

Re: Related languages (Re: A China–Sumer connection)

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Comm wrote:

> *"Neeraj Mathur" <neemathur@hotmail.com> wrote in message*

> *news:d1qb9t\$9l7\$1@news.ox.ac.uk...*

>> *Now, a more general point, for Martin. He points out that linguists use*

>> *similarities in vocabularies to determine relations, and offers the tables*

>> *as evidence. This is true, but it is not the correct approach. What*

>> *historical linguists and comparative philologists actually do is trace the*

>> *history of any given word through the language. If you do this, you will*

>> *find that there are basically two possible scenarios: first, the word can*

>> *have been borrowed at a given moment from some other language. If this*

>> *happens, your tracing of the word's history ends at the time of the*

>> *borrowing (to trace it further would mean tracing it in a different*

>> *language; if you are a specialist in English, you might get 'jungle' as*

>> *far back as the moment it enters Hindi but you may simply not have the*

>> *resources or knowledge to trace it further within Hindi itself).*

>> *On the other hand, if*

>> *the word is not borrowed, then essentially you are tracing it back to the*

>> *end of your records. Your search ends at the point when your records for*

>> *the > past run out. Comparative philology now provides the opportunity to*

>> *go one step further back. It is at this point, and this point only, that*

> > *comparison tables between different languages become relevant. If you make*
> > *a large enough table, then if two languages offer regular sound*
> > *correspondences, you can go further back and posit that they are*
all the
> > *descendants of a given form and you can say that the word you were*
tracing
> > *is 'inherited' from that parent source. If you cannot set up these*
regular
> > *correspondences, then your search ends in mystery.*
> >
> > *This is much more sophisticated than simply drawing up a table of*
words
> > *that > look similar. If you were simply comparing vocabulary, you*
might be
> > *tempted > to posit some sort of connection between Latin 'deus' and*
Greek
> > *'theos', both of which mean 'god'. However, there is no way to draw*
up a regular
> > *sound correspondence to account for these two words that is*
consistent
> > *with > all the other words of the language, and so we cannot say*
that
> > *there is any connection between them.*

Yes, BUT when I was studying Mandarin Chinese the teacher made the comment that if you trace back the pronunciation of words in Chinese (presumably if you found ancient rhyming dictionaries?) then you will find that words used in Vietnamese to mean the same thing are, in fact, the same word. He went so far as to speculate that Vietnamese sounds more like ancient Chinese than modern Chinese does (presumably due to the influence of Manchu pronunciation on Mandarin). Yet people on this group have insisted that Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.) and Vietnamese belong to unrelated language groups. Comm suggests that this is a paradigm, that people are classifying Chinese languages as a group for political reasons whereas, in reality, Cantonese differs from Mandarin to the same extent that Vietnamese differs from Cantonese. Who is right?

> > *All of the trees that linguists draw up are based on patterns that*
arise
> > *from tracing the histories of the individual words of a language.*
They
> > *exclude borrowing because that would make things too complex: you*
can only
> > *have one source from which to 'inherit' words, and you can only*
'inherit'
> > *them at one point in time, while you can borrow words from as many*
sources
> > > *as you like and in as many moments in history as your fancy*
takes. The

> > *tree diagrams are simply shorthands for showing the inherited relationships; the vocabulary comparisons that you will see philologists make are specifically of those words that are inherited, not borrowed.*

Fair enough, but note your use here of the word "inherited". I've been criticized for saying that there should be a correlation between genetics and linguistics: if you trace back different groups speaking different languages and assume that they were once one group speaking the same language then you would have to argue that they must also have a genetic relationship. The only other possibility is that there was a language shift, that people, for whatever reason started speaking another language. It has been pointed out by many people that this does happen when one group is conquered by another (even though I was criticized, yet again, for making this very suggestion).

> > *It is true that a complete description of the history of, say, English would need to talk about the French influence, the fact that French and Latin were such large and continuous sources of borrowing. But a tree diagram does not claim to do any such thing – it is limited to offering a history of the words that were inherited by a language only. This is much more easily identified, codified and worked with: since inheritance happens only once, you can describe it in general rules that will apply to all inherited words; borrowing happens all over and so a separate description is needed for each borrowed word. That is why most linguists use the much simpler, easier to fully understand situation and use 'related' in reference to the tree diagrams only.*

Now, in the case of English, we are descended from Angles and Saxons, Germanic tribes, so it is natural to say that the oldest English words are from German, even if most of the modern words were borrowed from other languages, mostly French and Latin. Fair enough. But in the case of people in South America, for example, who speak Spanish but are presumably descendents of local people, couldn't we argue that they are still speaking their traditional language but that they have borrowed vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation from Spanish? This is an extreme example. I'm just asking if vocabulary can be borrowed then why not everything else? In which case we are all speaking whatever language we inherited from our ancient ancestors plus any elements that were borrowed along the way. We would then expect a 100% correlation between genetics and "inherited" as opposed to "borrowed" language.

> *Martin said:*
> > *Certainly English speaking people*
> >> *can decipher a lot of words from Romance languages and very little from*
> >>> *Indian languages (meaning languages spoken in India and not meant to*
> >>> *imply that there is an all encompassing Indian language group).*
Again,
> >>> *it would be prejudicial NOT to recognize the relationship between*
> >>> *languages in India and Europe just because they sound different.*
By
> >>> *the same token, however, it is intuitive to think that closely related*
> >>> *languages should sound similar and that people who speak one should be*
> >>> *able to understand someone who speaks the other.*
> >
> > *This argument seems to be confusing two very, very different things. Two*
> > *languages can 'sound similar' and two languages can have vocabulary in*
> > *common.*

Perhaps I should have been clearer. I don't understand, say, Greek or Hindi, and probably wouldn't be able to identify any of the words in either but I can still judge whether they sound similar. I was referring to Comm's subjective descriptions of languages (eg her claim that Chinese sounded like "cats meowing" to her) and not to similarities in vocabulary.

On the other hand, related languages should sound similar AND have words in common and should therefore it should be easier for people speaking related languages to understand each other.

> > *It is certainly true that English has a greater percent of its*
> > *vocabulary in common with French than with Hindi. However, in terms of*
> > *their > sounds, Hindi is much, much more like French than either are to*
> > *English.*
>
> *Hmm, it doesn't sound anything like French to me.*

It's subjective.

> > *Suggesting that 'closely related languages should sound similar' is not*
> > *really a tenable argument: Armenian sounds a lot like its close neighbours*
> > *in the Caucasus, but is not related to them at all. As for being able to*

> > *understand them, I don't see how that argument is meant to work at all.*

> > *I'm afraid that, despite having spoken English for my entire life, I still*

> > *very often do not understand Scottish people talking – and that is*

> > *supposedly the same language! Punjabi and Hindi are extremely closely*

> > *related, but I can't understand Punjabi. Nor can I understand Dutch, one*

> > *of English's closest relatives.*

But pronunciation, the use of tone and rhythm, these are what determine how a language sound. Surely these things are inherited (or borrowed as the case may be) along with vocabulary and grammar, so that you would EXPECT related languages to sound similar. I suggested that could be a "prejudice".

Martin