

I am uploading Eugene Helimski's review of my 1984 book *Toward Proto-Nostratic* to clarify my reaction to it and to answer a recent statement published by several Russian authors that I continue to ignore the concerns raised by Helimski in my subsequent work. The answer is easy: I disagreed with most of Helimski's review when it was published (in 1987) and still do.

Some of the criticisms raised by Helimski fall into the category of "straw man arguments". To quote Wikipedia: "A *straw man* is a common form of *argument* and is an informal fallacy based on giving the impression of refuting an opponent's *argument*, while actually refuting an *argument* that was not advanced by that opponent. One who engages in this fallacy is said to be 'attacking a *straw man*'."

Another problem with the review is "cherry picking". Again, quoting Wikipedia: "Cherry picking, suppressing evidence, or the fallacy of incomplete evidence is the act of pointing to individual cases or data that seem to confirm a particular position, while ignoring a significant portion of related cases or data that may contradict that position. It is a kind of fallacy of selective attention, the most common example of which is the confirmation bias. Cherry picking may be committed intentionally or unintentionally. This fallacy is a major problem in public debate."

In those (relatively few) cases where I felt Helimski raised legitimate concerns, I have made the appropriate corrections in subsequent works.

Helimski's review follows.

Allan R. Bomhard  
19 January 2017

## A "NEW APPROACH" TO NOSTRATIC COMPARISON\*

EUGENE HELIMSKI

INSTITUT SLAVJANOVEDENJA I BALKANISTIKI, MOSCOW, USSR

Allen Bomhard, in a provocative and interesting volume, presents a novel attempt to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Afroasiatic phonologies and advocates a new approach to the problem of Indo-European/Afroasiatic genetic relationship. In spite of a number of innovative and convincing observations by Bomhard, the reviewer will attempt to show why his arguments have failed and to point out the weaknesses in his new approach.

THE MONOGRAPH UNDER REVIEW is extremely rich in ideas and interpretations which cover a vast field of problems. A novel reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) consonants, a model of the sub-phonemic variation of the PIE vowels, the Proto-Afroasiatic (PAA) phonology and sound correspondences between the five or six branches of the Afroasiatic (Semitic-Hamitic) family—each of these topics could make the subject of a separate book, but for Allen R. Bomhard they only are a prelude to the focal theme, that is, to the presentation of 318 presumable lexical cognates between PAA and PIE and a tentative phonological reconstruction of the common ancestor of these two proto-languages. As long as this short review can in no way substitute for a more detailed acquaintance with the book (its reading will be highly instructive for any specialist concerned with the above-mentioned problems, whatever his opinion on the author's solutions may be), the reviewer feels free to spare many details and to concentrate upon the main lines of the "new approach," declared already in the subtitle, and upon the reliability of the data.

This being not the first attempt to prove the genetic relationship of PIE and PAA—cf. the studies of Hermann Möller, Albert Cuny, Marcel Cohen, Linus Brunner<sup>1</sup> and the incorporation of this relationship into a broader Nostratic framework in the works of

Aharon Dolgopolsky and especially of Vladislav Illič-Svityč—Bomhard's study is fully and deliberately independent of the previous tradition. The author claims that the works of all his predecessors suffer from the same basic weakness and finds them "to be of limited value at best" (p. ix). The genetic relationship between PIE and PAA could not be proven insofar as their phonological systems were typologically different, thus giving no chance to come across plausible phonetic correspondences. "As long as scholars operated with the phonological system traditionally reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, no real progress was possible: since that reconstruction was typologically isolated, Indo-European was doomed to remain genetically isolated" (p. 1). (The statement that genetic relationship is unprovable for languages with dissimilar phonologies seems to reflect a new discovery in the methodology of comparative research in linguistics. It is great luck that the Indo-Europeanists of the past did not know what Bomhard knows, otherwise Germanic, not to mention Tokharian, was doomed to remain beyond the Indo-European family.)

Bomhard breaks the wall of typological isolation purposefully and unidirectionally. His first step is to adopt the glottalic theory of the PIE stop system which has been proposed in 1972 by T. V. Gamkrelidze and Vjač. Vs. Ivanov and in 1973 by Paul J. Hopper and enjoys growing popularity among the Indo-Europeanists: traditional plain voiced stops are reinterpreted as glottalized, while traditional voiced aspiratae take the vacant place of plain voiced. Some other innovations also serve to bring the PIE consonantal system closer to the PAA/PSem. system, as well as to pattern it after some North Caucasian specimens. Thus, for example, Bomhard cancels the series of palatal gutturals (giving no acceptable explanation to the phenomenon of satemization). On the other hand, he reconstructs as much as

\* A review article of *Toward Proto-Nostratic: A New Approach to Comparison of Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Afroasiatic*. By Allen R. Bomhard with a foreword by Paul J. Hopper, Pp. xi, 356. Amsterdam, 1983. Hfl 100.—.

