

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

Z. Nikolas Zakov

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The last speakers of probably half of the world's languages are alive today. In the year 2001 there were at least 6,912 distinct human languages spoken worldwide. The prediction is that by the year 2101 only half of these languages will be spoken.

Why then are other languages or language group so overwhelmingly successful? I shall not give you the answer to this question, but this talk serve as food for thought on this question.

This talk will concern a particularly successful group of languages and dialects - the Indo-European group. These languages are spoken by 3 billion of the 7 billion people on Earth. Of the 20 languages with the largest number of native speakers, 12 are Indo-European: Spanish, English, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, German, Landau, Marathi, French, Urdu, and Italian – accounting for over 1.7 billion native speakers.

Since the 16th century various scholars had noted similarities between various European languages. In 1786 Sir William Jones, Chief Justice of India, founder of the Royal Asiatic Society – during a lecture noted almost as an aside that there exists an affinity of Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, to other languages.

“The Sanskrit language whatever may be its antiquity, is of wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, that could have been produced by accident; so strong that no philologist could examine all the three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and Celtic, though blended with a difference idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the Old Persian might be added to the same family.”

This model advanced by Jones suggesting a common and extinct ancestral language for the majority of the peoples of Europe, Iran and India has been seen by many as the first essentially modern exposition of the Indo-European theory.

“It is only in the first half of the nineteenth century that we see the actual development of a recognizable comparative philology and the growth of a concept of linguistic affinity unfathered by Noah. Rasmus Rask (1787-1832), for example, showed that it was not enough to allude to the intuitive linguistic similarity between various languages as was the practice of the earlier linguistic antiquarian; he argued that these similarities must be demonstrated systematically. The affinity between the Greek work for “oak”, *phēgos*, and English *beech* was founded on more than Japhetic intuition since it was predicated on a systematic correspondence of Greek *ph*=Germanic *b*; for example, Greek phero ‘I carry’ and English *bear*, or Greek *phrateer* ‘clan member’ and English *brother*.

Similarly, one could demonstrate the regular relationship between Greek *g* and Germanic *k*: Greek *gyne*, Old Norse *kona* ‘woman’; Greek *genos*, Old Norse *kyn* ‘family’; or Greek *agros*, Old Norse *akr* ‘field’.”

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CLASSIFICATION

Further information: List of languages by first written accounts

The various subgroups of the Indo-European language family include ten major branches, given in the chronological order of their earliest surviving written attestations:

1. Anatolian (Asia Minor), the earliest attested branch, isolated terms in Luwian/Hittite mentioned in Semitic Old Assyrian texts from the 20th and 19 centuries BC, Hittite texts from about 1650 BC; extinct by Late Antiquity.
2. Hellenic. Fragmentary records in Mycenaean Greek from between 1450 and 1350 BC have been found. Homeric texts date to the 8th century BC.
3. Indo-Iranian, circa 1400 BC, descended from Proto-Indo-Iranian (dated to the late 3rd millennium BC).
 - *Indo-Aryan or Indic languages, attested from around 1400 BC in Hittite texts from Asia Minor, showing traces of Indo-Aryan words. Epigraphically from the 3rd century BC in the form of Prakrit (Edicts of Ashoka). The Rigveda is assumed to preserve intact records via oral tradition dating from about the mid-2nd millennium BC in the form of Vedic Sanskrit.
 - *Iranian, attested from roughly 1000 BC in the form of Avestan. Epigraphically from 520 BC in the form of Old Persian (Behistun inscription).
 - *Dardic
 - *Nuristani
4. Italic, including Latin and its descendants (the Romance languages), attested from the 7th century BC.
5. Celtic, descended from Proto-Celtic, Gaulish inscriptions date as early as the 6th century BC; Celtiberian from the 2nd century BC; Primitive Irish Ogham inscriptions 5th century AD, earliest inscriptions in Old Welsh from the 8th Century AD.
6. Germanic (from Proto-Germanic), earliest testimonies in runic inscriptions from around the 2nd century AD, earliest coherent texts in Gothic, 4th century AD, Old English manuscript tradition from the about the 8th century AD.
7. Armenian. Alphabet writings known from the beginning of the 5th century AD.
8. Tocharian, extant in two dialects (Turfanian and Kuchean), attested from roughly the 6th to the 9th century AD. Marginalized by the Old Turkic Uyghur Khaganate and probably extinct by the 10th century.
9. Balto-Slavic, believed by most Indo-Europeanists to form a phylogenetic unit, while a minority ascribes similarities to prolonged language contact.
 - *Slavic (from Proto-Slavic), attested from the 9th century AD (possibly earlier, see Slavic runes), earliest texts in Old Church Slavonic
 - *Baltic, attested from the 14th century AD; for languages attested that late, they retain unusually many archaic features attributed to Proto-Indo-European (PIE)

10. Albanian, attested from the 14th century AD; Proto-Albanian likely evolved from Paleo-Balkan predecessors.

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In addition to the classical ten branches listed above, several extinct and little-known languages have existed:

- Illyrian – related to Messapian. Possibly related to Albanian
- Venetic – close to Italic and possibly Continental Celtic.
- Liburnian – doubtful affiliation, features shared with Venetic, Illyrian and Indo-Hittite, significant transition of the Pre-Indo-European elements.
- Messapian – not conclusively deciphered.
- Phrygian – language of the ancient Phrygians, possibly close to Thracian, Armenian, Greek
- Paionian – extinct language once spoken north of Macedon.
- Thracian – possibly including Dacian.
- Dacian – possibly very close to Thracian.
- Ancient Macedonian – proposed relationships to Greek, Illyrian, Thracian, and Phrygian.
- Ligurian language – possibly close to or part of Celtic.
- Sicel – an ancient language spoken by the Sicels (Greek Sikeloι, Latin Siculi), one of the three indigenous (i.e., pre-Greek and pre-Punic) tribes of Sicily. Proposed relationship to Latin or Proto-Illyrian (Pre-Indo-European) at an earlier stage.
- Lusitanian – possibly related to (or part of) Celtic, Ligurian, or Italic.

Most important of all:

*Vedic Sanskrit (c. 1500-500 BC). This language is unique in that its source documents were all composed orally, and were passed down through oral tradition (shakha schools) for c. 2,000 years before ever being written down. The oldest documents are all in poetic form; oldest and most important of all is the Rig Veda (c. 1500 BC).

The Indo-European Homeland. By consensus and exclusion several areas have been proposed.

By studying the words for certain nouns and vowels present in Indo-European languages the potential homeland of the language may be speculated on proposed spread of I-E languages families. Also certain rules such as the centum and satem families emerge in research. In addition studies of ancient language families prove out similarities and evolution of the proto – I-E language.

Time does not allow us to show the huge amount of linguistic research that has been done on the relationship and rules that apply between the I-E languages.

We can only speculate why the I-E language families have spread to cover the Earth – but mainly the age of discovery and colonialism contributed to this – Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Dutch and Russian for instance.