

OBJECTIVITY IN LINGUISTIC PALEONTOLOGY RECONSTRUCTING
THE INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY

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By the latter half of the 19th century, linguists were convinced that their study of language was objective. August Schleicher stated in 1871 that

Grammar forms one part of the science of language this science is itself part of the natural history of Man Its method is in substance that of natural science generally it consists in accurate investigation of our object and in conclusions founded upon that investigation. (89-90)

Likewise, William Dwight Whitney averred in 1892 that linguistic analyses were more reliable than anthropological ones, because the facts of language are

more easily and accurately apprehended, judged and described Linguistic facts admit of being readily collected, laid down with authentic fidelity, and compared coolly, with little risk of error from subjective misapprehension. (244)

Linguistic science is generally dated to the 1786 address of Sir William Jones to the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta, in which he asserted that the similarities which existed between Sanskrit and the classical languages could only be the result of their common linguistic ancestry The 19th century saw the flowering of comparative linguistics, as European linguists sought to establish the existence of an Ursprache for European languages, the mother tongue, and to describe its lexicon and its grammar

From the outset, historical linguists confused linguistic characteristics with racial ones and languages with ethnic groups and races Jacob Grimm's attributing the High German Sound Shift to Germans' yearning for liberty during the Middle Ages is common knowledge. Less well known is the extent to which the new science was made to serve the anti-Semitic beliefs of other linguists. Both Leon Poliakov (1971), whose vantage-point is openly political, and J. P. Mallory (1973), a respected Indo-Europeanist, have spoken of the attempts made by some early linguists to equate the Indo-European language with an aryan race, or even with Christianity, contrasting its speakers with the Hebrews While other linguists undoubtedly approached their subject-matter more objectively, it has proven difficult to

eliminate bias from the reconstruction of Indo-European, or, indeed, from the reconstruction of any protolanguage.

Leonard Bloomfield outlined in 1933 the problems inherent in the comparative method. The comparative method worked "only on the assumption of a uniform parent language," one without dialectal variation, and hypothesized abrupt separations of one speech-community from another. Such situations are unlikely. Furthermore, according to Bloomfield, the likelihood of error increases with the length of time or breadth of area under investigation. Bloomfield was even more critical of linguistic paleontology, a field which attempted (and still attempts) to reconstruct protoculture on the basis of a reconstructed lexicon.

Given the "vague and variable meanings" of the cognates used to reconstruct Indo-European, conclusions about Indo-European culture must be suspect. Bloomfield's Language had the effect of dramatically limiting for two decades work in historical linguistics within the United States. Later, there was renewed interest in comparative reconstruction and linguistic paleontology, particularly during the past twenty-five years. Even recent work, however, has often failed to proceed objectively, since 20th century linguists, like those of the 19th century, often seem to adopt unquestioningly the assumption that there are natural differences between the sexes, and that these lead inevitably to certain social structures. Elsewhere I have said that historical linguistics has often proceeded within a "patriarchal paradigm", within such a paradigm, data are interpreted as substantiating androcentric views of the world. And nowhere is such a bias clearer than in linguistic reconstructions of Indo-European culture, particularly in reconstructions of the Indo-European family.

It has been more than a century since Delbrück's (1890) analysis of Indo-European kinship terminology, yet it has remained central to Indo-European linguistic paleontology. In 1977, Oswald Szemerényi, for example, published a monumental re-examination of the field, whose chief accomplishment was the reconciliation of anthropological kinship studies with the linguists' insistence that Indo-European society was patriarchal. He concludes that linguistic evidence demonstrates "that the Indo-Europeans had a patriarchal system", so long as we accept a "fuzzy" definition of patriarchy (198).

