

Language Threads

Similar Metaphors and Notions across Languages

Françoise Ratzlaff

Abstract

A personal multilingual study, mainly of the Eurasiatic languages over a period of almost four decades has made clear that innumerable Indo-European word roots are also present in other language groups. With the help of the online etymological database of world languages by Starostin, author of *“Altaic Problem and the Origin of Japanese,”* of Joseph Greenberg’s *“Indo-European and Its Closest Relatives,”* and of the *“Online Etymology”* (of the English language), common etymons are presented as a list of topics concerned with man, his coming to life, his living, and his body. These etymons show that, not only the same roots are found in various language families, but that common metaphors are also present. This has been accomplished by a cross-linguistic lexical-semantic approach of the etymologies, comparing languages all the way to proto-language. A bold approach to the comparison of world etymologies is certainly not to the detriment of linguistic progress. Instead, looking into these far reaching etymologies and widening our scope on human language with the intuitive knowledge of what and who we are, we can relive the origin of languages, and get a better understanding of how language appeared.

Keywords

linguistic metaphor, lexical-semantic, etymon, proto-language, language origin, Indo-European, Altaic

I. Introduction

One of the dominant themes in the field of linguistics has been to determine the original language stocks of mankind. This has been done by exploring and finding similarities between languages. However, explaining these similarities is more difficult than simply noticing them. Even though they can be explained as traits inherited from a common ancestor, their lexical

resemblances are sometimes so striking that they merit consideration. They show evidence for a common language stock and even more, a universal thought structure for this common ancestor, which, crossing all borders, all languages and cultures, profoundly brings us back to the world of man and man's beginning.

A closer look at etymology, all the way back to proto-language, shows that words develop from primitive, often imitative sounds. These may remain intact after several millennia. The verb *to grab*, for example, has hardly changed for 5000 years and the word *vest* is probably just as old. There used to be a Proto- Indo-European root **wes-* "to clothe" (in Sanskrit *vaste* "he puts on"). The Sanskrit word *nāda* (**ni* "down" + **sed-* "sit"), a nest, is still *nid* in French. Such examples are not rare.

In spite of great semantic changes, the primitive notions at the origin of words are still deeply anchored in their *etymon* (in Greek, "real meaning"). Sounds evolve as words cross borders, but, surprisingly, the primitive notion of words remains connected to their present meaning. For example, the French verb *tuer*, to kill, remains connected to its first meaning "to protect," as in *tuteur*, "tutor," strangely enough, as the opposite meaning of this word. As words travel, their etymon can also be traced in other languages, even in those not genetically related to them. Some may be loanwords, but some very old etymons are present in the proto language of different language families. These can be seen under Starostin's "Nostratic" database.

After almost four decades of personal intensive multilingual study of the languages spoken across the Eurasian continent (about 50 languages), certain grammatical and lexical similarities could not be missed between unrelated language families, for example:

- the Finnish question element *ko*, the Hindi *kya*, the Japanese and the Malay *ka*, the French interrogative pronoun *que*, the German *was*, or the English *what*
- the negation in : the English "no," the Greek *an*, and the Japanese "nai"
- the widely spread genitive in *n*
- the same SOV word order: in Basque, Latin, Ancient Greek, , in Hindi, Turkish, and Japanese, as well as in many German examples
- the verb *iru*, "to be" common to Japanese and Tamil

First, these similarities seemed to be pure coincidence, but, when Greenberg's "*Indo-European and Its Closest Relatives*" was published in 2000, our convictions were confirmed that these languages have a remote common thread, and it seemed imperative to expand the comparison methods and bring support to the work of this linguist.

By further comparing languages on the etymological level, with the help of the etymological online *Tower of Babel*, a web-based project on historical and comparative linguistics, some

etymologies that could not be traced in one single language family appeared to abound in others.

