

The language of the first farmers

Convenor

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Topic

The Farming/Language Dispersal Hypothesis, proposed by Renfrew (1987), Bellwood & Renfrew (2002), Diamond & Bellwood (2003) and Bellwood (2005a, 2011), posits that many of the world's major language families owe their dispersal to the adoption of agriculture by their early speakers. Subsequent population growth steadily pushed the new farmers and their language into wider territories, displacing the languages of preexisting hunter-gatherer populations. Agriculture is argued to be one of the major factors causing dispersal in families such as Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, Dravidian, Indo-European in Eurasia, Bantu and Semitic in Africa and Tupian and Arawakan in the Americas. As a result, the reconstructed vocabulary common to these families is found to reflect a number of agricultural items.

However, agriculture does not always seem to motivate language expansion for there are also cases of widely spread language families that are claimed to be lacking common agricultural vocabulary. Among others these include families such as Tungusic, Mongolic, Turkic, Transeurasian (“Altaic”), Uralic, Pama-Nyungan, Salishan, Uto-Aztecan, Eskimo-Aleut, Athabaskan, Algonquian, Siouan, Yuman and Chon (Campbell & Poser 2008: 340; Heggarty & Beresford Jones 2014). In some cases (e.g. Tungusic, Mongolic, Turkic, Transeurasian and Uto-Aztecan) it may nevertheless be possible to reconstruct common agricultural terms in spite of previous claims. In other cases, such as Eskimo-Aleut in the Americas and Pama-Nyungan in Australia where farming never arose in any case, other processes may account for the spreads.

In this workshop, we will take an empirical focus, aiming at the comparison and reconstruction of lexical and morphological items that are directly or indirectly linked to subsistence, including words relating to crops, animal husbandry, agricultural technology and subsistence-related derivational morphology. To this end we will undertake a linguistic journey, traveling from Indo-European in Europe, to Transeurasian, Japano-Koreanic, Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian, Hmong-Mien and Austroasiatic in Asia and from Eskimo-Aleut, Quechuan and Aymaran in the Americas to Bantu and Khoe-Kwadi in Africa.

We will pay special attention to language families that have previously been claimed to lack common agricultural vocabulary, revisiting the alleged lack of evidence based on the latest state of affairs in the reconstruction of the relevant proto-languages. However, we will also present linguistic evidence that weakens the importance of agriculture as a factor behind the expansion of certain language families, commonly associated with agriculture. In this way, we hope to acquire a more balanced view on what the availability of agricultural reconstructions really adds to our understanding of human prehistory.

The techniques underlying the reconstructions will be based on the classical comparative method. Our area of research belongs to the field of cultural reconstruction, also known as “linguistic palaeontology” or “paleobiolinguistics”, a subfield of comparative historical linguistics that enables us to study human prehistory by correlating our linguistic reconstructions with information from archaeology about the cultural and natural environment possibly available to the speakers of the proto-language. Special attention will be paid to the distinction between borrowing, substratum interference and inheritance of reconstructed subsistence terms.

In addition to case studies concentrating on the reconstruction of subsistence vocabulary in individual families, this workshop will also address methodological issues, investigating the benefits as well as the limits of cultural reconstruction.

Questions

Specific issues to be addressed include, among others:

- What are the linguistic methods at our disposal to find out whether an ancestral population was familiar with agriculture or not?
- How reliable is cultural reconstruction? What can the reconstruction of subsistence terms contribute to our general understanding of human prehistory and what are the caveats concerning the methodological limits of linguistic palaeontology?
- How reliable is the semantic reconstruction of subsistence terms? Is it possible to set up certain constraints to the semantic divergence permitted among the cognates? How can we, for instance, exclude that a reconstructed subsistence term reflects an earlier non-agricultural meaning and that the agricultural associations developed independently in the daughter languages?
- Most cultural reconstructions focus on lexical comparison, but how can we integrate derivational morphology into our research?
- In what way does the overall profile of cognate vocabulary and morphology reflect a specific subsistence system? Is it, for instance, possible to find a correlation between the high retention of numerals and animal-based economies? Can the clustering of derivational affixes into particular semantic fields provide information about the focus of economical activities in the original speech communities, where the affixes were productively used? Is the reconstruction of instrumental or manipulative suffixes on words in the agricultural sector of the ancestral lexicon indicative of agricultural economies?
- How can we distinguish areal factors such as borrowing and substratum interference from genealogical factors in generating common subsistence terms across a group of languages?
- Is it possible to distinguish agricultural core-vocabulary from later (intra- or extra-family) borrowings relating to agriculture? How can different layers of agricultural borrowing be detected?
- Does the reconstructed vocabulary exclusively reflect agricultural crops belonging to the first Neolithic revolution or does it also witness to later stages in agricultural intensification such as the integration of secondary crops, animal husbandry, secondary products, iron-working?
- How well do the reconstructed subsistence terms tie in with information provided by archaeology?

- Are there, in spite of previous claims, linguistic indications that relativise the importance of agriculture as a factor behind the expansion for language families commonly associated with agriculture?
- Is it, in contrast to what is commonly assumed, possible to recover ancestral agricultural vocabulary in widespread language families that are so far claimed to be lacking agriculture? If not, by what other processes can the spreads of these languages be accounted for?
- Does the existence of widespread language families that are lacking common agricultural vocabulary call the Farming/Language Dispersal Hypothesis into question?