Szemerényi (1977) suggests that we use Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) definition of patriarchy as a point of departure. Radcliffe-Brown proposed that a society might be termed patriarchal when (1) descent is patrilineal, (2) marriage is patrilocal, (3) inheritance and succession (to rank) are in the male line, and (4) the family is patripotestal (i.e. the father or his relatives have authority over family members). But

Szemerényi (205-6) offers no decisive evidence that any of the four conditions applied in Indo-European society. He concedes that inheritance was probably a matter of individual choice. Likewise, he offers no data in support of succession through the male line, other than stating that patrilineal descent "seems to demand succession in the male line". He mentions almost in passing Wordick's (1975) argument that patripotestiality (even in the narrow sense could not have been characteristic of IE society, since only in Roman, Greek, and Armenian society did the male head of the family enjoy complete control over the family property. To dispute Wordick's argument, Szemerényi simply asserts that "surely questions like choosing a husband for one's daughter or a wife for one's son" were more important in characterizing an individual as "a patriarch," and then notes that lexical evidence in support of patripotestiality is inadequate.

Although Radcliffe-Brown would term patriarchal only those societies to which all four criteria may be ascribed, Szemerényi (206) proposes that we view the term as comprising "a bundle of highly variable components," and that, in the case of Indo-European society, the term "means that the society's organization was patrilineal, patrilocal, and to a considerable extent patripotestal." If we ascribe patriarchy to IE society on evidence of its patriliney and patrilocality alone, surely our reconstruction of these characteristics should be beyond debate.

An impressive array of evidence is available for reconstructing terms for the consanguineals father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, and son. There has been general agreement on the forms of the PIE etymons and on their senses immediately prior to the IE dispersal. A great deal of controversy has centered, however, on their origins as reflections of PIE society in antiquity.

Szemerényi (1977:9), for instance, attributes the origin of *p̥t̥ēr and *mātēr to "childish babble," citing a study central in Jakobson (1960) which demonstrated that forms for parents in various languages are CV, with stops and nasals the predominant consonants, and, within these, labials and dentals the most frequent, and with a the most frequent vowel. Hence, he concludes, "papa-mama" are almost natural expressions for the persons concerned. ". *p̥t̥ēr and *mātēr do indeed have their basic syllables from the world of the nursery." He dismisses as "inexcusable ignorance" further analysis of these terms.

It can only be ascribed to inexcusable ignorance if even today it is reiterated that *p̥t̥ēr is the "protector" (and what is *mātēr?)

But a Lallwort source for *pōtēr is plausible only if the existence of known male parent within the earliest PIE household is presumed, precisely the point Szemerényi and other Indo-Europeanists seek to prove. By contrast, Benveniste (1973.170-71), for instance, ascribes only a mythological, and later an uncertain classificatory, sense to *pōtēr, and argues that:

. . . In this original usage, the relationship of physical parentage is excluded. We are outside of kinship in the strict sense, and *pōtēr cannot designate 'father' in a personal sense. . .

The Indo-European distribution corresponds on the whole to the same principle. The personal father is atta, which alone survives in Hittite, Gothic, and Slavic. If in these languages the ancient term *pōtēr has been replaced by atta, this is because *pōtēr was originally a classificatory term . . .

That is to say, the importance of the father originated in his status as the head of the pantheon, and thence as progenitor of the clan. Similar interpretations for *mātēr are lacking--the word is ascribed neither to mystical nor agentive origins--perhaps because biological maternity is so obvious as to have been noticed long before the PIE dispersal. By contrast, biological paternity had originally no designation--but the absence of a term with such a meaning is simply evidence of the (greater) cultural importance of male parentage.

The word for 'daughter' is more widely attested than that for 'son,' but the ubiquity of the former has never been taken as proof of the daughter's importance in antiquity. Rather, the universality of cognates for *sunús, whether or not they are attested in IE languages, is assumed, as in Szemerényi (11).

The fact that the word appears in a Northern belt from one end of Indoeuropa to the other guarantees that it was an all-IE word. If in the South it seems to be or is in fact missing, that must be due to various innovations.

According to Szemerényi (11), IE *sunú-s, a "clear derivative of the verbal root su-. . . which originally meant offspring. . . was later restricted to the sole important offspring, the male." That is to say, the earlier meaning of the term, far from specifying a human male offspring, denoted a young animal of any type--yet its origin is somehow evidence of the primal and primordial significance of sons, as are analogous Southern terms derived from a word meaning "young" or "small."

