

SEMANTIC ENIGMAS

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I understand that the Hungarian and Finnish languages are related because the two peoples share a common origin somewhere east of the Urals. Where exactly do they come from?

- I ONCE attended a lecture, delivered in German by a Romanian whose native language was Hungarian, and who also spoke Finnish. When the inevitable question as to the similarity of the two languages arose, he answered "Yes, they are quite similar. About as similar as French and Russian." I don't think he was being facetious: French and Russian (or for that matter English and Albanian) are similar, since they are related Indo-European languages. But the Romanian's answer is a salutary warning against over-emphasising the similarities. Finnish and Hungarian both belong to the Finno-Ugrian group of languages (Estonian also, which is very similar to Finnish). Hungarian history is well documented, since they came early into contact with the German (Holy Roman) Empire and had to be confined within their boundaries by the German king Henry I in the 10th century. They (and presumably also the Finns) are the descendants of probably the last wave of foreign invaders from the East, of whom the Huns and the Avars are perhaps the best known. To say more would be speculation. As to the question "Where do the Hungarians and the Finns come from?" - where do any of us come from? It's just that their languages stick out like erratic blocks in an otherwise homogeneous Indo-European landscape that makes us wonder about their origins. They are just people like the rest of us.

Frank Shaw, Department of German, University of Bristol.

- FINNISH and Hungarian are members of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic languages, some dozen or so that are still spoken in some countries bordering the Urals. Estonian and Lappish also belong to this group. Scholars disagree on dates, but over 4,000 years BC a group of hunters from the Siberian lands beyond the Urals split, with the Finno group going towards the Baltic and the Ugric group moving southwards towards present-day Hungary, becoming nomadic herdsmen through contact with Turkic peoples. The presence of words of Turkish origin in today's Hungarian may presume that Finno-Ugric can be linked with other languages of central Asia.

Jean Fowlds, Luton, Beds.

- THE HYPOTHESIS which asserts a common origin for the Hungarian and Finnish languages is based on the fact that there are about 600 words shared by Hungarian and Finnish. This "official" version is generally the only one taught in schools and universities. However, it is also true that there is an equal or greater number of words shared by Hungarian with Turkish and many other languages. Moreover, the anthropology, the mythology and the traditional music of Hungarians shows a much closer kinship with the Turkic

peoples than with the Finns and the other related Uralic peoples. The earliest sources relating to Hungarians generally describe them as Turks, Huns, Sabirs, Onogurs, etc, but never as Finns. If the questioner wishes to know more about the "official" story of Hungarian origins, he only has to consult any textbook anywhere in the Western world. But most Hungarian people no longer believe in this version. If he wishes to know something about the research concerned with the alternative views, he could contact us.

I Halasz, Hungarian Historical Society, 115 Auburn Road,
Auburn 2144, Australia.

- I HALASZ'S condemnation of scholarly work on these languages is unfortunate. The common origin of Hungarian and Finnish (and many other languages) in a large Uralic family was established over 200 years ago, mostly by Hungarian scholars. The Uralic view is presented in all the books, and taught in all the universities, simply because it is true. The common ancestor of these languages has been reconstructed in considerable detail, and the pre-histories of both Hungarian and Finnish are reasonably well understood. The last common ancestor of Hungarian and Finnish is dated to around 5,000 years ago, probably in the vicinity of the Urals, after which the Finns diffused west into northern Europe, while the Hungarians moved east into central Asia. There they encountered the Turks, with whom they remained in intimate contact for many centuries; this is the reason for the words and cultural traditions shared with the Turks. Only about 1,000 years ago did the Hungarians move west into Europe. We do not establish the common origin of languages merely by counting shared vocabulary. If we did, we might conclude rapidly, and wrongly, that English is most closely related to French, that Basque is most closely related to Spanish, or that Japanese is most closely related to Chinese. There is no substitute for patient scholarly work.

R L Trask, School of Cognitive and Computing Sciences,
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- I HALASZ demonstrates a lack of understanding about taxonomic linguistics. The words shared with Turkish are cultural items, which are most subject to borrowing. The words that Hungarian shares with Finnish, however, belong to the stable core of the language, such as personal pronouns, basic natural phenomena, body parts, etc. The Finno-Ugric hypothesis was denied by Hungarians throughout the last century - in the face of over-whelming evidence - on the irrelevant grounds that the Hungarians were conquerors on horseback whereas the Saami and the Udmurts, etc, were hunter-gatherers who had never conquered anyone.

Paul Whitehouse, London N1.

- THE ANSWER from I Halasz is mistaken. First, the question is where the languages come from, not whether they are related. Finns' ancestors left Siberia and headed north-west. If the Hungarians left from the same area they headed south-west, and besides, this took place thousands of years ago.

Second, languages are not categorised solely by shared words. Finnish has more words derived from Swedish than the 600 common words with Hungarian, but nobody is claiming that Finnish has suddenly become an Indo-European language. These 600 words shared by Hungarian and Finnish are not "common" but they obviously are of same origin. Categorisation includes such features as stress of words and sentences, grammatical system, e.g. case system, syntax and morphology. These features happen to be closely related in both Finnish and Hungarian. Finally, I couldn't care less if Hungarians prefer being related to Turks, but people who claim something should take all facts into consideration and not just those which suit to them.

