W7 - Interactions at the dawn of history: Methods and results in prehistoric contact linguistics

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Workshop Description

It is well known that the elements of a language acquired through contact preserve traces of the past socio-cultural interactions of the communities that used it. This observation is particularly interesting when dealing with pre- and proto-historic realities, because it implies that these elements can be used to build bridges between languages and between language families, which in turn can be extremely useful in contextualizing such languages and family, in highlighting their positions in cross-linguistic networks, and in better locating them in relation with other languages, and thus both in space and time.

These linguistic concepts have been known for decades. However, recent developments in ancient genetics have introduced completely novel frameworks for investigating contacts between human populations in the past (Haak et al. 2015, Allentoft et al. 2015), which in turn have stimulated new, fresh debates about the possibility to combine ancient genetics, archaeology, and historical linguistics for the study of pre- and proto-historic realities.

As a result, new increasingly robust and sophisticated reconstructions of the social ecology of whole language families are being formulated (Sagart et al. 2019, Robbeets et al. 2021, Narasimhan et al. 2019, Rocha & Fehn 2016), and historical linguistics has witnessed a renewed interest in issues of contacts between pre- and proto-historic speech communities (and proto-languages). This new trend is well represented by various research projects on these topics that have been launched in the past few years, such as the recent ERC project by Guus Kroonen and his team, based in Leiden, which focuses on language contacts in prehistoric Europe in the context of Indo-European linguistics. It is also worth noting that this renewed interest is not limited to Europe and the Indo-European language family, but extends beyond it: good examples touching on different regions are the ongoing project of Wolfgang Behr based at the university of Zurich on pre- and proto-historic Wanderwörter in Central and East Asia, the recently concluded project by Federico Giusfredi on language contacts in pre-/proto-historic Anatolia, the recently (2022) launched project by Koen Bostoen at Ghent University on prehistoric contacts between Bantu and Khoisan languages, or the also recently (2022) launched project by Marwan Kilani at the university of Basel on linguistic interactions and Wanderwörter in Bronze Age Egypt and the Levant, just to name but a few.

These projects (and the work of several other scholars) are opening new avenues of research, are making new data available, and are suggesting new methodological approaches. Nevertheless, the work is far from over. On the contrary, the research developed in recent years has already yielded fruitful linguistic and historical insights, but it has also raised new questions and new methodological needs. First and foremost, there are theoretical questions that need to be discussed. While research on language contacts in modern languages has a long and established tradition, the systematic study of linguistic contacts in ancient languages

is still in its infancy, especially outside the Indo-European reality. Moreover, while the analytical frameworks developed to explore contacts in modern languages are undoubtedly valuable, the nature of the available evidence for ancient and proto-languages raises unique questions that require specific theoretical and methodological approaches to be answered satisfactorily. The fact that the data attesting prehistoric contact situations is usually limited and often difficult to substantiate by the comparative method alone, makes the need for solid, commonly agreed means to assess the veracity of hypotheses even more pressing. Moreover, the question of if and how linguistic data can be correlated with archeological and genetic evidence is becoming increasingly relevant, and sound discipline-specific methodologies (in our case, on the linguistic side) are a crucial basis for a constructive interdisciplinary dialogue.

It is thus clear that the question of language contacts and language interactions in pre- and proto-historic societies can be approached in multiple different ways, which we believe makes it an ideal topic for a conference such as this one.

First and foremost, we are aiming at gathering contributions that address methodological issues and offer new approaches to tackle them. We aim to have a good representation of research that focuses on non-European regions and/or deals with non-Indo-European languages, as we believe that a broader scope is essential to identify patterns and specificities. Discussions of specific case studies (whether based on single language-to-language interactions, or involving large geographical areas or *longue durée* approaches) is also welcomed and encouraged: good theory can only be developed on the basis of a careful and systematic investigation of real cases.

As mentioned above, several projects have emerged in recent years that aim to explore contact phenomena from different angles, often using interdisciplinary approaches that combine linguistic data with archeological and genetic evidence. Papers arising from such projects or presenting interim or final results are also welcomed.

We welcome discussions of contact phenomena touching on any linguistic level (phonology, morphology, lexicon, etc.), and we are especially interested in realities involving multiple languages. In this respect, we are particularly interested in contributions dealing with Wanderwörter that permeate several languages and distinct language families. Recent scholarship (Boutkan & Kossmann 2001, de Vaan 2008, Antonov & Jacques 2011, Haynie et al. 2014, Piispanen 2020, Peyrot 2016, Bjørn 2020, 2022, etc.) has focused on the specificities of Wanderwörter, highlighting how Wanderwörter are like breadcrumbs attesting ancient (and often pre- and proto-historic) networks of interlinguistic and intercultural interactions. Furthermore, Wanderwörter are characterized by two features that make them particularly interesting for the study of pre- and proto-historic contacts, namely their datability and their multiple interfaces. These two features can provide crucial insights into the historical and cultural contexts in which the words were transferred, thus making Wanderwörter a valuable tool for the investigation and contextualization of ancient interactions, of the participating speech communities, and of the history of the items they denote. Therefore, we believe that the analysis of Wanderwörter provides a very attractive topic for this conference.

Finally, we believe that there are several other types of language contact phenomena that deserve renewed scrutiny in light of recent and emerging research on prehistory, including but not limited to calques (e.g. Puhvel 1993), areal phenomena (e.g. Peyrot 2019), and extinct substrate languages (e.g. Lubotsky 2001). Papers focusing on these topics are also welcomed.

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