

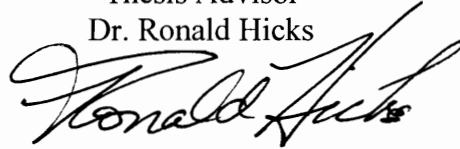
The Indo-European Question

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

We know that the languages of the Indo-European language family are all related, but determining the exact spread of these languages across Europe and Asia has been difficult to do. Marija Gimbutas argues that the Indo-European people originated in the steppes of Russia and Central Asia, and that these people migrated outward, dominating the cultures they encountered. Other scholars, such as Colin Renfrew, argue that the Indo-Europeans migrated out of Anatolia slowly, intermingling with new cultures. These differing viewpoints each use archaeological and linguistic evidence to supplement their arguments. However, they also show that there is still much to discover about this fascinating topic.

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Where did our language come from? This is a question that has puzzled scholars for years. The origins of the Indo-European language are shrouded in the mists of time, and parting these mists to see what lies within has been difficult. Every few years a new theory is developed that points to a new homeland from which the Indo-European people spread west and south to cover much of Europe and Asia. These theories generally use both archaeological and linguistic evidence to support their claims, but it is difficult to trace human migration patterns in the archaeological record. Linguistic evidence also has its critics; some scholars have claimed that the Indo-European languages can be traced back to one root language, a Proto-Indo-European language, and that a base vocabulary can be established. However, other scholars claim that a failure to account for language processes, like word-borrowing or a change in the meaning of a word, can seriously undermine the data yielded by a reconstruction.

There are also other processes that one must take into account if one is studying the spread of Indo-European languages. These include the processes of language spread itself as well as the different ways that populations shift and migrate. Another factor that has been linked into the spread of Indo-European languages is the domestication of the horse. Some scholars argue that archaeological evidence of horse domestication is critical in determining the area that Indo-European peoples originally inhabited. Others claim that the domestication of the horse is one of the elements that allowed Indo-European peoples to spread into Europe and Asia in the first place.

Marija Gimbutas, one of the scholars who had done extensive work in the area of Indo-European archaeology, began to write about what she called the “Kurgan culture” in 1956 (Anthony 1986:305). According to Gimbutas, the Kurgan culture spread the Indo-European language out of the steppes of Asia in a vast westward migration. She identified three main groups of people who existed in the area around the Black Sea based on archaeological assemblages found in each area. The first group she termed the North Pontic or Mariupol Culture; this group was concentrated in Eastern Ukraine and the Dnieper Valley (Gimbutas 1963:818-819). Gimbutas associated this culture with burials covered in bright red ochre and flat-based pottery. The second archaeological culture was called the Transcaucasian Copper Age Culture, and it was defined by stone molds for copper axes and the presence of agriculture and pastoralism (Gimbutas 1963:819-820). This culture stretched from the Euphrates to Anatolia.

The third archaeological group defined by Gimbutas was the Kurgan culture; it received its name from the Russian word for barrow, describing the burial mounds associated with it (Gimbutas 1963:820-821). The Kurgan culture encompassed what had been several smaller archaeological cultures, including the Yamna, or Pit-Grave, Culture (Anthony 1986:291). Gimbutas believed that the Kurgan culture was concentrated mainly in the Eurasian steppes. She also stated, “this is the area where horse-breeding must have first occurred” (Gimbutas 1963:820).

According to Gimbutas, the Kurgan people began to spread out of the steppes to the northern Caucasus region first around 2400 BC. Based on archaeological

information, she surmised that the original culture of the Pontic region was completely dominated by the Kurgan culture. There was a shift in the burial styles to one more that used barrows, and the settlement patterns became fortified hill-top villages (Gimbutas 1963:821). Gimbutas also stated that the presence of wheels and burial goods modeled after carts proved that the Kurgan people must have brought domestic horses with the into the region (Gimbutas 1963:821).

The Kurgans then spread even farther west into Anatolia and eastern Europe. "Around 2400-2200 B.C. Kurgan elements (barrows, pit-graves with skeletons lying on the back with legs contracted upwards, ochre deposits, stone maceheads...) appeared in Transylvania, northern Yugoslavia, and northeastern Hungary, and along the western coasts of the Black Sea, in the western Ukraine, Rumania, and Bulgaria" (Gimbutas 1963:823). Gimbutas believed that this invasion into Europe could be evidenced by the layers of destruction found at sites in Greece that dated to around the same time as the migration.