The research of the eminent linguist Vladislav Illich-Svitych, founder of the Nostratic family, the base of Starostin's etymological online database, still remains a prey to controversy. Nicholas Wade, in the *New York Times*, deplored the conservative view of linguists who remain overly skeptical, even in face of the monumental findings of Joseph Greenberg, whose works on typology as well as on world etymologies, has fueled unprecedented advances seen in the field of linguistics:

Greenberg's method, which he calls mass or multilateral comparison, is to compare many languages simultaneously on the basis of 300 core words in the hope that they will sort themselves into clusters representative of their historical development. Many linguists believe such an exercise is futile because words change too quickly to preserve any ancestry older than 5,000 years or so.

Keeping etymology as a base, we will first be dealing with parallel metaphors, seen across languages genetically connected or not. According to Lakoff

...most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (p 241).

We will show how, at the origin, all languages tend to fall back on similar mental images. We also will present some examples of far reaching etymologies which strongly connect a number of language families and definitely hint at a main core.

Some cross-linguistic similar notions representing body parts will be presented. Joseph Greenberg states that "Certain items in language are extremely stable, like personal pronouns or parts of the human body (Wade, 2).

To begin with, as an example of what has happened to words across genetically unrelated languages, we will discuss the state of things before birth, the body and its manifestations in breathing, birthing, procreating. Concerning man and the body, from the stomach up to the head, the muscles, and finally, the hands, vocabulary will be compared across languages, genetically related or not.

II. Similar metaphors across languages

Pregnancy and the metaphor of weight

Focusing on man and his life, we will first mention some aspects of man's condition before life, starting with the state of pregnancy. The English 'pregnant' evolved from the Latin *prægnantem*, literally, in a "pre" birth condition, from *præ-* "before" + root of *gnasci* "to be born" = pre + natal. When we imagine, for example, a cotton wad impregnated with water, the adjective carries the hidden metaphor of this pre-natal state which, of course, we are not aware of. This non-metaphoric adjective is often replaced by the metaphor of weight. Many Indo-European languages connect this condition with the image of heaviness, as in the word "gravid", originally, "heavy."

Surprisingly, across the whole Eurasiatic continent, the expression "having heavy feet" appears in only three (genetically unrelated) languages:

- In Hindi : *Pair bhare ho gaye*, the feet have become heavy = she is pregnant
- In Uyghur: *Egher ayak ayyâl*, a heavy footed woman (pregnant)
- And in Georgian: *pexmdzime*, heavy footed (pregnant)

Child bearing, birth and the metaphor of gravity

In the same order of thinking, the verb "to bear (down)" is also linked to the notion of heaviness. The English "to bear" has the same origin as the Hindi adjective *bhare*, which we easily recognize from the Hindi example above, *Pair bhare ho gaye*. "To have weight" and "to carry, or make go" come from the Sanskrit root *bhar*, to carry. To "bear down," "birth," as well as to the Swedish *barn*, a child, are all related.

We trust that the Japanese equivalent *umu*, "to lay eggs," and *umareru*, its passive form, to be born, is linked to its homophone *omou*, to think, and *omoi*, heavy. This is just the French *pondre*, "to lay eggs," "a cognate of *penser*, "to ponder," "to think deeply," "heavily," and also a cognate of *peser*, "to be heavy." *Umu* is also known to be a cognate of the Finnish *muna*, "egg" (see the Altaic database). The Egyptian Arabic *wada'at* means both "She puts down" or "She gives birth."

Parenting

The child bearers, the parents, represent the ones who "bring/ carry forth." The Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **per*, through, make go (through), gave the Latin verb *pareo*, bring forth, give birth, and therefore "parent," someone "bringing forth."

As André Rousseau puts it, "there are obvious connections between some roots: **per*, to go, to make go, and **bher*, to make go, to carry, or even **kap*, seize, and **ghab*, to hold, to have; this is a domain that has barely been explored by Indo-Europeanists" (Rousseau, 19). The connection **per*

/ **bher* is quite probable, since it is a known fact that speakers of Bengali, tend to pronounce *bh* instead of *p*. Therefore the verb to bear, as in “to bear a child,” seems related to the word “parent,” and consequently to more cognates, such as “port,” “portal,” “portable,” as well as “important.”

