New perspectives on the study of language change
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This study aims at exploring new perspectives in the research on language evolution and focuses on language change from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) down to modern Slavic languages. To date, thanks to the methods of linguistic reconstruction, interlinguistic comparison and linguistic paleontology we have accumulated considerable amount of information about the way languages evolve over time, similarities in the evolution process of many even non-related languages and differences in language change on all levels of grammar. We know now that those changes are quite constrained and that the evolution of different linguistic codes must follow a limited number of patterns (Fromkin & alia 2012, Kortlandt 2001, Sheveliov 1979, among many others). However, the effectiveness of the above-mentioned methods is often insignificant or null in the instances where we have absolutely no data to draw upon. Therefore, in order to solve the problem of the absence of physical evidence about how some PIE languages (such as, for instance, Slavic or Baltic) evolved and to contribute to answering the “old question” of where geographically “it” all started, this paper proposes an innovative approach – the method of grammatical feature tracking. In the last decades, featural approach to the study of different phenomena in the domain of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics has become quite popular due to its explanatory viability. The goal of our method is to trace the distribution of different grammatical features across related languages over time by means of tracking the vestiges of those features in their modern counterparts as well as in those old and ancient languages whose records have survived down to our day and have been already substantially studied.

In the present study we will focus only on certain features, in view of limited space. The objective here is simply to show how the method works and what purpose it can serve. The features we are interested in are as follows: case, gender, inflectional periphrasis, infinitival ending -i (Ex. 1a), the Hittite morpheme -nu- (Ex. 1b/c), the laryngeal H2 (Kortlandt 2001, Ex. 1d/e, that possibly evolved into the Ukrainian morpheme -ha-), and the yrs (Sheveliov 1979).

(1) a. jihat (Sanskrit) – goduvat (Old Slavonic) – rizat (Northern Lemko dialect of Ukrainian)
   b. war nu (Hittite) – zvyx nu ty (Modern Ukrainian)
   c. harga nu wan (Hittite) – zapla no wano (Modern Ukrainian)
   d. *peH2-ur ‘fire’ (PIE) → pahh ur (Hittite)
   e. *peH2-ur ‘fire’ (PIE) → ahn’ (Old-Slavonic) → vohon’ (Modern Ukrainian)

It will be shown that some features (such as case), although being vulnerable to loss in the context of language contact, can be preserved in a language for a long time, if that language is spoken in an agricultural (culturally strong) society whose representatives have lived in a certain territory for a long period of time. On the other hand, this feature is easily affected and even lost if it belongs to a language whose speakers live in an unstable (due to migrations) society. It will also be argued that grammatical features can be distributed in related languages in varying ways: some languages will inherit them from a proto-language and accumulate them, in others their number or their vestiges will vary due to the agency of a dozen or so (extra)-linguistic factors. In our investigation we side with Kortlandt (1989) in that, contra Gimbutas (1985), linguistic evidence and interpretations need to be supported with archeological interpretations and evidence.

In conclusion, this study helps us see how by means of grammatical feature tracking we can retrace the evolution of the grammatical systems of different language groups within IE linguistic realm as far back as their proto-mother tongue. Comparing those changes with archeological evidence about the directionality of ethnic group migrations we can retrace the geographical urheimat of proto-Indoeuropeans and make significant adjustments in the dating of those migrations.
References


http://www.kortlandt.nl/publications/art202e.pdf

