Indo-European Languages

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English 315

Genetic Classification of Languages

- Grouping of languages according to common sources
- Concept that each language has descended from another
- Metaphor of parent and children
- Dangers of metaphors

Biblical Groupings

- Based on sons of Noah:
  - Semetic
  - Hammitic
  - Japhetic (Indo-European)

IE’s Prominence

- Only 140 of about 5000 known languages are Indo-European (3%)
- IE languages are spoken by about half of the world’s population

Some non-IE languages

William Jones & the Importance of Sanskrit

- Eighteenth-century interest in language families
- In 1786, Sir William Jones, a supreme court judge in India, proposed that because Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, was similar to Greek and Latin, the languages must have a common source
Not only did Sanskrit have cognates with European languages, it had a similar inflectional system, suggesting that the inflectional systems also shared a common source.

Key IE features
- Cognates: similar words exist across languages, suggesting a common source
- Inflections: language indicates syntax by adding endings or changing internal form of words

Divisions of IE
- IE languages divide into two broad groups
- Division is geographical but based on initial consonant of a language’s word for “100”
  - “Satem” languages are east of the dividing line
  - “Centum” languages are west of the dividing line

Who were the Indo-Europeans?
- Words for …
  - snow, winter, spring
  - beech, oak, pine, willow
  - dog, horse, cow, sheep
  - wheel
  - bear
  - gold, silver
- No words for …
  - camel, lion, elephant
  - palm, banyan
  - copper, iron
  - ocean
The Bee Puzzle

- Many I-E languages have cognates for the honey bee and for a fermented honey drink (e.g., Greek "méli" (honey) and "mélissa (bee); Latin mel (honey); Old English milisc (honey sweet), medu (mead) and mildaeaw (honey dew); Sanskrit madhu (honey); Dutch mede)
- Bees are not found in any of the Asiatic sites proposed as the IE homeland.

A Guess at the IE People & their Homeland

- Lithuania?