The Indo-European question reconsidered
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Avslutningsvis kan jag bara hoppas att Colin Renfrews provokation leder till snabbare slutliga resultat än vad Expansionsmodellen förutsäger. För övrigt ställer jag mig frågan om inte trots allt en så komplex framtidslösnings på problemet måste tänkas att den kommer att bygga såväl på vissa resultat av den linguistiska paleontologin som på Expansionsmodellen och på teorier om språkconvergens. Tills vidare får vi vara tacksamma för de nya aspekter på problemet som Renfrews bok och den av honom initierade debatten har givit.

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Indo-European origins used to be a central topic of discussion among linguists, and to a lesser extent, archaeologists, during the century preceding the Second World War. But when Nazi Germany built its ideology of the Master Race on the myth of the blond and blue-eyed Aryans, the subject lost its appeal in the scholarly world. Publications on the subject have been remarkably sparse during the last few decades.

However, it seems the quarantine is over. In 1987, Colin Renfrew of Cambridge published his Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins. Now, only two years after, J. P. Mallory, of the University of Belfast, and assistant archaeological editor of
the (linguistic) *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, presents us with a new full-length treatment of the subject.

The two books are very different. Renfrew launches an overall hypothesis, namely, that the Indo-Europeanization of Europe came about as a result of the spread of farming, roughly between 7000 and 4000 BCE (a convenient abbreviation, increasingly popular among theologians, for *Before the Common Era*). Renfrew realizes, of course, that his overall hypothesis oversimplifies matters. Reality is always more complex than the theories we invent to describe and explain it. But his main aim is obviously to establish his hypothesis as a serious competitor to the “established” one, propounded over the last three decades above all by Marija Gimbutas, Lithuanian-born archaeologist at Berkeley. In her view the Indo-Europeanization was effected by several waves of horse-riding invaders from the Pontic steppes between 4000 and 2000 BCE. Their archaeological counterpart is the Kurgan (burial mound) culture of Southern Russia.

Renfrew stresses the weaknesses of that theory, but does not attempt to cover all the relevant evidence. This holds both on the archaeological and on the linguistic side. Renfrew presents a very effective brief, but it must be admitted that it is a one-sided one. Mallory’s book contains considerably more factual information, especially on the linguistic side. This means that Mallory puts his reader in a much better position to draw his own conclusions. While Renfrew is an advocate who assumes that his readers have already a general acquaintance with the field, Mallory is more of a teacher concerned with displaying the facts of the case, including their complexity. Undoubtedly Mallory offers more meat for the beginner, while Renfrew provides a salutary challenge for the more advanced student.

Since Mallory wrote two years after Renfrew, he naturally had to take a stand on the latter’s hypothesis. But he does not allow his discussion of it to play a prominent part in his book. By and large, Mallory comes down on the side of the established theory, placing the origin of the Indo-Europeans in the North Pontic–Caspian region about 4500–2500 BCE. He differs, however, from Gimbutas by extending the original territory westwards to include also the Donets–Dnepr area.

Mallory arrives at this conclusion above all on the basis of “linguistic paleontology”, the shared Indo-European vocabulary. Agricultural terms like corn and to plough, names of domestic animals like sheep, cow, and horse, names of technical inventions like wheel and wagon, terms of social organization like Latin rex and Sanskrit raj, all point to a stage of development which roughly indicates the period 4500–2500 for the area concerned, southwestern Eurasia.

Further, Mallory points out that the considerable number of apparently early Indo-European loanwords in Finno-Ugric languages, and the meagre harvest of traces of linguistic exchange between Indo-European and the Semitic languages, favour a location to the north rather than to the south of the Black Sea and the Caspian. As for the Anatolian languages, there are many hints that they are intruders rather than aboriginal in Asia Minor.

On this basis, Mallory finds a strong case for placing the original Indo-Europeans where he does. What I would like to question is the base itself. Unlike Renfrew, I do not think we should reject the evidential value of linguistic paleontology. Without it, we have hardly any foundation at all. The Indo-Europeans are necessarily and by definition people speaking some Indo-European language. It is through their language that we identify them. On the other hand, I wish to query Mallory’s assumption that we cannot go further back than the year 4500 BCE in our reconstruction of the Indo-European speech community.

It is true that we have no evidence of the domesticated horse before c. 4000 BCE, and that, in the relevant area, we do not encounter the wheel until c. 3500 BCE. But in the first place we cannot conclude that the words must have come into being before the Indo-European languages had diverged from each other. To simplify a little: *centum* speakers may have recognized that a *satem* term like, for instance, *esvos*, could be loan-translated into
their own *ekwos. Moreover, the wheel terms might be natural extensions of older words for “roll”; such semantic shifts occur all the time, and are among the well-known pitfalls of linguistic paleontology.