One of the major arguments in Gimbutas' theory was that the Kurgan culture wiped out the cultures that had existed previously in much of northern and eastern Europe and around the Black Sea. She stated that, in the Balkans, "The intrusion of the Kurgan people to the Balkans gave rise to an entirely different pattern in cultural developments. In the course of several centuries the old Balkan cultures came to an end...the ensuing social structure, economy, architecture, and burial rites were different" (Gimbutas 1963:825). Because the Kurgans were capable of inflicting such dramatic change on the areas into which they migrated, Gimbutas

stated that they must have had a powerful aristocracy that was able to impose the new language and social organization (Gimbutas 1963:827).

This original theory was later amended; one change concentrated on the Sredni Stog Culture of the Dnieper Valley. Gimbutas had previously stated that this culture was the result of a westward migration of peoples from the Kurgan homeland (Anthony 1986:295). Newer evidence later showed that this culture developed from a local Neolithic culture, and that horses had already been domesticated. A site at Dereivka yielded horse skeletons that, at one point, were described as “a ritual assemblage consisting of a horse head with hide and hoofs attached...a crescentic antler tine with a single cord-worn perforation lay near the horse skull...” (Anthony 1986:295). Some scholars, however, believed that the horse find represented a trash pit rather than a ritual site (Anthony 2003:55).

Some scholars supported Gimbutas’ theory. One study studied the transition the Copper Age and the Early Bronze Age in the Danube Basin, which the author believed was affected by the second Kurgan wave of migration (Nemeskéri 1987:88, 118). The study examined skeletal remains from local cultures in the Danube Valley, and the skulls of these individuals were measured using eleven characteristics. The results were then grouped into clusters, which were grouped into cluster trees that indicated cohesion, or similarities between individuals (Nemeskéri 1987:94). Nemeskéri found that the data indicated two major forces affecting the population of the Copper Age.

In this respect, it seems probable that the population of the Copper Age was formed by two fundamental effects. One is the survival of the local Late Neolithic population, which may be seen mostly in the Tiszapolgár

culture...the second effect is the arrival of immigrants that can be observed for the first time in the Tiszapolgár culture... [Nemeskéri 1987:97]

Nemeskéri stated that the Kurgan migrations into the Danube Basin transformed the cultures of the local groups, and that this change must have persisted in the Copper Age (1987:118).

While some scholars supported the Kurgan migration theory, others began to find major flaws in it. One of these scholars was Colin Renfrew. According to Renfrew, scientists who believed that the Indo-European language developed in one place and was spread by a wave of migrating people had not adequately demonstrated that enough evidence existed to link the archaeological remains, such as pottery and tools, with the language that was spoken by the people using these tools.

They [writers] have placed too much faith in the idea of some reconstructed Proto-Indo-European vocabulary, from which some kind of word-picture of the original homeland might be put together. They have too readily assumed that a given pottery form, or an assemblage of items of material equipment, can be equated directly with a group of people and hence supposedly with a particular language or language group. And they have not adequately explained *why* all these languages, or the speakers of all these languages, should be wandering around Europe and western Asia so tirelessly, in a series of migrations, thus setting up the pattern of different languages which we see today [Renfrew 1987:75]

Renfrew also believed that these scientists were erroneously equating race and language; he pointed out that it was very hard to determine race accurately from skeletal material, and that this made it hard to say that a certain population could be associated with a specific language (Renfrew 1987:76-77).

Renfrew then discussed several problems that he saw with the migration theory. First, he believed that scientists erred in trying to create a protolexicon that

could be used to trace back modern words to their Indo-European root (Renfrew 1987:77). He stated that linguists accomplished this by comparing cognates from several languages; when cognates were discovered in languages that were far apart geographically, then they must have been related to a basic word from the protolexicon (Renfrew 1987:77-78). Linguists also believed that if a word could be traced back to the protolexicon, then the Indo-European group must have been familiar with it. This led to the theory that Indo-Europeans must have been nomadic since linguists traced back animal names, but few terms for vegetables (Renfrew 1987:78).