Marriage and the metaphor of movement

The coming together of future parents is often represented by a metaphor of movement toward a partner:

- In Russian *ona vishla zamuzh*, “She went to the man.”
- In French *coureur* represents a man who runs after a woman
- In Georgian *im kaltan dadis*, “He goes to that woman / He has an affair with that woman.”
- The Sanskrit verb *gam*, “to come / to go,” is present in the word “polygamy”

Air, breathing, and the notion of living

In many languages the notion of ‘air’ or ‘breathing’ represents living. From the PIE base *ane-* “to blow,” “to breathe,” and the Sanskrit *aniti*, to breathe, to live, stems the Greek *anemos* “wind,” and the Latin *anima*, “living being, breath, soul, mind, spirit.” It gave the word “animated,” literally, “full of life.”

The same parallel can be found in the following:

- in Japanese: *iki suru* “to breathe” and *iki-ru* “live,” and possibly, *iku*, to live/ to die.
- In Georgian, the noun *sicockhle*, the living, contains *ceckhli*, breath, fire and life ,

The English verb “to breathe” is also linked to “burning,” “brew,” “bride,” and “beer.”

Life and the metaphor of “leaving”

The word “life” shares the same origin as the verb “to leave,” a cognate of the German verb *leben*, to live, and of the word *Leib*, body. It is the metaphor of leaving, or rather, delivering a baby.

Man speaking and the metaphor of throwing or letting go

The metaphor ‘throwing words’ around or ‘letting words out’ is present in diverse languages. Here we have as examples the following:

In French: *parler (parabole)* = literally, “to throw (words) around”: *para* “alongside” + *bole* = “throwing”

In Japanese: *hanasu* = to speak, literally “to let go (of words)”

In English: “to speak,” “to strew or scatter words,” from the Latin *spargere*, a cognate of “asparagus.”

III. Similar notions across languages

Man, oneness, health and wholeness

Man is often referred to as “one” in the following:

- In English “someone”
- In French *quelqu'un*
- In Greek, *a-tomos*, “a man,” a human being described as not divisible (*a* = not and *tomos* = cut), whereas, in the opposite perspective, an insect (in-sect) is *entomon*, from *en+temnein* = “in”+“to cut,” a “being cut into.”
- In Japanese *hitori*, one person, and *hito*, both the number “one” and “a person.”

The etymology of *hito* appears in the *Tower of Babel*, as a cognate of the Turkish *bir*, one, without mentioning *hito* as “man.” In Japanese “one” has become the equivalent of “man,” as we can see here:

- Proto-Japanese: *pit@
- Altaic etymology:

Meaning: one

Russian meaning: *один*

Old Japanese: *pjito*

Middle Japanese: *fi/to/-, fi'to/-, fi'to\-*

Tokyo: *hito/tsu*

Kyoto: *hito/tsu*

(*Tower of Babel*, Japanese database)

To be “one” also means to be indivisible, whole, and unaltered. This oneness is present in the word “healthy,” from PIE **kailo-*, whole, uninjured. Both adjectives “safe,” and “solid,” from the Latin *salvus*, uninjured, are also related to *saluber*, healthful, from PIE **solwos*, **sol-*, whole, as in the Greek *holos*, whole.

If oneness represents ‘man’ as well as ‘health,’ it can also refer to his mental quality, for example, to his honesty. Therefore, “integrity,” from the Latin *integritas* “wholeness,” from *integer*, “untouched,” (*in-* “not” *tangere* “to touch”) is also concerned with the same notion of wholeness. Divisibility appears to be a sign of weakness, physically and morally.

