

A unique perspective on (pre)historical migration using linguistics

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Credit: Tijmen Pronk

Migration is not only reflected in DNA, but also in language. By tracing changes in language, we learn more about the lifestyle of the people that speak it. University lecturer Tijmen Pronk (40) conducts linguistic research into (pre)historical migration.

"When people move, their languages move with them," says Pronk.

"When migration takes place in larger groups, there is a chance that a [language](#) will remain in the arrival area for a long time, or might even be adopted by others in that area. This is a phenomenon that frequently recurs in world history."

Language migration

As early as during the prehistoric period, migration constantly took place. "The Dutch language originates from an [ancient language](#) that was once spoken north of the Caspian Sea," Pronk explains. "This language was brought to Central Europe by migrants in the third millennium B.C. The language of these migrants can be reconstructed reasonably well and shows that these migrants were mainly engaged in livestock farming and that they brought with them a patriarchal society."

Another example is Australian English, which was brought from Britain by migrants, starting at the end of the 18th century. In Britain itself, English was once introduced by migrants who crossed the North Sea from the northwest coast of Europe in the early Middle Ages.

Language contains traces of the past

One of the reasons why Pronk studies language is the fact that it is an important source for (pre)[historical research](#): "Linguistics offer a unique perspective on historical and prehistoric [migration](#)," says Pronk. "You can often find traces of the past in language. Some typical Leiden surnames, for example, still reveal the groups of French-speaking migrants who came to Leiden from the 16th century onwards. Flemish elements in the (now almost non-existent) Leiden dialect testify to Flemish migrants from the same period."

And did you know that the Latin name Lugdunum, which referred to a Roman settlement at the mouth of the Rhine near Leiden, tells us that speakers of a Celtic language lived in this region around the time of the arrival of the Romans?

Development of modern languages

Differences between related languages or dialects also show us a lot about migrants and the people they came into contact with. Pronk: "In the early Middle Ages, groups of people that spoke Slavic in Eastern Europe crossed the Danube from the north. They settled in the Balkans, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea and in the eastern foothills of the Alps.

Depending on where they settled and with whom they came into contact, their languages eventually evolved into modern languages such as Bulgarian and Slovenian, or, as is the case in, for example, Greece and Hungary, these migrants and their descendants adopted other languages. In Hungary, that was the language of a later group of migrants from the east: the Hungarians." By looking at the current linguistic diversity in Southeastern Europe, Pronk's research reveals migrations that took place there in the Middle Ages.

Technical innovations as a research source

Pronk is currently investigating linguistic evidence of migrations that—from the third millennium before our era up to and including the Migration Period—have fundamentally changed the linguistic and demographic landscape of Europe and the western part of Asia. He conducts this research by looking at linguistic changes at the end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the Bronze Age. "This is an interesting period, because all kinds of [technical innovations](#) happened that form the basis of our present society, such as the invention of the wheel, the milking of cows and the shearing of sheep," explains Pronk.

"These innovations can be linguistically traced by looking at terminology for, for example, wheels, wagons, milk products, wool and wool processing. That way, I can see changes in the lifestyle of the speakers of the language. Collaborating with archaeologists, including ones from Leiden, provides both parties with new insights into this area."

Provided by Leiden University

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