Renfrew believed that there were several problems with this practice of attributing too much importance to a protolexicon. First, he believed that finding the same word for something in several languages does not mean that it came from a protolexicon; rather, it could have been a loan word from another language that explained a new concept or object. (Renfrew 1987:80). Next, Renfrew stated that the meanings of words change over time; a word that originally had one meaning in the protolexicon may have adopted new significance over the years, and that could skew the translation given to the word by linguists (Renfrew 1987:80). He also stated that cognates in Indo-European languages did not always have the same meaning. Therefore, basing a protolexicon on cognates that exist in many Indo-European languages could lead linguists to make skewed inferences about the vocabulary or social structure of the Proto-Indo-European people (Renfrew 1987:81).

Linguists had also tried to use the protolexicon to establish an Indo-European homeland by indicating that the presence of certain words for animals and trees could be linked to a geographical area. One of these scholars, Paul Friedrich, argued that the existence of many words for plants and animals meant that Proto-Indo-Europeans must have been pastoralists; Renfrew refutes this conclusion, stating that, "...this view is, unfortunately, based upon a very simplistic view of pastoralism. It is now well-established that a pastoral economy, with emphasis upon domestic animal species, can only arise following the emergence of agriculture" (Renfrew 1987:83). Renfrew believed that the linguistic trees created by linguistic paleontologists to create a protolexicon could not provide enough information on their own to make any conclusions about what type of society Proto-Indo-Europeans lived in or what type of environment they may have been familiar with.

However, the use of a protolexicon to make inferences about the Proto-Indo-Europeans was only one part of the overall argument for an Indo-European homeland. Another part consisted of associating archaeological evidence with a specific group of people. Renfrew stated that, at one point, the Beaker drinking vessels that were found throughout Europe were associated with a group of people who migrated from place to place (Renfrew 1987:87-88). However, in 1977, an archaeologist named Stephen Shennan that the Beaker objects were seen as status symbols, and that individuals were buried with Beaker vessels to emphasize their social rank (Renfrew 1987: 88-89).

Renfrew used the example of the Beaker vessels to show that archaeological assemblages should not be associated with a specific group of people. The spread of a new type of archaeological assemblage did not necessarily mean that a new group of people had invaded an area; rather, the technique for developing different tool types probably spread along the trade routes (Renfrew 1987:89-90). He saw this as a repudiation of the arguments made by some archaeologists; they believed that the spread of the practice of using certain burial mounds that had been associated with Proto-Indo-Europeans indicated an invasion into Europe. According to Renfrew, new trade networks throughout Europe opened the door to the spread of ideas and techniques, and this probably accounted for the spread of new burial practices throughout parts of Europe.

These arguments seem to me totally destructive of the suggestion that there were Kurgan invasions at this time, or that a new Kurgan language spread throughout the regions in question. It is certainly true that the Beaker élite were sometimes buried under a mound, a barrow, which in Russian might very properly be referred to by the term 'kurgan.' But so what? Even if this particular feature had indeed been learnt from south Russia, it scarcely carries with it linguistic implications, other than the possibility of an interesting loan-word [Renfrew 1987:92]

Renfrew's final criticism of the migration theory was that it gives no reason for a possible population shift (Renfrew 1987:94). While some people have argued that the Indo-European culture spread through the use of warfare, Renfrew did not believe that this claim had enough evidence to back it up (Renfrew 1987:95). He stated that the most common explanation given for the migration of Proto-Indo-European people is that they were a pastoral, nomadic people who gradually moved westward; Renfrew criticized this idea because it assumed that the Proto-Indo-European people had an innate advantage that allowed them to adapt to the climate

of western and central Europe as well as to the climate of the Russian steppes (Renfrew 1987:95-96).

While Renfrew believed that the migration theory did not serve as an adequate explanation for the spread of Indo-European languages, he did believe that there were several language processes and models that could give a clearer picture as to how the language diffusion occurred. First, he stated that there were three processes by which language came to be spoken in an area (Renfrew 1987:121). The first process, initial colonization, referred to humans entering an uninhabited area and bringing their language with them. The second process, replacement, occurred when one language in an area was replaced by a second language that was probably brought in by people from another area (Renfrew 1987:121-122). The third and final process was called continuous development; it consisted of divergence, when people who spoke a common language were isolated enough that their languages became completely separate, and convergence, in which the languages of neighboring areas became more common due to increased interaction between the two groups (Renfrew 1987:122).