Heart and center

Words which refer to the heart tend to be linked to the word “center,” as in the following:

Russian *sertse*, “heart,” and *sreda*, “between”

Chinese *xīn/shīn*

Or to the breast:

Proto-Altaic: **kōk`è*, “breast, to suck; heart”

Turkic: **gökür*

Mongolian: **kōkōn*

Tungus-Manchu: **xuku-n / *kuku-n*

Korean: **kokǎi-*

Japanese: **kokoro*

Arabic: *qalb* (added by the author)

Modern Turkish: *kol* (added by the author)

(*Tower of Babel*, Altaic database)

Body, intestines, belly and breast: notion of compactness

In the *Online Etymological Dictionary*, the origin of the English word “body” OG *botah*, is mentioned as unknown. However, in the Nostratic data base of the *Tower of Babel*, a great number of words with the same meaning, containing the paired consonants “b” and “d” exist in Indo-European, Altaic, Dravidian, and even some African languages. The example of the word “body” shows us that, if some etymologies cannot be traced in one language family, we need to check the Nostratic database. Even if linguists do not consider such similarities as proof of a common ancestry, it seems impossible to refute the connections between the following languages:

Proto-Altaic	<i>*bo\da\meaning</i> “body; intestines, belly”
Proto-Dravidian	<i>*pot.-(*pavt.-)</i> meaning “belly”
Proto-Afro-Asiatic	<i>*bayad-</i> meaning “arm with shoulder”
Berber	<i>*bad-</i> meaning “breast”
Proto-Turkic	<i>*bod</i> meaning “body, stature; self; counter for persons” meaning bowels
Proto-North-Dravidian	<i>*pot-</i>
Kurukh	<i>pot!ā</i> "bowels, entrails"
Malto	<i>pura</i> "belly, bowels"
Modern Turkish	<i>beden</i>
Proto-Mongolian	<i>*boda</i> meaning “substance, matter, body”
Proto-Japanese	<i>*ba\ta\</i> which became <i>wata/</i> in Old Japanese meaning “intestines, belly”
Farsi	<i>badana</i>
Hindi and Arabic	<i>badan</i> (added by the author)

(*Tower of Babel*, Nostratic database)

A *bod* -like root, representing “belly,” “body,” “intestines,” “stomach” persists across the most diverse languages. It would be an unimaginable coincidence that more than 75% of the Nostratic languages have a similar root representing the body. We must ask ourselves why this connection with the English word “body” has never been recognized in the perspective of these examples present in other languages. More than likely, the problem is that no one wants to risk any kind of wide range comparison.

Head, and hair and the notion of “content” or “top”

The terms representing the head are naturally linked to containers. Hollow dishes have given their names to the head, or rather, the cup-like shape of skulls, not a rare sight in the landscape of primitive men, must have inspired them to use these as containers. The word “head” and “chief,” from the French *chef* share a common origin, from the PIE **kauput*, to the Latin *caput*, to the Germanic languages with *Haupt*, and the Old Norse, *hoved*. As we mentioned earlier in Rousseau’s lexical-semantic study, it is interesting, concerning the theme of the “head,” to note the resemblance between the root *cap* of the Latin *caput* and the *cap* of the verb *capere*. The Latin root of the verb *capere*, “to take, to have,” probably contributed to the association of the consonants k-pt/h-pt/sh-v/k-pf, in words representing the head. As the other word for “head” in French is *tête*, based on the image of a turtle (shell) from the Latin *testudo*, another recipient-like shape, we notice once more that man put this shell to good use, to replace his hands and used it as a bowl or a dish.

According to Joseph Greenberg the Japanese *kaburu* is connected to the Germanic *Gehirn*, “brain,” the Greek, *kephale*, and the English “gable,” as in the following:

