LINGUISTIC TESTIMONY AND MIGRATION HISTORIES

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LANGUAGE AND MIGRATION

The application of linguistic evidence in tracing human migrations has a long scholarly history. Despite that long history, the potential of this kind of study remains mostly unrealized. Scholars commonly have applied one set of methods, aimed at uncovering particular histories of population movement and identifying probable origin areas and the broad directions and trends of migration. A further set of methods, with which very few scholars have a hands-on acquaintance, subjects the linguistic evidence to more nuanced analyses, allowing the investigation of such issues as the nature and kinds of demographic shifts set in motion by a period of migration and the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of that history.

The latter methods, which work with the evidence generated by language contact situations, especially the testimony of word borrowing from one language to another, have received relatively little attention, even in ethnohistorical studies. Sociolinguists have investigated a great variety of contact situations around the world, but the normal direction of their work has been to study language change in relation to known demographic and social histories. An existing situation involving two or more speech communities is laid out, and the subsequent examination aims at identifying and characterizing the kinds of language change, grammatical and lexical, that took place and at building models of wider theoretical and explanatory value. Moving in the opposite direction—identifying a set of changes in a language, induced by language contacts, and from them inferring the otherwise unknown human history that lay behind those changes—is a tack that scholars have almost never undertaken in systematic fashion, except in one field of study. That field is African history, in which major new work and significant advances in method have been produced in recent decades.

Outside of the African history field, the application of linguistic evidence to historical reconstruction has generally been left to some
students of the Indo-European language family and, for the non-Western parts of the world, to the ethnographers. Even in these instances, scholars have tended to utilize only a portion of the tools available to them. Especially this kind of study has focused on the questions of where a particular language family originated and where its speakers subsequently spread. A second major focus has been the reconstruction of the ancient lexicons of the ancestral languages, the proto-languages, of various language families, because the reconstructed lexicons reveal many aspects of the knowledge and cultural practices of the societies that spoke the languages.

Nearly everywhere, though, scholars have tended either to neglect or to give only superficial attention to the historical implications of word borrowing over extended periods of contact. This evidence is potentially the most telling resource of all. A period of word borrowing lasting from as few up to many generations almost always accompanies the sustained encounter of two societies. The kinds of words borrowed, the scale and intensity of borrowing, and the directions of borrowing tell a great deal about the demography and social history of the encounter of peoples: which group was moving into the other’s territory; what the relative proportion of the in-coming to existing population was; and what kinds of social and economic relations characterized and evolved out of the encounter between the two populations. Using the categorizations of long-term word borrowing, summarized in Figure 1, we can construct more nuanced pictures of the manners, pace, and demographic proportionality of particular histories of migration in times and places where either written sources are lacking or those sources are few and ambiguous. This approach enables us to propose much stronger and more compelling correlations of linguistic with archaeological evidence, and provides new tools for assessing whether diffusion or migration was the principle cause in particular cases of historical change.

This chapter begins with two examples of the classical methods of tracing the paths of long-term migration through language evidence. From there it moves on to the less widely known methods of loanword analysis, presenting several historical case studies to illustrate some of the more telling ways in which this kind of evidence can advance the historical understanding of migration in global history.