

Researcher investigates undocumented prehistoric languages through irregularities in current languages

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Language can be a time machine—we can learn from ancient texts how

our ancestors interacted with the world around them. But can language also teach us something about people whose language has been lost? Ph.D. candidate Anthony Jakob investigated whether the languages of prehistoric populations left traces in Lithuanian and Latvian.

About five thousand years ago, a group of people migrated from the steppe in what is now eastern Ukraine and southern Russia to the rest of the European continent. They took their [language](#) with them: Indo-European became the basis of many contemporary European languages, such as Dutch and English. Yet it was not the only language spoken. Other groups had lived in Europe for thousands of years and spoke their own lost languages. "We wanted to know if these original populations left traces in the languages of Europe today," says Jakob.

Contradictions

For his research, Jakob looked specifically at the East Baltic languages, Lithuanian and Latvian. These languages are often said to be relatively "archaic," meaning that they retained many features of the reconstructed ancestor language Proto-Indo-European. "A popular explanation for this was that Latvians and Lithuanians had little interaction with other peoples. The languages would therefore have developed in isolation, which might explain why they kept so many ancient features."

However, Jakob thought there was more to it. "Sometimes, we find words which have not developed in the way we'd expect if they came from Proto-Indo-European. One way to explain this is that these words entered the language at a later time, for example, through contact with other peoples. In the case of East Baltic, we'd most likely be dealing with languages that were never written down."

Prehistoric loan words

One of the possible loan words from an unknown language is the Lithuanian word for seal: ruonis. It is very similar to the Irish word for seal: rón. "But when we try to reconstruct these words, we can't do that using Proto-Indo-European. I would say they are borrowed from an unknown language," Jakob explains.

That language was probably spoken by a group of people who lived in the Baltic region before the arrival of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. The region had been populated by different groups since the end of the last Ice Age. These people probably also fished and were familiar with the local marine life. "The theory makes cultural sense because we know seals live in the Baltic Sea. The Europeans who migrated inland from the steppes would never have encountered them until they reached this area."

It is irregularities like these that slowly reveal more information about the unknown language. "We can find patterns in these irregularities. That allows us to say something about this mysterious language that we have never seen written down, but which nevertheless had an influence on the languages we speak today."

Provided by Leiden University

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