<sup>1</sup> I feel it necessary to leave Saul Levin, who attacked the same problem with a most peculiar idea of the Indo-European origin of Hebrew, but not of other Semitic languages, out of this list.

six PIE laryngeals, though—as it comes out of the text on pp. 17 and 119—no Indo-European language (Anatolian included) distinguishes between the reflexes of Bomhard's \**h*h and \**h* (both = \**ǵ*<sub>2</sub> in Kuryłowicz's reconstruction), \**x* and \**γ* (both = Kuryłowicz's \**ǵ*<sub>3</sub>). The only reason for the multiplication of laryngeals becomes evident later, when the arbitrary discrimination between the members of these two pairs is used in order to account for four kinds of PAA/PIE correspondences (\**h*/*ǵ*<sub>2</sub>, \**h*/*ǵ*<sub>3</sub>, \**h*/*ǵ*<sub>2</sub>, \**h*/*ǵ*<sub>3</sub>).

While reconstructing the PAA consonantal system Bomhard follows a winding path between the reconstructions proposed by Igor Diakonoff, David Cohen and some other scholars. It results in a variant that looks no worse than any other from the typological viewpoint, but should be considered as an overt simplification of the true picture of phonetic correspondences between the Afroasiatic languages: the author honestly admits that "there are other correspondences, however, which simply do not fit the expected pattern" (p. 154). The same is probably to be said about other attempts to reconstruct the PAA phonology ("early" Diakonoff, "modern" Diakonoff, Cohen, Greenberg): each of them is based upon a more or less arbitrarily selected list of presumable Afroasiatic cognates (some of them being very problematic) and neglects many other possible etymologies. I think that the Afroasiatic linguists must look for an alternative to this approach, which appears to be rather fruitless, or just wait until decisive progress is made in the reconstruction of Proto-Cushitic and Proto-Chadic.

According to Bomhard, the proposed modifications of the PIE and PAA reconstructions (which are sometimes on the verge of juggling with these reconstructions) are confirmed "in retrospect", because they bring at once the long-sought solution of the problem of genetic relationship. The table on p. 181 lists 40 phonetic correspondences between PAA and PIE, and 25 among them turn out to be trivial identities (\**p* \**b* \**p'* \**t* \**d* \**t'* \**s* \**k* \**g* \**k'* \**k*<sup>w</sup> \**g*<sup>w</sup> \**k*<sup>w</sup> \**ʔ* \**h* \**h*/*h*h \**h*/*h*h \**w* \**y* \**m* \**n* \**r* \**l* \**ə* \**a* in both PAA and reinterpreted PIE). In 15 other pairs the reflexes differ in not more than one distinctive feature (PAA/PIE \**f*/*p* \**ʃ*/*t* \**dz*/*d* etc.), so that the positing of the ancestral phonemic inventory (p. 186) looks like a schoolboy exercise.

The correspondences are illustrated with the lexical comparisons collected on pp. 188–284 of the monograph and forming its centerpiece. 318 proposed etymologies give from 1 to 35 examples (on the average 12) for each PAA/PIE pair of noise and laryngeal consonants and from 21 to 90 examples (on the average 48) for each pair of resonants. In most cases the cognates look strikingly alike, cf.:

50. PAA \**tək*'-/\**tak*'- "to touch, push, strike": EG.: *tq* "to cut, slay, strike". CUSH.: PEC \**tak*'-/\**tuk*'- "to touch, push, strike" (. . .). PIE \**tak*'- "to touch, strike, push, stroke": Lat. *tangō* "to touch, strike, push, hit"; Gk. *τεταγών* "having seized"; OE. *þaccian* "to pat, stroke."
100. PAA \**šar*-/\**šar*- "to flow, overflow, creep, crawl": SEM.: Psem. \**šar-ats*'- → Hebr. *šāraš* "to swarm, teem"; Aram. *šaraš* "to creep, crawl."
150. PAA \**gar*-/\**gar*- "to take, take away, seize, carry off, remove": SEM.: Psem. \**gar-ap*- → Hebr. *'eyrōp* "fist"; Ar. *ǧarafa* "to take away, remove, carry off, sweep away" (. . .). PIE \**gar*-/\**gar*- "to take, take away, seize, carry off, remove": Skt. *hāraṭi* "to take, take away, carry off, seize, remove"; Gk. *χείρ* "hand"; Arm. *jeṛn* "hand."

