



# *There are exceptions to the theory of a common thread in languages*



**T**HESE days, when it is widely recognised that languages such as English are “related to” languages like Greek, Persian and Hindi, it is hard to reconstruct the feeling of excitement that this discovery gave rise to in the eighteenth century.

People had known for hundreds of years that some languages had words that looked similar: English cold, Danish kold, Dutch koud, German kalt have much in common, as do French cheval, Italian cavallo, Portuguese cavalo and Spanish caballo, all meaning horse.

The Romans and the Greeks had played the same game of listing apparently related words (even obscurely related ones) and of looking for the “original meaning”.

Then various scholars tried to link all languages with Hebrew, on the understanding that Hebrew was the original language of humankind. This was a difficult task, since Hebrew belongs to a different language family from English, French, or Russian.

In the end, correspondences such as the following turned out to be convincing because there were so many of them, and they were largely predictable.

Carry (or, perhaps better, bear) corresponds to Sanskrit bhar-, Latin fero, Greek phero and Gothic bairan; father corresponds to Sanskrit pitar-, Latin pater, Greek pater and Gothic fadar; foot corresponds to Sanskrit pad-, Latin pes, Greek pous and Gothic fotus, and mouse corresponds to Sanskrit mus-, Latin mus, Greek mus and Gothic mus.

The person usually given the credit for bringing all this together is Sir William (“Oriental”) Jones, a British judge in India, said to have known more than 20 languages, who in an address to the Asiatic Society in 1786 said: “The Sanscrit language is more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed that no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.”

What is vital here is the last bit I have quoted, the common source which no longer exists.

Since the languages related to the four listed above spread from India to the Atlantic Ocean, they were termed the Indo-European languages, and the common source which no longer exists, and about which we know only what we can deduce from the languages descended from it, is called Proto-Indo-European.

The number of Indo-European languages is not entirely settled even today, but there are about 140 of them.

**M**OST of the languages of Europe are included in the list, but not Basque, Finnish, Maltese or Turkish, which belong to different families. If we try a similar exercise with them, the words are clearly less related.

Corresponding to English man we find Basque gizon, Finnish mies, Maltese



**The Dominion Post**  
**09-Mar-2011**  
**Page: 7**  
**Opinion**  
**Market: Wellington**  
**Circulation: 84047**  
**Type: Metro**  
**Size: 328.48 sq.cms**  
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ragel and Turkish adam; corresponding to English four we find Basque laur, Finnish neljä, Maltese erba and Turkish dört; and corresponding to English here we find Basque hemen, Finnish täällä, Maltese hawn and Turkish burada.

From archaeological evidence as well as linguistic evidence (there are Indo-European words for horse, oak, pig, sheep, but not for donkey or chicken) it seems that the speakers of Proto-Indo-European lived in modern-day Eastern Europe about 3000 years ago.

The relationships between the words in the different languages have been worked on in great detail, with more than 100 proposed “laws” governing the ways in which sounds or letters in one language correspond to those in another.

The relationship between the initial “p” in the Latin word for foot and the “f” in the English or Gothic words is part of

Grimm’s Law and recurs regularly, for instance. Although there are always some surprises – usually because a word is borrowed or a meaning changes – the relationships between the languages are now so well established that the Indo-European hypothesis is universally accepted.

Given that geneticists now tell us that mitochondrial Eve, the ancestor of all modern humans, lived about 200,000 years ago, we might expect all human language to go back to her.

However, the techniques used to say something about the nature of the language 3000 years ago do not allow us to look so far back, so we cannot provide solid linguistic proof in support of such a hypothesis.

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