

## Article

### *A Historical and Cultural Sketch of the Concept of Proto-Language*

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*Abstract:* The paper investigates the cultural prerequisites and developments that ultimately led to the creation of the concept of prehistoric unattested proto-languages from Antiquity to present-day.

*Keywords:* Proto-language, historiography, prehistory, Leibniz, Bopp, Proto-Indo-European.

#### 1. Introduction

Romance languages are descended from Latin. This statement sounds completely obvious in the year 2010 and does not seem to require any kind of proof to be believed. But what language is Latin itself descended from? Does this question even have an adequate or possible answer? Or rather, what did this question mean for people in Antiquity and in the Middle-Ages? The present-day scientific answer is to posit as ancestor of Latin a prehistoric language, called Proto-Indo-European, which is also the ancestor, or mother-language, of numerous languages in Europe, in Anatolia, in Iran and in India, and even in China's Turkestan. English is Indo-European as well through the intermediary stage of Proto-Germanic. The contemporary approach resorts to the concept of *prehistoric unattested language*, in other words of *proto-language*, and significantly differs from previous approaches from Antiquity down to a rather recent period. It presupposes that two other concepts have been mastered: evolution and very long periods of time, which underlie what could be called a truly modern thinking, in sharp contrast with the fixist mindset that prevailed before. They were lacking in the past and for that matter, answers and theories were very different from the one we now consider the most acceptable.

#### 2. The invention of prehistory and evolution

Proto-Languages are linguistic entities but they may have not emerged without the drastic paradigmatic shifts that occurred first in geology and biology. Linguistics actually owes to these fields several scientific innovations, which it did not invent but integrated in its own heuristic program: the ancientness of the universe, prehistory (with and without human beings), the evolution of living beings and arborescent taxonomy. Modern thinking, be it linguistic or not, is in this respect indebted to Darwin, Lamarck, Linnaeus and Cuvier.

The “bigbang”, that is to say the temporal limit assigned to the “beginning” of the universe is now usually dated as far back as about 13 billion years ago. This number is breathtakingly high when compared with the maximal life expectancy of a human being. But people have grown used to it. It is actually nothing when compared to the *mahākalpa* of the Indian tradition, but it cannot be emphasized too strongly that until the 18th century Europeans and people of the “western” cultural tradition more generally lived in the intellectual framework of a world that had just been created very little time ago. The canonical cultural reference as reported in the Bible gave History about no time span to unravel. Noah in his arch was supposed to have landed in Armenia in -2350 BCE, which appears to be in fact younger than the age of some living beings and plants found on the planet. According to the learned computations of the Irish archbishop Ussher (1581-1656), God had accomplished his grandiose scheme on the October 23th -4004 BCE around 7.20 a.m. In other words, in this approach, the universe hardly has more than 6000 years and human history hardly more than 4000. It is therefore little wonder that the concepts of prehistory and evolution were never to develop in such an intellectual and

cultural environment, virtually caged and clamped inside the fleeting instant of the divine Creation and its brief and immediate earthly aftermath.

Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) was a naturalist and he painstakingly studied fossils, which had been interpreted as proofs of the Flood, since the 7th century and Isidore of Seville's Etymologies. His reflections and doubts opened a first breach in the Biblical tight corset: more time is needed, considerably more. How many successive Floods are needed to account for all these layers upon layers of rocks and remains and all these strange animals and plants which seem to be buried in them? In his boldest thoughts he imagined a world as old as 10 000 years, or maybe even 40 000 years, ten times the age computed a century before. He could hardly stand believing that himself, but, compared to present-day cosmology, he was not as bold as he feared. Another puzzling feature was that many layers show no traces at all of any human presence. Was it then that there might have been a time when no man lived down here? Was the Unthinkable the real Truth? Being not an antichristian thinker, Cuvier labored and turmoiled in the midst of considerable contradictions but one conclusion appeared clearly: the universe was definitely old, much older than previously thought and mankind used not to be there. Cuvier invented without giving it a name the *prehistory* with and without mankind, which was a major advance. The word itself was to be coined in the middle of the 19th century.

Now that the universe is understood as lasting and existing for long, a new and epoch-making concept can appear: evolution. Jean-Baptiste de Monet aka Lamarck (1744-1829) then invents and tests the idea that living beings get gradually transformed and acquire new features in this process. Following him, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) deals the last blow to the fixist and biblical paradigm: the idea that we live in a sublime world where divine perfection reveals itself gloriously is ruined for good. The world is a kind of chaos where only practical efficiency prevails. God, demoted as a *Deus Otiosus*, is very far away and very much absent. Beauty and perfection are purged from scientific discourse.