Bomhard intends to impress and even to fascinate the readers of his monograph with the exactness of his phonetic and lexical correspondences (the foreword by Paul J. Hopper shows that he can succeed in that). But it is just this exactness that can also raise serious doubts. First of all, if the solution is so simple and elegant, how could it have remained unnoticed for such a long time? Unlike Bomhard, his predecessors in the comparative study of PIE and PAA were not equipped with the glottalic theory and did not treat PIE \**d* as \**t*'. But comparative linguistics is accustomed to "overcoming" distinctions in manner of articulation, and scholars were to equate PIE \**d* with PAA \**t*', if the evidence is so strong and systematic. Secondly, the whole experience of comparative linguistics shows that phonological systems and the general shape of stems in two genetically related languages may be similar, especially if the relationship is close; or drastically different, which is the more probable, the more remote is their relationship. In our case two situations should be considered. If the PIE-PAA unity broke up at a relatively late date, so that PIE existed apart of PAA for only two or three millennia (which is difficult to believe), then it would be natural to expect that the two proto-languages possess a far-reaching typological resemblance (that is what the author tries to demonstrate throughout the book) and are connected with "fairly straightforward" (p. 185) correspondences. If, however, PAA and PIE "parted company many millennia before the stage of development that can be reached by a direct comparison of the extant daughter languages"

(p. 180), so that their morphologies are almost totally different, then the simplicity of phonetic correspondences and the similarity (actually almost the identity) of so many roots would take a comparativist by the greatest surprise.

To solve this dilemma, one can also think about the possibility of mutual borrowings in (late) PIE and (late or even disintegrated) PAA. For some lexical comparisons this is undoubtedly the case, cf. (79) PSEM. \**vawr-* "bull, steer"—PIE \**tawr-* "bull."<sup>2</sup> In the majority of pairs, however, the possibility of borrowing is practically excluded for semantic reasons; Bomhard himself insists on the treatment of the compared roots as genetic cognates.

I believe that in order to account for the above-mentioned paradoxes (without admitting that all Bomhard's predecessors were blind or that both PIE and PAA displayed unprecedented phonological conservatism) it is necessary to recollect the history of the Afroasiatic-Indo-European comparison and to cast a more critical glance at the list of the examples.

Bomhard supports the equation of PIE \**t'* (traditional \**d*) with PAA \**t* with 20 examples. Linus Brunner considers PIE \**d* to be the counterpart of PSEM. \**d* and cites 26 examples (only from Semitic, but in modern Afroasiatic linguistics a considerable percentage of Semitic roots is supposed to be of PAA origin).<sup>3</sup> On the whole, these examples are hardly much worse than Bomhard's material. Illič-Svityč has posited the development of Nostratic \**t* into PIE \**d*, PAA \**t*, illustrated in one of his earlier works with 24 examples (7 of them—with both PIE and PAA counterparts).<sup>4</sup> His examples, being less numerous, are of much higher quality and reliability, because he practised multilateral comparison and provided corroborating data from Kartvelian, Dravidian, Uralic and Altaic (still his etymologies seem to suffer from the ambiguity of the Afroasiatic materials: that was the price of "jumping across" the missing intermediate reconstructions of PChad., PCush. and PAA itself). Anyhow, in the case of PIE \**d*—as well as in many other cases—the version

accepted by Bomhard is not the only one which can be supplied with seemingly good examples, and, in my opinion, not necessarily the best one. To be sure, the etymologies by Brunner, Illič-Svityč and other scholars, which contradict this version, are disregarded in the book (or, exceptionally, provided with a different PAA reconstruction).

The trouble is that the "raw materials" at Bomhard's (and Brunner's) disposal—comprehensive Indo-European etymological dictionaries, comparative and monolingual dictionaries of numerous Afroasiatic languages—have been tremendously rich. This fact alone creates a high risk of coming across phonetically and semantically similar words which historically have nothing to do with each other. The risk surpasses reasonable limits if the proposed etymologies suffer from faults which are regrettably typical of many of the examples in the monograph. These faults are: over-exploitation of verbal stems with blurred semantics ("to breathe, puff, blow," "to cleave, cut, split," "to expand, extend, spread, stretch," "to flee, run, rush, hurry," "to scatter, spray," "to shine, be bright," etc.—Bomhard's list abounds in such words, sharing this distressing feature with many etymological dictionaries): dubious semantic conjectures (cf. e.g.; (17) PAA \**paš-* / \**paš-* "to split, cleave, sever"—PIE \**pas-* "to split, prick, pierce, penetrate; penis"; actually, however, the Indo-European word is attested *only* with the last of the enumerated meanings, certainly not as a verb!); arbitrary truncation of the third consonant in the PAA and PIE stems whenever its phonetic quality does not fit the comparison (cf. the above-cited Nos. 100 and 150); ascribing the PAA origin to many roots which are attested in only one branch of Afroasiatic or even in one or two languages. This is not to say that all etymologies with such faults are incorrect. We know or can easily assume that a proto-language, like any living language, did have a number of semantically blurred verbal stems; that many words in their history underwent significant semantic changes; that the formation of a triconsonantal root from a biconsonantal base may be due to mere suffixation; that any non-etymologized word in any Afroasiatic language may be a relic of PAA vocabulary. I am afraid, however, that a scholar who is tolerant of such faults in his etymologies and equipped with comprehensive lexical sources would be able to posit and "prove" any set of phonetic correspondences between any two languages, related or unrelated.