Friedrich (1966 6-7) points out the connection between terms

for 'son' and maternal physiological processes.

Following Brugmann (1905), many linguists would agree that snhnws, perhaps alone of the six primary terms, derives from a verbal root, specifically swH-/sew-/sw-, meaning "to give birth"; Sanskrit shows su:te-, "she gives birth," and suta-h, "son." Also, Hittite has the verb haš(š)- "to give birth," the participle of which (hassant-) means "own son" (J. Friedrich 1952:62). These semantic patterns are paralleled in several daughter languages. The Latin word for son is fi lius (feminine fi lia). The Slavic word for child is deti, which is related to the word for "to suckle, milk" (doiti). The roots of both the Latin and Slavic words, and for several allied notions, go back to PIE dheh-, meaning "to suckle, to be capable of bearing children" (Benveniste 1933:15). In short, the term-concepts for son seem to be related to female (maternal) physiological processes.

Friedrich hastens to assure us, however, that these connections "in no wise demonstrate matriliney or matriarchy" because "the recognition of maternity is a cultural universal" and because the emotional tie between mother and son is "often the most dominant emotionally in patrilineal and patriarchal systems." In other words, the absence of a unique term for male offspring is additional evidence for patriarchy in PIE antiquity--even as, for Szemerényi, the two terms signifying 'son' and 'sister,' though derived from the same root, connote the relative importance of the former and the unimportance of the latter. 'Daughter' has been analyzed as derived from a verbal root meaning 'to milk' (hence the daughter was "a milkmaid") and more recently by Szemerényi as denoting "the person who prepares a meal" (22). Nowhere has it been suggested that the association of an individual with milk might represent another important maternal function--at least in conjunction with 'daughter', rather, importance has been assigned to the recipient of the milk, the son.

In similar fashion, *bhrātēr and *swesōr, though generally agreed (by Friedrich, 1966, Benveniste, 1973, and Szemerényi, 1977, for example) to have functioned as classificatory terms before having been adapted to consanguineal significations, are analyzed so as to assign greater importance to male offspring. However each term is segmented, *bhrātēr is said to have occupied a place of central importance in the extended social group, while *swesōr existed on the periphery, gaining importance from the group. And her relative insignificance is said to rest on the fact, rather than despite the fact, that *swesōr is etymologically derived from *swē, the term for the social group, "one's own blood."

Interestingly, there are no established terms for 'cousin,' 'niece,' 'nephew,' or 'aunt' in IE, terms for 'grandmother' are rare, with most languages showing forms derived from a word for 'ancestor'. Moreover, terms for 'uncle' and 'grandfather,' like those for 'grandson,' have prompted much debate on the probable existence of an IE avunculate.

Evidence for IE patriarchy based on consanguineal kinship terminology therefore rests chiefly on the six primary terms discussed.

The Latin term for the maternal uncle, avunculus, appears to be derived from avus, the Latin reflex of a common term meaning "grandfather," while Latin nepos has the double sense "nephew" and "grandson." The double sense of nepos is paralleled in other languages: its cognates denote only "grandson" in Indo-Iranian, only "nephew" in Western languages other than Latin. Moreover, evidence gathered from Latin inscriptions and literature suggests that corresponding Celtic words also referred to the sister's son alone (Benveniste 1973:188-89).

A study . . . of the sense of nepos in the Latin inscriptions in Brittainy has shown that it always refers to the sister's son; nepos therefore has the same sense as in the corresponding Celtic word nīa in Irish and nei in Welsh, which designated the sister's son, while the brother's son in Irish is called mac brather, a descriptive term. Aside from this, there are in Celtic legends traces of a uterine kinship, in the Ogamic inscriptions, filiation is established through the mother. . . . What are we to make of the classical use of nepos?

What could be made of the classical uses of nepos and avunculus is an argument for an earlier form of kinship, one in which mothers' brothers were parents to their sisters' children. What Benveniste makes of them is another argument for a patriarchal social structure, albeit one with classificatory kinship terminology, exogamy, and cross-cousin marriage. With cross-cousin marriage, the mother's brother, avunculus, is the son of the sister of EGO's paternal grandfather, avus, so that a term for maternal uncle also points to father-son filiation. The relation between uncle and nephew is also termed "sentimental," its warmth tempering the severity of the father-son relation under strict patriarchy, like that of Rome (1973:189).