These are the ground-breaking innovations on which linguistics was to thrive.

### *3. Programmatic and Heuristic Imbroglios*

For a very long period of time, several questions were so much entangled that this situation prevented any one of them from being satisfactorily answered. In particular the issue of the origin of language as a general faculty of mankind was confused with that of specific languages. So far the origin of language remains beyond the borders of the scientifically knowable and today no robust hypothesis can help understand how it started. For centuries another anguished question haunting monasteries and christian theology was to determine how God had spoken to Adam and Eve to the Snake. Was it in Hebrew or was it thanks to some spiritual enlightenment? This unanswerable question compounded with the quest for the ultimate origin of language was thwarting any concrete study on the origin of a precise language, as the comparative method now does. In the same realm of obscure and speculative issues why not ponder on the language of Sirens entralling Ulysses tied to his mast?

To these metaphysical issues can be added very old questions that are still being discussed in present-day linguistics. What are the relationships between thought and language or between language and reality? In other words how should languages be assessed when it comes to their adequacy and capacity to permit communication and representation? A question that the medieval modist theory had studied with its *modi intelligendi*, *modi significandi*, *modi essendi*, very similar to the *signified*, *signifiers* and *referents* of Ferdinand de Saussure. Another question, often tainted with political and religious undertones, was to tell which language was the most perfect and therefore the only one to be trusted as being the origin of the others? This might have opened the way to typological investigations of languages but foregone conclusions were too strong. Most often Hebrew was seen as more perfect than the other languages, a conclusion which quite surprisingly was advocated together with a fierce and unrelenting antisemitism.

Thanks to the advances of molecular biology, which advocates a single and recent human species, some questions, dismissed not so long ago, have made a comeback: Was there one or several languages at the origin of all known languages: should one believe in mono- or poly-genesis? Which language(s) did the “anatomically modern” human beings speak 60 000 years ago and before? In a way (historical) linguistics is forced to address these issues that had been deemed to be preferably not dealt with at all. And as mentioned before, to these general issues, remained specific questions: from what language(s) is Latin derived?

Several epochs can be distinguished :

- Antiquity and the early Middle-Ages (before 1200),
- The end of the Middle-Ages and Renaissance (1200 to 1600),
- Pre-modern era (1600 to 1800),
- Modern era (1800 to 1990),
- Possibly a post-modern era (1990-).

Each of them has its own features that will be described in the following paragraphs.

#### 4. *Antiquity and the early Middle-Ages (before 1200)*

Neither the ancient Greeks nor the Romans have left much on the issue of proto-languages. In the eyes and ears of Greeks non-Greeks were *Barbaroi*, that is to say splutterers and mumblers. Moreover Greeks were proud to claim illustrious divine ancestors: Zeus, Poseidon or Apollon. From the Greek point of view Phrygians were not far from being just pathetic splutterers. That the Greek language could share a close genetic relationship with Phrygian was at least unthinkable not to say outright insulting. Words that sounded alike in Greek and Phrygian were explained as borrowings. And this was in fact to be held as the major if not unique cause of lexical similarities between languages for a very long time. As for Romans they had not failed to notice lexical and grammatical analogies between Latin and Greek. Here again borrowing was the cause: Eolian Greeks were supposed to have been in Rome's surroundings at an early period and had contributed to making the two languages sound similar. In a very imperial way the conquest of Italy by Rome resulted in the interdiction of local languages such as Oscan. In fact Greeks and Romans did not display much interest in describing other languages. Unfortunately, several works on Etruscan written by the Roman emperor Claudius (10 BC – AD 54) are now lost. On the whole, in spite of its amazing creativity, Greece invented nothing that remotely reminds of a proto-language. People were not ready for that.

#### 5. *(Early) Renaissance (1200 - 1600)*

During this period several authors began to state that languages could derive from another one. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the famous writer of the *Commedia dell'arte*, was the first European to assert that Romance languages were cognate and were the contemporary idioms resulting from the historical modifications of Latin. Toscan and Florentine are two idioms simultaneously different from Latin and derived from it. He roughly classified Romance languages in three branches according to the word *yes*: *lingue di si*, *lingue di oc* and *lingue di oil* in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304). As a quite titillating detail Dante did not appreciate so much the Bible's Genesis as it appears that Eve, a female, might have spoken first before Adam... Robert Bacon (1214-1294) also noticed that modern Greek was the evolved continuation of the dialects of ancient Greek. As early as the beginning of the 13th century Giraud de Cambrie suggested that Breton, Welsh and Cornish were derived from a more ancient Celtic language spoken in Great Britain. All these sensical remarks announced an increasing interest for the description of languages but significant progress was hampered by the absence of adequate theories and the persistent confusion between sacred and profane considerations.