In the second place, we must remember that our discussion of the original Indo-European language rests on a rather narrow foundation. Even if we demand no more than that the word in question should be found in at least three language families, with at least one each from Europe and Asia, the number of such words (or rather, roots) is no more than a few hundred, out of the tens of thousands that we know are in current use in any natural language. Though linguistic paleontology is an indispensable tool, we must never forget how narrow and dim is the window that it opens up on the linguistic reality of the past.

We must assume that the original home of the Indo-European speakers covered a considerably smaller area than the one in which we find the daughter languages when they first come into view, some of them as early as c. 2000 BCE. Let us look a little more closely into this matter, which will take us into the field of anthropology and human origins. Thanks to advances both in paleontology and in molecular biology we can now say with some certainty that all modern humans belong to the same subspecies, Homo sapiens sapiens. The origin of that sub-species should almost certainly be sought in Africa, perhaps 100,000 years ago. From there, human populations spread into Eurasia, and eventually into Australia and America, which were reached perhaps 30,000–40,000 years ago. Work done especially by L. L. Cavalli-Sforza et al. (1988) reveals a striking amount of correspondence between biological measures of relatedness for the world’s aboriginal populations, and the major language families of the world.

We have indeed many indications from historical times that a population has switched from one language to another. But such shifts, at least across language families, have apparently not been very common in the past. Accordingly there is reason to believe that the languages found in southwestern Eurasia at the end of the paleolithic were at least in the main developed out of the languages brought by the various populations of Homo sapiens sapiens which first spread into these parts of the world some 30,000–60,000 years ago.

This does not by any means imply that they then all spoke one and the same language. There is no more reason to assume that all humanity ever spoke the same language, than that they arose from a single pair. On the contrary, the evidence that we have from present-day hunter-gatherers, in Australia and in South America, is that the groups speaking a certain language are normally quite small, from a few hundred to a few thousand. Historical evidence suggests that a few thousand years of separation is enough for two originally similar languages to split into mutually unintelligible ones (though, to be sure, linguists will recognize their relatedness). With a time perspective of several tens of thousands of years, and speech communities of a few thousand each, it is probable that many hundreds of mutually unintelligible languages were spoken in paleolithic Europe. They were indeed distantly related to each other, like the American Indian languages of to-day. But again, like those languages, they would be so different from each other that even professional linguists would not be able to assign them to a common stock.

However, when the European languages begin to come into view, in the second and first millennium BCE, they are in fact demonstrably related to each other. A considerable linguistic unification must have taken place. Our problem is, when? Mallory, as we have seen, opts for the period 4500–2500 BCE, refusing to speculate about what may have happened before that period. I think this is a mistake, since we then have to explain virtually the whole of the Indo-European expansion into Europe as due to migrations during that period, for which we have very little hard evidence. I think Renfrew is right in insisting that massive replacements of whole populations seem very unlikely in the largely agricultural Europe of that time. Elite invasions appear a little more plausible, but only towards the end of the period. Hence I find Renfrew’s
hypothesis appealing, since it connects the linguistic unification with an archaeologically identifiable technical and economic innovation, which is also demonstrably able to explain the demographic change without large-scale invasions. The many small, old European languages, differentiated over a period of tens of thousands of years, could thus be replaced by a new set, whose differentiation had only recently started.

Linguistically, too, the longer time perspective provided by Renfrew’s theory seems to me highly desirable. Even at their first appearance some 4,000 years ago the Indo-European language families are remarkably differentiated. Mycenaean Greek is very clearly Greek, far different from its near contemporary Hittite, and also from its neighbour, Latin, which first comes into view in the middle of the first millennium BCE. Also, to judge from the Indo-European loanwords in the Mitanni kingdom of North Mesopotamia, c. 1500 BCE, the distinctive character of Indo-Iranian was already apparent at that time. In view of what has happened to those languages in the subsequent 4,000 years, it seems to me very unlikely that the earlier differentiation could have taken much less time to develop. The mere two millennia that the Gimbutas model allows is simply not enough.