Renfrew also stated that he believed that there were only a few ways in which language replacement could occur, and that scholars have focused too much on an invading culture as an explanation for cultural and lingual shifts (Renfrew 1987:123-124). The first model that Renfrew proposed was the demography/subsistence model (Renfrew 1987:124). This model, "assumes that the new language comes about as a result of the movement into the territory of large numbers of people who speak the new language. They do not have to conquer the

existing inhabitants by force of arms” (Renfrew 1987:124). To reinforce this model, Renfrew discussed the wave of advance model that had been put forward by Cavalli-Sforza and Ammerman; it stated that people did move, but only short distances (Renfrew 1987:126). According to the model, this wave of people would advance outward from some new technology that would allow them to take advantage of natural resources in the environment and exist without negatively affecting the population density of a region. This population wave would contribute to language spread, but would probably not result in language replacement, since the people in the model only moved short distances (Renfrew 1987:128-130).

The second model that Renfrew offered for language spread was the elite dominance model. In this model a relatively small group of well-organized people arrived in another territory and were able to take control through military force. The new language of the invading group would exist alongside the original language for a while, and what would happen after would depend on the circumstances (Renfrew 131-132). Either the invader’s language would be assimilated into the original language, or the new language would replace the old.

The third theory offered by Renfrew was the system collapse model. This model stated that the society of a people collapsed due to a number of factors, and the central authority lost control over the population (Renfrew 1987:133). This collapse could lead to the movement of large numbers of people from one the center of a territory to the outer edges; as a result, dialects of the original language would begin to prevail, and these dialects could be very different from the language they were descended from (Renfrew 1987:135-136).

Renfrew used these models of language dispersal to present his theory on the spread of Indo-European languages. This hypothesis focused on agriculture as one of the major forces behind the language spread. Renfrew believed that farming in Europe could be traced back to Greece by about 6000 BCE (Renfrew 1987:148). According to him, it was these farmers who may have spread their language as they spread out and settled the land:

My argument, following the wave of advance model, is that the new economy of farming allowed the population in each area to rise, over just a few centuries from something like 5 or 10 per square kilometre. As the model predicts, with only small, local movements of twenty or thirty kilometres, this would gradually result in the peopling of the whole of Europe by a farming population, the descendants of the first European farmers. If that was the case, we would expect that the language of those first farmers in Greece around 6500 BC would be carried across the whole of Europe [Renfrew 1987:150]

Renfrew believed that this language spoken by the first farmers was Indo-European; and that, as the farming groups split up and became isolated, the original language would split into cognate languages, which would later become distinct entities (Renfrew 1987:150-151). This was an alternate hypothesis that he presented to contest the idea that Indo-European languages had spread into Europe by way of the Russian and Central Asian steppes.

However, Renfrew's theory is simply one of many regarding the origins of the Indo-European language. J.P. Mallory, also a scholar of the Indo-European peoples, developed his own hypothesis as to how they and their language dispersed. Mallory asserted that the Proto-Indo-European language originated in what he refers to as the Pontic-Caspian region, near the Balkans, and then spread outward to the rest of

Europe and Asia; he used both archaeological and linguistic evidence to support his claim.

Mallory found fault with Renfrew's ideas based on several factors. First, he did not believe that there were enough Anatolian place names with Indo-European roots to justify Renfrew's belief that the language had originated there (Mallory 1989:179). Mallory also believed in the use of linguistic paleontology to reconstruct a Proto-Indo-European language; he also thought that tracing the Indo-European languages back would reveal when the Indo-European groups moved into a new area based on new words that had not been part of the vocabulary up to that point (Mallory 1989:179). Mallory stated that Anatolia could not be the homeland of the Indo-European people because archaeological evidence for the domestication of horses did not appear in the region until the fourth millennium BC, while words for wheeled vehicles had been found in so many Indo-European languages that Mallory believed horses must have been well-known to the Indo-Europeans long before the fourth millennium:

Nevertheless, as we have seen before, terminology for wheeled vehicles is so abundant and deeply embedded in the Indo-European languages that we must accept their ascription to Proto-Indo-European if the comparative method means anything. Similarly, the horse, which is not attested in any form in Anatolia until the fourth millennium BC, and in Greece until the third, and is again thoroughly embedded in the reconstructed vocabulary as well as in Indo-European ritual, makes a seventh-millennium BC homeland in Anatolia or Greece quite unacceptable [Mallory 1989:179]