To check this statement I made an attempt to "substantiate" a phonetic correspondence thought of just on the spur of the moment: PSEM. \**b*—PIE \**t* (assuming that all other correspondences between PSEM. and PIE should be those put forward by

<sup>2</sup> See V. M. Illič-Svityč, "Drevnejšie indoevropejsko-semitskie jazykovye kontakty," in *Problemy indoevropejskogo jazykoznanija*, Moscow, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> L. Brunner, *Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln des semitischen und indogermanischen Wortschatzes*, Bern, 1969, Nos. 381–406.

<sup>4</sup> V. M. Illič-Svityč, "Sootvetstvija smyčnyx v nostratičeskix jazykax," in *Étimologija* 1966, Moscow 1968, Nos. 2.1–2.24. "Opyt sravnenija nostratičeskix jazykov" and other works of the same author (partly not yet published) contain additional examples with this reflexion.

Bomhard and that his approach to constructing etymologies should be followed). Two hours' work with David Cohen's *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques* and Julius Pokorny's *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* proved sufficient to find 20 would-be cognate pairs showing this correspondence in the initial position; the "pearls" of my collection are PSem. \**bl-d* (Ar. *balad-* "pays plat, terre, sol")—PIE \**tel-* "flach, flacher Boden, Gegend", PSem. \**br-m* (Ar. *burām* "tique")—PIE \**ter-*, \**ter-m-* "Holzwurm, Milbe, malmendes oder bohrendes Insekt" (Lat. *tarmes, termes*), PSem. \**br?* (Aram. *b'rā* "être fort")—PIE \*(*s*)*terə-*: \*(*s*)*trē-* "starr, fest." It is hardly necessary to cite here the full list of my jocular comparisons, but I am ready to submit it to anybody interested in the substantiation of my claim (together with another list which shows the "correspondence" between PSem. \**b* and PIE laryngeal).

Being sceptical about the methods employed by Bomhard and the obtained results, the reviewer on no account is going to reject the idea of the PIE-PAA genetic relationship. Some of the lexical examples in the book are extremely interesting and do not suffer from any serious faults, cf. e.g., (5) PAA \**pət-/pat-* (Ar. *fataḥa* "to open", Eg. *pth* "to be open")—PIE \**pət-/pat-* (Lat. *pateō* "to be open"); (104) PAA \**šan-/šan-* (Ar. *sanna* "to grow old, age")—PIE \**sən-* (Lat. *senex* "old"); (280) PAA \**mər-/mar-* (Ar. *marīda* "to fall ill, be sick," Eg. *mr* "to be sick, to

die")—PIE \**mər-/mar-/mṛ-* "to die" and some others. One is tempted to note that many of these good etymologies have been discovered long ago by the pioneers of the PIE-PAA comparative studies.<sup>5</sup> The absence of references to their works in the book is embarrassing. Even if Bomhard had come across long-established etymologies all by himself—which is fully imaginable—there still exists in scholarship the notion of priority.

It can nevertheless be hoped that future investigators of the problem will not follow this example of disrespect to predecessors (as they will not follow his "new approach," which has obviously failed), and that the monograph under review will constitute for them an additional, though not very reliable, source of etymological ideas and possible interpretations.

<sup>5</sup> For (5) see already H. Möller, *Vergleichendes indogermanisch-semitisches Wörterbuch*, Göttingen 1911, p. 205; for (104) *ibid.*, p. 226; for (280)—A. Cuny, "Contribution à la connaissance du vocabulaire commun à l'indoeuropéen et au chamito-sémitique," in *Donum Natalicium Schrijnen*, Nijmegen—Utrecht 1929, p. 330–32. (5) is attested also in Altaic and possibly Dravidian, (280)—in Uralic; see V. M. Illič-Svityč, "Materialy k sravnitel'nomu slovarju nostratičeskix jazykov," in *Étimologija* 1965, Moscow, 1967, p. 372, 331.