

Linguistic Areas and the Problem of Genetic Classification

In the beginning ...

Neogrammarians

Sound change correspondences among languages

Uniformity of sound changes

Latin *pater* = English *father*

Proto-Indo-European

The comparative method

Internal reconstruction

Beyond Indo-European

Genetic-type drift cannot account for all languages

Some languages don't fit easily into "family trees"

Japanese, Korean ("isolates")

Languages of the Americas, Africa

Past diffusion complicates "genetics"

"Janhunen's statement that somewhere behind the multiple sources of Japanese there is a single 'stable parameter of genetic identity' sound to me like an article of faith." (Fortescue 1998:58)

The Balkan Sprachbund

Sprachbund (literally 'language union')

Trubetzkoy's term (1928)

First mentioned by Kopitar (1829, 1857), von Miklosich (1861)

The most-studied linguistic area

Six or seven languages

Rumanian (Romance)

Bulgarian (Slavic)

Macedonian (Slavic)

Albanian (Albanian)

Serbian (Slavic)

Greek (Greek)

Balkan Romani (Indic)

Common shared features in the Balkans

Turkish nouns, verbs, even adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions

Mid-central or high central vowel, vowel harmony

Loss of the inherited infinitive construction

Postposed article (aur-ul vs. el oro)

A circumpolar Sprachbund origin?

Fortescue (1998) proposes a Proto-Uralo-Siberian "stock or mesh"

Single voiceless stop series /p/ /t/ /k/ (/t'/ /q/)

Corresponding voiced fricatives /v/ /ð/ /ɣ/ (/ð'/ /ʀ/)

Lack of adjectives as a distinct part of speech

Plural and dual noun affixes

Several other features

Uralo-Siberian mesh

Finnic

Ugric (Hungarian, etc.)

Yukagir

Chukotko-Kamchatkan

Eskimo-Aleut

Causes

Indo-European and Altaic pushing north

Spread zone with a bottleneck at Beringia

Successive waves of immigration

Linguistic area definition (Thomason)

A geographical region where:

- 1. Three or more languages*
- 2. have shared structural features*
- 3. as a result of contact*

Rather than by accident or inheritance

1. Why three languages? Why not two?

Two-language contact very widespread

Multidirectional interference in most Sprachbünde

Source of shared features often unclear in Sprachbünde

2. Why insist on structural features?

Vocabulary is too broad

Words like “hamburger”, “television” almost worldwide

Sharing structures makes a linguistic area a special case

3. Why must sharing be due to contact? Distinct from:

Inheritance from a common ancestor

“Accidental similarity” due to universals (unmarked)

Existence of /t/ phoneme

Lack of click phonemes

Noun vs. Verb distinction

Thomason’s more controversial criteria

1. Must all the languages be unrelated?

No, some will usually be related

2. How many shared features are needed?

More than one or two (one is unrealistic)

3. Must all shared features be in all languages?

No, no such Sprachbund exists

4. Must the shared features be confined to the area?

No, accidental and/or inherited features may extend outside the area

5. Does prolonged contact always form a Sprachbund?

Thomason has no confident answer

Proving contact-induced change

1. Establish that there was intimate contact

2. *Find several independent shared features in X and Y*
3. *Prove that the shared features were not in pre-X*
4. *Prove that the shared features were not in pre-Y*

Conclusion:

Linguistic areas occur worldwide

References

- Fortescue, Michael. 1998. *Language Relations Across the Berin Strait: Reappraising the Archaeological and Linguistic Evidence*. New York: Cassell.
- Thomason, Sarah G. 2001. *Language contact: an introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Thomason, Sarah G. 2000. Linguistic areas and language history. In Dicky Gilbers, John Nerbonne, and Jos Schaecken, eds., *Languages in Contact* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 311-327.