Mallory used archaeological evidence combined with linguistic reconstructions of the Proto-Indo-European language to support his theory that the Indo-European people originated somewhere near the Caspian Sea. He stated that the geographic terms reconstructed from Indo-European languages refer to region

that would be very similar to the Pontic-Caspian area (Mallory 1989:216). For example, the reconstructed vocabulary included words for mountains, hills, and inland seas or marshes (Mallory 1989:216). Mallory also believed that the archaeological evidence of stockbreeding and agriculture in the Caspian region could be correlated with the reconstructed vocabulary, which included words for cow, ox, and steer (Mallory 1989:117, 217). Yet the piece of evidence that Mallory considered the most important in establishing the Caspian region as a possible homeland was its proximity to the natural habitat of horses, as well as archaeological evidence suggesting that horses played an important role both economically and ritually in the culture of Indo-European peoples (Mallory 1989:217). As stated previously, Mallory pointed to the lack of horse remains in Anatolia until about the fourth century BCE as one of the major problems with Renfrew's Anatolian hypothesis.

According to Mallory, the Indo-Europeans migrated from the Pontic-Caspian region into the steppes east of the Urals (Mallory 1989:223). He claimed that the Afanasievo culture was the first group in the region to show a relationship with the Indo-European people. Their burials included grave goods similar to those from the Pontic-Caspian region, and ochre was also found (Mallory 1989:223). The Indo-Europeans then extended south and east across the Asian steppes. Eventually, they reached Anatolia; from there they entered northern and eastern Europe (Mallory 1989:233, 247).

These theories all attempted to explain how Indo-European languages spread across Europe and Asia. However, theories represent only part of the study

of the spread of Indo-European languages. When one studies these theories, it is important to keep in mind that there are also processes of both language and population dispersal that affect how languages spread through a given group. Renfrew discussed some of the processes that affect language dispersal; these include the models of linguistic replacement, continued population displacement, sedentary/mobile boundary shift, and donor/recipient population systems (Renfrew 1987:124-137, 141-144). Although these are important processes, they are not the only factors that affect language dispersal. One of these factors is agriculture; in some areas agriculture allows the co-existence of several languages side-by-side (Campbell 2002:51). There are also social factors that can influence language spread, such as discrimination, exogamous marriage patterns, military service, official language policies, and so on (Campbell 2002:58).

There are also processes that affect population dispersal, and these can also affect how a language is spread. Demic diffusion is defined as “a sequential colonization by random migration carried out by family groups” (Zvelebil 2000:62). Demic diffusion is usually very slow, and it can occur when a group overgrows its area and begins to send the next generation off a little farther to find new farmland. Folk migration is a more direct settlement that moves people from an old region to a new one. Infiltration occurs when small groups slowly migrate into another culture; these groups sometimes perform specialized tasks within the new society (Zvelebil 2000:62). Individual frontier mobility occurs when small groups or individuals create interaction between hunter-gatherer and farming groups (Zvelebil 2000:62-

63). All of these processes affect how language spreads both within a culture and from one culture to another.

There are also biological theories about language dispersal. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza believes that there is a relationship between what he calls superfamilies of languages and branches of a genetic tree. His theory is that people who speak related languages are, in fact, genetically close to one another (Cavalli-Sforza 2000:144-145). However, language dispersal processes, such as language replacements, can affect the relationship between linguistic and genetic relationships. Gene flow between two neighboring populations can do the same thing (Cavalli-Sforza 2000:154).

It is difficult to determine exactly when the Indo-European peoples began to migrate into Asia and Europe, and it is also difficult to determine where they came from. Some theories include the steppes of Central Asia, Anatolia, and the area around the Black and Caspian seas. These theories have been supported with various archaeological and linguistic data, including a reconstruction of what may have been a Proto-Indo-European language. Some scholars believed that the Indo-Europeans completely subjugated the cultures that they encountered, while others believe that the migration was gradual and took place over generations. Several processes affect language and population dispersal, including language replacement, élite dominance, and demic diffusion. Some geneticists believe that people who speak similar languages may be closely related genetically as well. The question of Indo-European origins is really a matter of finding our roots. In the future new archaeological discoveries will probably make this question easier to answer. But

for now, the origins of the Indo-European language remain hidden in the mists of time.

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