

## THE DIFFUSION OF LANGUAGES

- I. Introduction
- II. Tracing linguistic diversification
  - A. Diffusion of languages
    1. Long been charted through the analysis of **sound shifts**
    2. Backward reconstruction of languages is called deep reconstruction
    3. Find some vocabulary of an extinct language and try to go backward
    4. More than 200 years ago, William Jones discovered ancient Sanskrit bore a striking resemblance to ancient Greek and Latin
    5. Jacob Grimm pointed out related languages have similar, but not identical consonants
    6. From Jones and Grimm came the linguistic hypothesis that postulated the existence of an ancestral (Proto) Indo-European language
    7. This concept had major implications that created major research tasks
      - a) The vocabulary of the postulated source language must be reconstructed
      - b) The hearth or source of this language from which it spread must be located
      - c) The routes of diffusion should be traced

d) The ways of life of those who spoke and spread this language should be established

### III. The language tree (Figure 8-2)

#### A. Divergence

1. Differentiation in language over time and space
2. Languages branched into dialects
4. Dialects became isolated and then became discrete languages
5. Language tree model remains central to language research (Figure 9-1)

#### B. Convergence

1. Human mobility complicates language study
2. Languages also spread by relocation diffusion
3. Long-isolated languages making contact–  
***language convergence***
4. Can make research unreliable

#### C. Replacement

1. Defined–replacement or modification of language by stronger invaders of a less advanced people
2. Goes on today
3. No reason to believe it has not happened ever since humans began to use language
4. Hungarian is completely surrounded by Indo-European languages
5. What Proto-language gave rise to the Basque language is unknown

### IV. Theories of language diffusion

#### A. Roots

1. Proto-language had words for certain landforms and other features of the landscape
2. More specifically some contained words for certain types of vegetation–trees, grass, etc.

3. Such information helps indicate the environment in which a language may have developed

#### B. Conquest theory

1. Some believed the Proto-Indo-European language originated somewhere north of the Black Sea in the vast steppes of Ukraine and Russia
2. The language then spread west judging by the sound shifts
  3. More than 5000 years ago, these people used horses, developed the wheel, and traded widely

#### C. Agriculture theory

1. Some felt the spread of agriculture, not conquest, diffused the Proto-Indo-European language through Europe
  - a) Postulated the source area as the hilly and mountainous terrain Anatolia in Turkey
  - b) Proto-Indo-European language has few words for plains but many for high and low mountains, valleys, mountain streams, rapids, lakes, and other high-relief landforms
  - c) Language also has words for trees, and animals that never lived on the plains
  - d) The realm's leading hearth of agricultural innovation lay in nearby Mesopotamia
2. Support for the theory
  - a) Research proved the existence of distance decay in the geographic pattern
    - (1) Certain genes become steadily less common as one moves north and west
    - (2) Farming in Anatolia led to overpopulation, which led to outmigration
    - (3) Farming peoples of Anatolia migrated in a slow moving wave into Europe
  - b) Nonfarming societies held out, and their languages remained unchanged

- c) Some geographers prefer the Soviet dispersal hypothesis (Figure 9-2)
- 3. Drawbacks of the theory
  - a) Anatolian region is not ideal for farming
  - b) Some believe the proto language(s) was first carried eastward into Southwest Asia, then across the Russian-Ukrainian plains and on into the Balkans (Figure 9-2)
  - c) May be some truth in both hypotheses
  - d) An eastward diffusion must have occurred because of relationships between Sanskrit and ancient Latin and Greek

## V. Superfamily

### A. Nostratic

1. Language development and divergence have been occurring for 90,000 or more years  
(Figure 9-4)
2. Renfrew proposed three agricultural hearths gave rise to language families (Figure 9-5)
3. Russian scholars have long been in the forefront of research on ancient languages
  - a) Vladislav Illich-Svitych and Aharon Dolgopolsky
    - (1) Studied independently of each other
    - (2) Came to similar conclusions
    - (3) Established the core of a pre-Proto-European language named Nostratic
4. Nostratic vocabulary revealed much about the people speaking it
  - a) No names for domestic plants
  - b) People were hunters and gatherers, not farmers
5. May date back 14,000 years
6. Believed to be the ancestral language for many other languages
7. Nostratic links widely separated languages

8. Some scholars have suggested that Nostratic is a direct successor of a Proto-World Language that goes back to the dawn of human history

## VI. Diffusion to the Pacific and the Americas

### A. Pacific diffusion

1. New Zealand peopled about 1000 years ago
2. Australia peopled between 50,000 and 60,000 years ago
3. Diffusion originated from coastal China
4. Austronesian language arose in Asia
5. Malay-Polynesian—forerunner of a large number of languages
6. Speed of diffusion and simultaneous divergence of languages is remarkable considering the water-fragmented nature of the Pacific realm
7. The whole eastern region of Polynesia was settled within several centuries (Figure 10.1)
8. Much remains to be learned about the reasons behind the complexity of the Pacific language map

### B. Diffusion in the Americas

1. The Americas are dominated by Indo-European languages
2. Pre-Columbian populations had not gone beyond 40 million at the highest speculation
3. As many as 200 indigenous language families have been identified
4. Appears first American languages diverged into the most intricately divided branch of language tree—if one accepts the Bering land-bridge hypothesis
5. The Greenberg hypothesis
  - a) Proposed there are only three families of indigenous American languages
  - b) Each corresponds to a major wave of migration from Asia (Figure 10.2)

- c) **Amerind**, the superfamily, is the most widely distributed
  - d) **Na-Dene**, spoken by indigenous people in northwest Canada and part of Alaska
  - e) **Eskimo-Aleut** is still concentrated along Arctic and near-Arctic shores
  - f) Many linguists disagreeing with Greenberg feel he did not follow proper procedures of reconstruction
  - g) Hypothesis implies a period longer than the 12,000-to-13,000-year-ago immigration into the Americas
  - h) Archaeological dating in Pennsylvania (16,000 B.P.), and Chile (tentatively 33,000 B.P.)
  - i) May lend credibility to Greenberg's hypothesis, if proved beyond a doubt
  - j) May mean the first wave came across the Bering Strait more than 40,000 years ago
  - k) Dental data gathered by Christy Turner conclude that three waves of immigration took place over a longer period than 12,000 years
6. The continuing controversy
- a) Most linguists still doubt the three-wave notion
  - b) There still remain many gaps in our knowledge

## VII. Influences on individual languages

- A. Critical influences on diffusion of individual tongues
  - 1. Speakers of nonwritten languages will not retain the same language very long if contact with one another is lost
  - 2. Three critical components have influenced the world's linguistic mosaic
    - a) Writing—texts are the primary means by which language can become stabilized

- b) Technology—influences both production of written texts and interaction of distant peoples
  - c) Political organization—key because it affects both what people have access to and which areas are in close contact with one another
3. Discussion of above 3 components
- B. Printing press and rise of national states
- 1. Printing press
    - a) Invented in 1588, in Germany
    - b) Allowed for unprecedented production of texts
    - c) Luther Bible for German and King James Bible for English
  - 2. Rise of national states
    - a) Had a strong interest in creating a more integrated state territory
    - b) Brought people together and exposed them to common linguistic influences
    - c) Established networks of communication and interaction