Three major hypotheses about the origin of languages can be described:

- Languages were considered blends of previously existing languages,

- All languages were derived from Hebrew,
- All languages were derived from a particular language, such as Flemish.

It took a long time until a prehistoric proto-language could be suggested. Probably because the Christian religion precluded the notion of evolution and considered all things and beings to be created once and forever, thinkers of the Renaissance explained language change as blending processes. Italian was thus Latin mixed with Lombardic (an eastern Germanic language) and French was Gaulish mixed with Latin. This blend process enabled people to describe changes, which were obvious, without resorting to evolution.

Unsurprisingly Hebrew was long held by many Europeans to be the mother of all languages. A typical example was Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), one of the greatest scholars of his time, who wrote that Arabic, Sanskrit and Greek originated in Hebrew, the language that Noah had bequeathed to mankind. Ultimately this approach led to what has been billed “etymological furor”: every word is explained through complex permutations and substitutions of letters which border on kabbalistic methods. In 1606 Estienne Guichard wrote the archetypal work: *L'Harmonie étymologique des langues*, in which all words of the known languages of that time were allegedly derivable from the trilateral roots of Hebrew. The gradual discovery of the immense diversity of languages throughout the world nevertheless contributed to the unescapable crisis of the biblical paradigm which could not integrate this profusion of languages. Exotic and improbable languages were subjected to these graphic games. South American Arawak was one of them and proved to be unmanageable. It could not be easily compared with Hebrew in any way. Arawak ultimately contributed to the collapse of the biblical paradigm.

Following the crisis of Hebrew as the original language and the development of national languages, another approach then got momentum with more chauvinistic than religious goals. Modern languages were proposed as substitutes of Hebrew for the role of original language of mankind. First attempted by Swedes, it reached its acme when some people proposed to derive all other languages from the Flemish dialect spoken in Antwerpen. This episode is remembered as goropianism, after Jan van Gorp. This led to the quest for the original language being abandoned as hopeless and Leibniz to declare *Nobis ignota est*.

#### 6. Pre-modern period (1600 - 1800)

An unexpected byproduct of the newly discovered human and linguistic diversity was the creation of emended variants of the Bible's Genesis: it was proposed that Adam might not be the very first man, but only the first man to have sinned. Before him other people called pre-adamites had existed who could account for far-off languages. This is the kind of ideas proposed in 1655 by the Swiss calvinist, Isaac de la Peyrère. The idea is novel in Europe but it can be noted that a muslim, Al-Maqdisi, had already proposed this original and iconoclastic concept of a pre-adamite mankind in the 10th century.

During this period several significant advances created the preconditions to disentangle the issues and to address them in an increasingly efficient way. Religious considerations receded in the background and focus was put on real languages. The theoretical framework improved. In the article *Etymologie* of the *Encyclopédie*, Turgot indicates that the adjective *britannique* could never derive from Hebrew *baratanac* ‘tin land’, as had been suggested before. The words do not have the same morphemic structure and nothing corresponds to the suffix *-ique* in *baratanac*. This linguistic reasoning definitely ruined the etymological fancies of Isidore of Seville who used to analyze *corpus* as being composed of letters extracted from the sentence *corruptus perit* ‘it dies rotten’. This kind of explanations obviously makes no sense at all from a point of view of modern linguistics.

These researches were always done on written languages and not on the real phonetics of spoken languages and they never alluded at the possibility of an unknown prehistoric proto-language. But they paved the way that would ultimately lead to the emergence of Indo-European comparative

studies. Joseph Scaliger, in *Diatriba de europaerorum linguis* published in 1599, distinguished 11 families of languages in Europe, which he considered to be unrelated.

A major event to have an irresistible influence on the development of comparative linguistics was the discovery of Sanskrit by Europeans in the 16th century. The striking similarity between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek was noticed for the first time in 1583 by an English jesuit, Thomas Stephen, who lived in India from 1579 to 1619. Other people to make the same observations include Filippo Sassetti who mentions in particular numbers 6 to 10 and the words God and snake (!). But he never suggested the possibility of cognacy as his letters primarily betray his amazement at the cultural gap between India and Italy. Much work was done at that time by Marcus Boxhorn (1640) in the Netherlands and by Claude de Saumaise (1643) in France on the comparison of Indo-European languages, which had not yet received that name, especially on Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian and Germanic languages. The word *indo-european* is attested for the first time under the pen of Thomas Young only in 1813 and it really became the mainstream word in the 20th century. The approach remained strictly comparative with no reconstruction and this period was fixist and the notion of proto-language was not yet thinkable. Moreover the data on Sanskrit and Persian were not precise and reliable and the proof of a relationship was hardly solid and somewhat fabulous.