Benveniste's argument undermines apparent traces of matrilineal kinship in Celtic languages even as he cites them, absorbing them as further evidence of an Indo-European patria potestas. Yet many have found disturbing even Benveniste's

glancing reference to an older matrilineal phase Gates (1971: 43) finds no evidence for cross-cousin marriage in IE groups, casting doubt on Benveniste's explanation. Beekes (1976: 44) objects to his "assumption" of a "filiation matrilineaire"--one which he claims is "accepted at present by nobody"--on the grounds that Benveniste's only arguments are based on avus and avunculus and on the "old argument provided by the Greek terms for 'brother', adelphos and kasignetos." That these terms for uterine kinship point to a matrilineal society has, according to Beekes, "long since been given up," (Interestingly, the evident derivation of adelphos from delphus, meaning "womb," was discussed by Lockwood (1969) and attributed by Benveniste (1969) to a temporary shift to matrilineal kinship in Greece).

Bremmer (1976) argues that avus and avunculus arose because of the widespread custom of fosterage. Precisely because the extended family was entirely paternal, a child was likely to be fostered by the maternal family. Like Benveniste, Bremmer regards the relationship of MoBr and SiSo as "cordial" in contrast to the "severe one of the father and son": ". . .in the paternal family the MoBr is the outsider who is not hindered by the patria potestas and therefore can develop an affectionate relationship" (71-2).

Bremmer (72) passes over rather quickly a problem with his analysis, the fact that property was sometimes transmitted from MoBr to SiSo, despite the fact that "a woman is a jural minor in patrilineal societies and her children do not enjoy the membership or property of her descent corporation." He suggests that we look to the custom of ritual stealing as evidence of the mother's son's group rights, though noting there is no evidence of such a custom among the Indo-Europeans.

Szemerényi (1977) provides an ingenious analysis which overturns not only the hypothesis that IE kinship might be characterized as Omaha (advanced by Gates, 1971, Friedrich, 1966, and Wordick, 1975), but also any evidence for matriliney. He claims that, within the extended paternal family, a nephew had a need to distinguish maternal uncles from paternal uncles, because he would treat them differently, but would have similar "pleasant relationships, one the one hand, as grandson, towards grandfather, on the other, as nephew, towards his maternal uncle" (190). Moreover, patrilineal succession (which, as Szemerényi later admits, he cannot document clearly) determines the connection between the maternal uncle and the grandfather.

In our view. . .the (eldest) maternal uncle came to be identified with grandfather as a result of the not uncommon situation that, on the demise of his father (EGO's grandfather), he inherited his father's position. The

consequence was that his name (*Hau-Hos/*awos) acquired the secondary sense 'grandfather', and not the other way around (191).

Szemerényi claims that a root originally designating grandparents generally has disappeared, resulting in the merging of two generations because "after the grandparents' death the eldest FB and MB stepped into the shoes of their parents" (189).

This allows him to dispose of the uncomfortable lack of terminology for the parents' male siblings, and to dismiss the "problem of a pseudo-matrilineal cast to a regime of father-right," a phrase of Levi-Strauss's he terms "memorable" (190)

As Bremmer (1976-71) points out, only "Marxist anthropologists" continue to postulate a state of matriarchy for an early stage of IE society. Szemerényi (158) forcefully dismisses their work

. . .we must exclude from our consideration the anachronistic endeavors of such writers as George Thomson, a Grecian, or Alexander Isačenko, a Slavicist, who, impressed by an early, and obsolete, brand of allegedly Marxist anthropology, have set out with the conviction not only that group marriage and matriarchate were the proven older stages in the development of all human societies but also that they were late enough to be reflected to a considerable extent in the IE kinship system. It has been rightly said that "the matriarchalists are interested in reconstructing a kinship system not for the period immediately preceding dispersal but for the earliest period of PIE times. . .