Salla Koivisto, Guildford, Surrey, (li65sk@surrey.ac.uk)

- Regarding Turkish and Hungarian one should read the paper "Turkish material in Hungarian" by John Dyneley Prince, Columbia University. Not all the so called Turkish "loan words" can be considered borrowed. Some fundamentals are never borrowed and point to a common, cognate linguistic connection. Example the followings are not loan material: Turkish "Çok var", Hungarian "Sok van", "There are many". The cognates Çok, Sok; var, van are clear. Furthermore the relationship between Turkish ol (to be) and Hungarian volt is obvious. Same can be said about Hungarian olyan, olyan and Turkish öle "Thus so"; Hungarian jó, Turkish iyi, iyi ("good"), Hungarian and Turkish öl ("kill and die"). Same is true for the Hungarian verbal suffixes 1.p -m 2.p -sz and Turkish -m, s(en), personal pronouns Hungarian én, Turkish ben "I", Hungarian ő, Turkish o "He/She", Hungarian te, Turkish sen "You", Hungarian Ki, Turkish Kim "Who". The first person possessive affix -m in Turkish and Hungarian çocuğu gyerek child çocuğum gyerekem my child çocuklarım gyerekeim my children One can point from the basic Hungarian vocabulary to family words. Hungarian words like anya ("mother"), apa, atya ("father") Turkish ana, anne and ata. These were just some from the many similarities between Hungarian and Turkish. I end with a sentence in Turkish and Hungarian: Cebimde çok küçük elma var. Zsebemben sok kicsi alma van. I have many little apples in my pocket. As a native Hungarian my point is that Hungarian is distantly related to Turkish, but I would not deny any distant relationship with Finnish either.

Erik Vail, Cluj, Romania

- I love how every answer on this forum, and indeed, the internet, relies on some or other preferred theory, which in Salla Koivisto's own words, "best suits them" (that's rich). The fact of the matter is that whatever theory you choose to subscribe to, they are all just that - theories. Until 100% solid, irrefutable, concrete evidence is provided to answer this question, then nothing that you read online can be taken as more than conjecture. I am no academic, nor am I a linguist, but I find it incredible how so many of the academic community online and elsewhere, can make final and conclusive claims about common ancestors between the Hungarians and the Finns, but in their next sentence they make extensive usage of such words as "might", "probably",

"most likely", "presume" etc., regarding many important factors such as locations, timelines and links to other groups and peoples. If you make a decisive statement about a widely debated topic, back it up with concrete evidence, not guesswork which is likely sprinkled with a healthy dose of personal bias. Finally, I couldn't care less what people like Salla Koivisto happen to think of I. Halasz's answer to the question. If Salla is so convinced about the common ancestor to both Finnish and Hungarian languages, then why not expand on some of the other commonly named language similarities - e.g. Hungarian and Turkish, Hungarian and Mongolian, Hungarian and Sumerian, to name but a few? Again, I am no linguist, but I do not subscribe to any one theory. Rather, I see that there are many theories around, and I do not necessarily think that the most commonly known one (i.e. Finno-Ugrian), is the correct one. After all, there was once a time when people believed the earth to be flat. We now know, only thanks to SOLID EVIDENCE, that it is, in fact a sphere.

Tibor Szabo, Johannesburg, South Africa

- This is not an answer but a reminder: Sumerian and Sythia connection which has many words and solid grammar in common with Turkish. Under time constrain I cannot write more.

Djavid Mostame, edmonton Canada

- There are a lot of Turkish words(loanwords) in modern day Greek language. Does this prove that the two languages share a common ancestor? No, we all know where Greek came from. But it indicates that the two people lived together for a long of time. I will presume that the same happened between Hungarian and Turcic.

Anna Zinonos, Athens Greeece

- There can be innovations that completely change the structure of a language. Germanic invaders seemed to have introduced the concept of "The" into Latin - all Romance languages are neurotic about articles which simply didn't occur in old languages. That doesn't mean that Latin is related to proto-Germanic. The relationship is because the amount of similar words is far higher than 200 monosyllabic babbles that have similarities even as far away as China (Baba v. Papa). The sounds are deliberate and non-coincidental; for instance, the comparison of hunt v. canine; I can think off the top of my head of hundreds of related German and Latin cognates. And that's without thinking. In Finnish-Hungarian, there are 200 words. Some of which are cited as pronouns. But Finnish pronouns are highly similar to Latin-perhaps just as close to indo-European as they are to Hungarian in fact. I would defer this scholarship to two parts: The desire of the Hungarians to explain their singularity in Europe, and to find common peoples, and the European need, especially 200 years ago, to cast out non-indo-European languages as non-European (see the origins of the word "Anti-Semitism")- The linking of Finnish and Hungarian

might be racism in the same way Jews and Tartars were not considered Europeans. After all, the amount of blondes in Finland in Estonia would suggest, to Europeans, a European ancestry, not an Asian ancestry, no? Reconstructing a proto-Uralic language is about as logical therefore as reconstructing Klingon. There is no reason to believe eye can not be a loanword any more than half of the English vocabulary is loaned from Latin.

Jared, NYC, USA

- In Hungary they have made a political question about this subject, where they want to identify themselves to Asia, instead of Europe. Hungarian language is Uralic, as Finnish, and it is known.

Vincze, Budapest Magyarország

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