The evident similarities between these languages were explained within the framework of the “scythic” origin, also called Celto-Scythic or Japhetic. The Scyths, in fact a component of the Iranian subbranch, were then supposed to have migrated in all Eurasia and to have split into the attested contemporary languages. Leibniz (1646-1716) contributed to propagate this hypothesis of a “scythic” diffusion, first proposed by Boxhorn in 1654:

The language or dialect of the ancient Goths is very different from present-day Germanic, although it draws from the same source. Ancient Gaulish was even more different, to judge from its closest relative, which is Welsh, Cornish and Breton. But Irish is still more different and displays the traces of a very antique British, Gaulish and Germanic tongue. However these languages all come from one source and can be considered to be alterations of one and the same language, which could be called Celtic. In the Antiquity, Germanic and Gaulish people were called Celts, and if one tries to understand the origins of Celtic, Latin and Greek, which have many roots in common with Germanic or Celtic languages, one may hypothesize that this is due to the common origin of all these peoples descended from the Scyths, who came from the Black Sea, crossed the Danube and the Vistule Rivers, of whom one part went to Greece, and the other formed Germanic and Gaulish people. This is a consequence of the hypothesis that Europeans came from Asia.<sup>1</sup> (Leibniz 1990:218)

It can be noted that this is nearly word-for-word the modern theory, three and a half centuries later. In spite of its quaint vocabulary, the theory described by Leibniz is incredibly close to the standard Pontico-Caspian origin of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. Other people like Andreas Jäger in 1686 have stated similar points of view. Other works like those of James Parsons (1767) are interesting from a comparative point of view but they are so much entangled with Biblical themes that it is hard to tell the historical from the mythical.

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<sup>1</sup> [My translation of the original in French] La langue ou le dialecte de ces anciens Goths est très-différent du germanique moderne, quoiqu'il y ait le même fonds de langue. L'ancien gaulois en était encore plus différent, à en juger par la langue plus approchante de la vraie gauloise, qui est celle du pays de Gales, de Cornuaille, et le bas-breton ; mais le hibernois en diffère encore davantage et nous fait voir les traces d'un langage britannique, gaulois, et germanique, encore plus antique. Cependant ces langues viennent toutes d'une source et peuvent être prises pour des altérations d'une même langue, qu'on pourrait appeler la celtique. Aussi les anciens appelaient-ils Celtes tant les Germains que les Gaulois ; et en remontant davantage pour y comprendre les origines tant du celtique et du latin que du grec, qui ont beaucoup de racines communes avec les langues germaniques ou celtiques, on peut conjecturer que cela vient de l'origine commune de tous ces peuples descendus des Scythes, venus de la mer Noire, qui ont passé le Danube et la Vistule, dont une partie pourrait être allée en Grèce, et l'autre aura rempli la Germaine et les Gaules ; ce qui est une suite de l'hypothèse qui fait venir les Européens d'Asie.

## 7. Modern period (1800 - 1990)

During the decades 1800-1840 the concept of Proto-Indo-European and *proto-language* gradually emerged in its fully modern form: it became an unattested prehistoric ancestor of all attested daughter languages, be they contemporary or ancient. Religious references disappear, even though some words were astonishingly resistant. In 1905 it is still written that:

Le sujet du présent livre est le groupe de langues que les Allemands appellent aujourd'hui indo-germanique (idg.), et que l'on désigne aussi sous le nom d'indo-européen (i.e.), nom usuel en France et qui sera adopté dans la présente traduction, ou d'aryen, ou de japhétique. (Brugmann 1905: 2)

The French translation of the German original begins with this sentence which still mentions the word *japhétique* of only historiographic interest. The rest of the book uses the standard word: Indo-European. This nevertheless suggests that *japhetic* was not yet fully obsolete at that time.

Before the emergence of the concepts of evolution and prehistory differences were not explained through *progressive divergences* with the passage of time, but as *blends* between languages as mentioned in a previous paragraph. In this premodern framework languages do not evolve but they get blended, which generates new idioms. On the contrary a clearly modern point of view on the evolution of languages is stated by Jakob Grimm (1785-1865) in *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache* (1848:833) :

All dialects develop in a progressive order, and the more one goes back toward the origin of languages, the fewer their number and the fainter their differences. Were it not that way, the formation of dialects and the plurality of languages would remain without explanation. Diversity grows gradually out of primeval unity. German dialects are all drawn from an ancient common Germanic language, and likewise this latter was together with Lithuanian, Slavic, Greek and Latin, nothing but a dialect of an idiom still more ancient.