Such a criticism seems remarkable from linguists who propose etymologies for primary kinship terms which include sources in infant babble, terms for young (non-human) mammals, and agentive nouns based on tending fires or preparing meals.

In contrast to the matriarchalists, the patriarchalists postulate as sources roots which seem to extend back to the dawn of a pre-PIE (if pastoral) culture, all the while insisting they merely reconstruct the state immediately prior to IE dispersal. And, though the migration of the IE peoples may have begun in the middle of the third millennium B.C., IE society has been reconstructed so as to resemble that of first century Rome.

Thus, though (according to Benveniste 1973 193-95) there is no IE term for marriage, that is because

. . .the term which we translate by "marriage". . .is only valid for the woman and signifies the accession of a young woman to the state of legal wifehood

In other words, men and women are not equal in the matrimonial state, a woman "is married," "given in matrimony" by her father, while a man "takes a wife":

In order to say that a man "takes a wife", Indo-European employs a form of a verbal root *wedh- "lead", especially "lead a woman to one's home". This particular sense emerges from a close correspondence between the majority of languages Celtic (Welsh) dy-weddio, Slavic vedo, Lithuanian vedu, Av. vadayaiti, with the Indo-Iranian derivatives vadhu- "newly married woman", Greek hēedna "marriage gift".

The use of secondary creations for "marriage" and "wed" suggests that the custom itself may be relatively recent, particularly in light of the fact that there are no specific IE terms for "wife" or "husband" either--the former was called "woman" or "mistress," the latter "man" or "master."

According to Szemerényi (73), less "unequivocal" expressions were coined for the wife, (e.g. a set of Greek expressions translating roughly as "sharing the lair" or "bedfellow"), expressions which place emphasis her sexual role. Passing over the metaphorical sense of the first expression, we may still find it interesting that a sex-neutral word like "bedfellow" is described as emphasizing the woman's sexual role, rather than the sexual connection between mates, the derivation of the Armenian and Albanian words for "husband" from Latin socius 'companion' is mentioned on the same page, but not as evidence of a possible sexual equality at an earlier stage.

Likewise, "daughter-in-law," reconstructed by Meillet as *snusos, is reconstructed *snusus, allowing the "important" term (Szemerényi, 68) to be connected to "son"--hence, the "son's wife," while possible derivations connecting "son-in-law" to roots for "beget" are likewise ignored in favor of sources meaning "buy" or "take," which are more congenial to the patriarchal hypothesis.

If pre-dispersal IE society and subsequent IE societies are presumed to be uniformly patriarchal, anomalies abound in IE languages and literatures. However, IE scholars, often bent upon excluding not only an earlier matriarchal or matrilineal stage for IE culture but also any effects from contact with non-IE cultures and societies, find alternative explanations consonant with patriarchy. Sergeant (1984), for example, comparing Indian and Celtic insular laws, lists eight admissible marriage forms, including "union by force or stealing up on (the woman); rape or intercourse with a woman found asleep or drunk" as well as union "by abduction."

Yet he is confronted by the apparent anomaly, the svayamvara union in the Indian epic, a union not present in Indian law, "a union--solid, permanent, not temporary--where the husband is (in theory) chosen by the future wife" (186). Having observed that this union is "very well-attested among the Celts. . . and in the Nordic tradition" and that it "forms one of the bases of the [common IE] legendary cycles," he reconciles the practice with the warrior principle, fitting it well within Dumezilian research. A woman of a ruling class, who must necessarily marry below her station, is allowed a measure of choice--provided she selects a hero from the noble or warrior class.

Oddly, Sergent remarks that the "Indian name reminds us directly of the Celtic practice," stating that the real svayamvara is to be found among the Celts, who "maintained the autonomy of women longer--a fact to which the ancient classical authors often testify with surprise" (188). Indeed. Longer than whom? "Maintained the autonomy of women"? But female autonomy is explicitly excluded by definition, explicitly so by Szemerényi, who attributes to the IE patriarch the control over the marriages of his children.

