THE ARCHAEO-LINGUISTICS OF MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

In prehistory, we do not have direct documentary evidence of migrations, but archaeology and linguistics may provide clues. Often there are material objects and traces (studied by archaeology) and languages or linguistic features (studied by diachronic linguistics) in one place which bear a resemblance to those in another place. One type of explanation of such a distribution is migration: people moved from one place to another and took their artefacts and styles of life and/or their languages with them.

In the history of both archaeology and linguistics, migration has been the dominant form of explanation of such patterns at various times in various places. However this has caused a reaction at various phases, and the sceptics about migration-driven explanation usually turn to one or other form of diffusion of traits as an alternative. In archaeology, trade is another way in which artefacts can be transported from place to place, and styles of production and life can also move from place to place without significant people-movement, either in association with trade or independently.

Languages can spread by migration of groups into unpopulated areas, or by driving out or, more rarely, exterminating indigenous populations. In such cases influence of other languages on the migrants’ language may be minimal, and changes which the language of the migrants undergoes are driven by internal factors. Where migrants move into contact with or through other groups, aspects of languages can also be adopted by neighbours (such as loanwords) often in tandem with trade and diffusion of other cultural traits, in processes known as ‘language contact’ or ‘adstrate influence’.

Adoption of whole languages without significant people movement is a more doubtful scenario, both in terms of theory and historical experience. But certainly whole groups of people can undergo ‘language shift’ to a migrant language when exposed to relatively small numbers of migrants, under the right conditions (Figure 1a). This is
often thought of as a consequence of invasion and ‘elite dominance’ militarily and politically by the newcomers. The adoption by a central European group of the language Hungarian, which has its origins far to the east, is probably an example of this.\(^1\) It occurs also between groups where power relations are not on the face of it so unequal, as in the ‘downstream spread’ cases to be discussed further below.

More frequently, migrant groups undergo language shift to the languages of the people among whom they come to live (Diagram 1b): this is the common case in recent historical migrations. Pakendorf also shows that some groups of Yakuts in Siberia shifted to Even when they moved into their area in prehistory.\(^2\) Where language shift has occurred, historical linguistics can frequently detect what is called ‘substrate’ influence—aspects of the previous language spoken by the group continuing in the new language that they have adopted.

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\(^1\) Pakendorf (2005) for the Siberian cases cited here uses bio-genetics, specifically mitochondrial DNA, to establish whether language shift has occurred or not, and at least in clear and relatively recent cases, this is probably the most powerful tool we have at the moment. The fact that Hungarians are very similar to the peoples surrounding them genetically while speaking an unrelated language points to language shift having taken place based on a small migrant population (Sokal 1988).

\(^2\) Pakendorf 2005.