In this text can be found the concepts of evolution and arborescent split from an initial proto-language which are the groundwork of historical linguistics. Another modern presentation of Indo-European relationship is stated by Friedrich Schlegel in *Ueber die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indier* (1808):

Sanskrit presents such a strong relationship with Latin, Greek and Germanic, as well as with Persian. Similarities go beyond a very huge number of roots which these languages have in common but exist in the structure and grammar as well. Consequently the relationship cannot be a chance coincidence or be explained with exchanges but is fundamental and caused by a common origin.

The demonstration of this relationship can be credited to Franz Bopp (1791-1867). He came in Paris to study Sanskrit in 1812 and published four years later a masterpiece of colossal magnitude, which conclusively proved the relationship that had been discussed in learned circles for 350 years. When reading this work one can only be admiring about the achievement. In fact about everything about comparatism and historical linguistics is already in this book!

The Neo-grammarians are often touted for having first asserted the need to work with sound correspondences. But it can be noted that they are in fact not the first at all. This idea is already in Bopp's original work. Rasmus Rask is also well-known for having applied this method at that time. Early precursors of that method are much less known. They have not necessarily played a direct role on the development of historical linguistics but they have come to assert the method as we know it. Among them was a South America churchman, Felipe Salvador Gilij. In the year 1782 he called *coherencia mayor* the fact that Arawak languages display the forms *shapa, dapa, yapa* for 'mountain' and *shema, dema, yema* for 'tobacco'. With his major coherences he formulated empirically the fact that related languages share predictable phonetic correspondences throughout their vocabulary.

A word needs to be shed about Sir William Jones (1746-1794), who is often described as the discoverer of Sanskrit and the initiator of Indo-European studies.<sup>2</sup> In 1786 Jones, who was a judge at the supreme court of Calcutta, delivered a conference, of which an excerpt has remained famous:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a 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, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all 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 the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family.

There is in fact nothing new in the wording and the thinking. This is more or less what Leibniz stated two centuries before. Jones did not mention any prehistoric language and remained in the old medieval framework of language blends. On the whole his linguistic competences are seriously overrated as he considered Farsi to have the same origin as Arabic because they were written in the same alphabet. It is also interesting and revealing to read the sentence just before the paragraph cited above:

“The pure Hindî, whether of Tartarian or Chaldean origin, was primeval in Upper India, into which the Sanskrit was introduced by conquerors from other kingdoms in some very remote age; for we cannot doubt that the language of the Vêda's was used in the great extent of country, which has before been delineated, as long as the religion of Brahmâ has prevailed in it.

Quite absurdly Jones does not seem to understand or perceive the direct connection between Hindi and Sanskrit. For him Hindi is Altaic or Semitic and even earlier than Sanskrit. It is hard to believe that he was ahead of his time. He represents the end of the fixist and blending paradigm, contrary to Bopp, Grimm or Schlegel who follow a modern approach. It cannot be doubted that German scholars gave comparatism its initial impetus, as underlined by Antoine Meillet in 1923.

In the middle of the 19th century evolutionist thinking established that none of the Indo-European languages could be the mother of all the others. The “Celto-Scythic” aka “Japhetic” theory was dismissed and the original Proto-Indo-European language was considered prehistoric and unattested as is still stated now.

#### 8. *Toward a post-modern period (1990 - )?*

The history of comparative and historical linguistics can briefly summarized as follows. Before the Renaissance very little was achieved even though some people had penetrating intuitions about potential genetic connections between languages. After the discovery of Sanskrit Europeans were struck by the similarity of this language with Latin and Greek. This generated the theory of the “Scythic” origin of all these languages which lasted from about 1650 to 1820. Afterwards several people among whom Franz Bopp must be remembered gave the Proto-Indo-European theory the contents and bases that have been kept until today: a high number of languages spoken in Eurasia are descended from a prehistoric unattested language. Their vocabularies, morphologies and grammars present structural and formal similarities that preclude chance coincidence as a possible explanation.

Since the 1990s and since genetics showed that all human beings originate in a rather recent and limited set of people, the quest for the original Proto-World language has been rekindled. A new field has emerged: macro-comparatism, but for the time being it has not gained the same status of respectability as orthodox and local comparatism of the Indo-European type.

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<sup>2</sup> Especially in English-speaking literature and naive traductions.

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