Such inconsistencies in patriarchalist analyses may result in part from the tendency to level out distinctions and eliminate anomalies in the process of reconstruction. It is well-known that reconstructed languages are more regular--phonologically and morphologically--than the languages upon which the reconstructions are based. Still, the data and explanations proffered by some Indo-Europeanists suggests that sexist motives may be imputed to the researchers, and perhaps to their reconstructions Szemerényi (1977. 73-78), for instance, provides data so anachronistic as to be laughable, were it not for the blatantly sexist glee with which he presents it.

Seeking to derive a form for "woman" from a source meaning "cow," a novel solution and one which he believes "former generations could have found. . . 'shocking,'" he argues for a segmentation *g^h-en- is possible, giving *g^h- as the basic unit, "best known in the form *g^hous" (76). Now, given that the IE languages contain terms for "son" related to words for "suckling pig," such a solution ought not to have shock value. Moreover, given the comparative importance of cattle in a pastoral culture (seen, for instance, in a central Celtic myth, the Tain bo Cualnge), the connection may not have had the pejorative value it has in modern English. Nonetheless, the pejorative sense is equated with "the facts of life" by Szemerényi.

It will, I think, be useful if we first take a look at modern mores, illustrated from English. It is not at all

uncommon for a Cockney boy to ask: "Who was that old cow?-- simply meaning: "Who was that woman?" But the same usage can be encountered on a more literary level. Two examples will suffice.

In Kingsley Amis' *Take a girl like you* (Penguin 1972, p. 164) we read: "You won't catch him going respectable, not for years anyway, not till he's beginning to be afraid he can't steal the milk through the fence any more. Then he might consider keeping a cow of his own." Elsie gave her tremendous laugh. "Wonderful, that, isn't it? Can't think where I heard it." And in John le Carre's recent spy story, *Tinker tailor soldier spy* (Pan Books 1975, 90) we read: "Do you know what she told me when they threw me out? That personnel cow? . . . You know what the cow said?"

As the remainder of his data, all drawn from antiquity, demonstrates, these passages, drawn from late 20th century literature, are clearly gratuitous and somewhat misleading. Given that at least two of the examples are slang and the third metaphorical, their use in contemporary language by no means argues for a similar prehistoric sense, since both slang and metaphor are, by definition, arbitrary and ephemeral. Moreover, parallel terms in Celtic languages, in which men are "bulls" and women "cows," are not only indicative of the centrality of the reproductive function in "marriage," but evocative of the mythological importance of cattle.

Taken as a whole, arguments in support of IE patriarchy seem most convincing. Examined separately, however, without a presumption of patriarchy, we find:

1. Primary (consanguineal) kinship terms--"mother," "father," "sister," "brother," "daughter"--derived from nursery babble or deverbalized agentive nouns, indicating earlier roles rather than kinship relations;
2. Terms for "son" derived from terms for the young of animals, or, though apparently derived from the same (extended family) source as "sister," used to explain her marginal existence and his importance;
3. A set of terms for "husband," "wife," and "marriage" that are secondary creations, and, in some languages, phrasal, used to argue for the antiquity and universality of patrilocal marriage;
4. A pair of terms for maternal uncle and grandfather, avus and avunculus, cited as evidence of paternal severity;
5. Missing etymons for "son" viewed as innovations;
6. Missing etymons for the paternal uncle viewed as an innovation, as heretofore separate generations merged--due to patrilineal succession and inheritance.

In logic, one proves an assertion by assuming it to be false and demonstrating that its falsehood leads to a logical inconsistency. In science, one tests hypotheses against bodies of data to seek counter-evidence. The IE terminologies of marriage and kinship, offered in support of the hypothetical IE patriarchy and its antiquity, far from providing convincing evidence for patriarchy, seem rather to point up the invalidity of the hypothesis. If the arguments above all "count" as evidence of patriarchy, we might well ask what, if anything, would serve as counter-evidence. And if no data can be accepted as counter-evidence, we might also ask whether the methodology of linguistic paleontology can be considered objective, particularly when it is put to the task of questioning or confirming Indo-European patriarchy.

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