To complete our overview of Altaic philology, we must say something about one of the most controversial aspects of Altaic studies, the so-called Altaic Hypothesis (AH). Also referred to as the Altaic Theory, the AH is a by-product of comparative research in the field of Uralic and Altaic linguistics. When, in the 19th c., enough data had been collected by individuals investigating the Finno-Ugric and Altaic languages (or, to be more precise, the ones we now call the Finno-Ugric and Altaic languages), certain apparent relationships between the languages of these groups were noticed. Further investigations caused a number of scholars interested in historical linguistics to establish correlations between these languages and propose a genetic rapport between them, as indeed was being done by their colleagues in the field of Indo-European languages. The way this process occurred is, briefly, as follows.

Although the theory developed in the 19th c. and flourished in the 20th, it first germinated in the 18th c. with von Strahlenberg, whom we met in connection with his work on Kalmyk. On the basis of his knowledge of several languages (which he had acquired during his extensive travels) and the similarities which he discovered among them, he classified their speakers into six groups: 1) Uighurs, i.e. the Finno-Ugric speaking people, the Baraba Tatars and the Huns, 2) Turco-Tatars, 3) Samoyeds, 4) Mongols and Manchus, 5) Tungus, and 6) the tribes between the Black Sea and the Caspian. This first classification was rough, unscientific and incorrect. The Finno-Ugric people cannot be grouped together with the Baraba Tatars who are a Turkic tribe; and the tribes between the Black and Caspian Seas belonged to several different ethnic groups speaking different languages: Turkic, Iranian and Caucasian languages. But it was a first attempt.

Rectifications of his classification, always on the basis of language affinity, and the renaming of the groups, with inclusion of other peoples and languages (including Basque, Eskimo, etc.), were carried out by the Danish linguist R. Rask in 1834. His scheme is called the ‘Scythian hypothesis’ because he renamed Strahlenberg’s ‘Tatar’ languages the ‘Scythian’ languages.

A few decades later, Indo-European comparative linguistics was in full swing, and this promoted further revisions and reclassifications.
of the languages in question. This led to the new ‘Turanian hypothesis’ of Max Müller (1823-1900) which in the earlier groupings included also Siamese, Tibetan, Dravidian and Malayan on the assumption that Turan, i.e. broadly Central Asia, was the original homeland of all these peoples.

The situation changed with A. M. Castrén, the Finnish scholar already mentioned as a Tungusologist and general linguist. He was really the first to use scientific criteria to classify languages. The previous investigators relied largely on the principle of agglutination vs. flection, i.e. essentially on morphological structure. Castrén accepted that but found the argument insufficient and went to the root of one of the major problems, viz. identity of the morphemes as a criterion to determine the affinity of languages. In the process he discovered that there was considerably less affinity within the Altaic languages than that within the Indo-European languages. He was the first to use the term ‘Altaic’ for the Uralic and Altaic groups. The affinity of the Uralic languages, i.e. the Finno-Ugric and Samoyed stocks, was then recognized and has since been proven (although there are still reservations as to the exact position in the scheme, i.e. in the family tree, of Samoyed). Yet the genetic relationship between the languages of the Altaic group is debated, and that between the Uralic and Altaic groups or phyla is still highly hypothetical. Hence, Castrén’s ‘Altaic’ theory, although marking progress in research, cannot be accepted as it stands because for him ‘Altaic’ meant both Uralic and Altaic.

After Castrén came the German comparativists W. Schott and H. Winkler, followed by the French linguist A. Sauvageot, the Finnish Turcologist M. Räsänen, the Swede B. Collinder and the Russian S. M. Shirokogoroff, all of whom approached the Ural-Altaic theory from various angles without however coming to any definite conclusions. With these scholars we have moved not only in time (from the 19th to the 20th c.), but also in methodology: we have progressed from morphologic correspondences to vocabulary and to sound correspondences, i.e. to comparative phonology. This was made possible through the in-depth research into the Altaic languages by the great Ramstedt, research that also broadened the field of investigation geographically to include Korean and Japanese. Ramstedt was also versed in the Finno-Ugric languages (he himself was Swedo-Finnish) and his forte was really the establishment of phonetic correspondences