Now Mallory does not really follow Gimbutas. Rather, he accepts that the Indo-Europeans, around 4000 BCE, occupied a wider area than the original Kurgan culture. He also allows that they may have been linguistically differentiated. But he refuses to speculate on that differentiation, since linguistic paleontology does not carry him further than the domesticated horse and the wheel. No doubt our reconstruction beyond that period is hypothetical. But we are not completely in the dark. We know something of the rate of change in languages, and about the factors inducing a population to adopt a new language. Some of those factors—differential population growth, migration, elite dominance—may leave archaeological traces. It is here, I think, that Renfrew’s hypothesis comes into its own.

Let me finish this review by presenting an outline sketch which may be looked upon as a synthesis of Renfrew’s and Mallory’s views.

At the end of the Paleolithic, the southwestern parts of Eurasia, together with Northern Africa, were inhabited by groups of hunter-gatherers who had lived in those regions for tens of thousands of years. There were probably hundreds, if not thousands, of mutually unintelligible languages there, each spoken by a few hundred or a few thousand people only. One part of this vast region, Eastern Anatolia–Northern Mesopotamia–Iran, saw the origin of agriculture. One of the peoples who adopted the new economy were speakers of a language which was to develop into the Indo-European group. However, that was only one out of dozens or more languages in the area, among which, many thousand years later, we can identify not only Semitic ones, but also apparently quite unrelated ones such as Sumerian, Hattic and Hurrian.

If we assume that the original Indo-Europeans lived in the Western parts of Anatolia, and that their adoption of agriculture led to a marked population increase, then their natural search for virgin land—not already occupied by other agriculturalists—would lead them towards Europe, and the expansion would not be likely to stop until it reached the western and northern ends of that continent. Needless to say, the spread would not be uniform, for various reasons. One of them has to do with soil and climate. Another has to do with demography. In some places, the indigenous populations may have adopted or developed agriculture themselves, before the general European wave of advance originating in Anatolia reached their region. The remnants of non-Indo-European languages in Spain (Basque, and perhaps Iberian), Italy (Etruscan), and Greece (“Pelasgian”) may be accounted for in this manner. The main wave of advance, accordingly, may have been towards the northwest and west, following the Danube, and towards the north and east, into the Pontic steppe.

In the fifth millennium BCE the steppe Indo-Europeans domesticated the horse. Considerably later they, or some of them, developed a nomadic economy, and also a more
stratified social system exploiting the military possibilities of the riding horse. This is when the Kurgan culture begins to expand. That expansion was naturally directed towards the already rich agricultural regions, such as India, Anatolia and Greece, where there were riches, and a food surplus, to exploit. Later, historically documented nomad invasions have taken a similar course—Huns, Turks, and Mongols.

Against this background, it is quite possible to regard Hittite and Luwian as the direct descendants of the “original” Indo-Europeans. And we seem to have no reason to regard the Thracians, Illyrians, Slavs and Balts, Germans, and Celts as other than descendants of those Indo-Europeans who came with the first wave of advance. The same may well be true of the Tocharians, who would therefore have arrived in Turkestan before the nomadic Kurgan culture developed.

But with the development of horse riding, of new military techniques and of new forms of organization, during the third millennium BCE and after, conditions arose for language shifts due to élite dominance. The spread of Indo-Iranian languages south into Iran and India in the third and second millennium BCE is probably a case in point. So is also, at the other end of the world, the spread of Celtic in the first millennium BCE into Britain, where it presumably replaced earlier Indo-European languages. Very possibly the spread of Greek, and of Armenian, into the areas where they are now spoken, may be similarly late shifts due to invading élites.

This kind of scenario, it seems to me, makes a great deal of sense both archaeologically and linguistically. The long stay of the Indo-Europeans in the Pontic steppe, and their secondary expansion from that area, accounts for the fairly substantial number of words shared with the Finno-Ugric languages in the north, while the scarcity of the Semitic–Indo-European correspondences is natural, if the first, and not very numerous, Indo-European speakers were separated from the Semitic speakers by such already agricultural communities as the Hatti and the Hurrians. The Hittites may, as Mallory insists, have been newcomers in the region where we first come across them. But they need not have come from afar. And the fairly extensive similarity of Armenian and Greek may be due to a common origin north of the Black Sea in the third millennium BCE.

The above is of course no more than a possible scenario. Necessarily so, since we are trying to trace a development embracing some 10,000 years, of which only the last 4,000 contain at least some hard linguistic evidence. Still, information continues to accumulate in such neighbouring fields as archaeology, anthropology and biology. The present-day state of the art is very well covered in Mallory’s book. If read together with Renfrew’s, it provides an excellent starting-point for whoever wishes to take up again the fascinating problem of Indo-European origins.

References

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