Proto-Indo-European	<i>*ghebh-el-</i> meaning “head, summit”
Old High German	<i>*gibil</i> meaning “gable,” <i>gebal</i> meaning “skull, gable”
Greek	<i>kephale</i> meaning “head, top”
Proto-Altaic	<i>kiam(b)a</i> meaning “top of head, top”
Proto-Turkic	<i>*k(i)a-mak</i> <i>*k(i)apak</i> meaning “forehead, front part”
Modern Turkish	<i>kafa</i> , head seems very close to the PIE <i>*kap</i>
Proto-Tungus	<i>*kiama</i> <i>*kiapa</i> meaning “temple, face”
Middle Korean	<i>kama</i> meaning “crown of head”
Modern Korean	<i>kama</i> meaning “crown of head”
Old Japanese	<i>kabu(ri)</i> meaning “head”
Modern Japanese	<i>kaburi</i> meaning “head” (<i>kami</i> is also connected according to Aston)

A common word for “muscle” meaning “mouse,” “fish,” or “frog”

The word “muscle” in English comes from the Sanskrit word *mus* PIE (Proto-Indo-European which means both “mouse” and “muscle.” The same semantic pair occurs in other languages:

- in Arabic, *adal*, “muscle” / *adelah*, “fieldmouse”
- in Ancient Greek, *mys* is both “mouse” and “muscle”
- in Modern Greek, *spondiki* represents the “muscle of the arm” as well as “mouse”
- in French, *souris* means both “mouse” and “muscle,” although *souris* as “muscle” is now mainly used as a culinary term. For example, we can read *souris d’agneau*, “lamb’s mouse,” which often appears on menus. However, the present word in French is *muscle* when it refers to this part of the body, as in English.

Obviously the muscle that one extracts from fowls’ legs looks like a mouse. A muscle moving under the arm’s skin generally looks like a mouse wiggling as the arm moves.

In these language examples, you would think English, French and Greek might have the same concept because they are related within the Indo European family, but the case of Arabic, a Semitic language, shows evidence that reasons other than common ancestry are involved.

How did these correspondences of meaning come about? It may seem surprising at first, but it can be understood if one imagines primitive human beings eating meat and tearing apart the “shank,” or “jarret” of an animal and not knowing the word for ‘muscle’ but knowing ‘mice,’ and therefore choosing the easy word to describe the shape of the meat being prepared for dinner.

Other languages name the muscle “fish,” as in the following:

- In Sinhala, *matsyā* (nominative case), *masun* (object case), “fish,” shares the same root as *manshā*, “meat, muscle.”
- In Berber *aslem* “fish” *taslemet* “little fish, muscle of the arm” from a dialect in central Morocco (www.berberes.com).
- In Tamil *tavalay* “a frog” is also used to refer to the muscle of the arm.

Hand, to give, and the notion of measure

The German word *Mass*, “measure,” which sounds like the Japanese *masu*, a square wooden container used to measure rice, appears in many languages as a very old etymon. Here are some examples:

Proto-Indo-European: **mǝ-r*, **mǝ-nǝs*, **me-* ~ **me-te-*, ‘to measure,’ **med*, ‘measure’

Hittite: *mānyahh-*, “hand over”

Greek: *mare*, “hand”

Lithuanian: *mets*, “year, time, measure”

Hungarian: *mer*; “measure”

Proto-Altaic: *mane*, “paw”

Middle Korean: *mal*, “measure”

Old Japanese: *masu*, “measure”

(Greenberg’s Volume 2 Lexicon)

Eurasianic: **mVńV* (/ **mVń-rV?*)

Meaning: “hand”

Indo-European: **mar/n-*

Altaic: **máńa*

Uralic: **mOrV* “handful”

Dravidian: **man-* (?); **mār-* [823] (?)

Chukchee-Kamchatkan: Chuk. **mъn-* “hand”

(*Tower of Babel*, Nostratic etymology)

IV. Conclusion

As Greenberg comments, “Of course, even in Indo-European studies, which have been carried out for over two centuries by hundreds of scholars, new etymologies are still discovered, so in a sense all etymological dictionaries are forever incomplete” (pg. 1). Since we know that there will always be new discoveries in the field of world etymologies, we must widen our scope, to the risk of taking chances, so we can deal with more etymologies which can always be processed later and cleaned up of possible errors. More than anything else, a more adventurous perspective allows researchers to advance, more than they could advance with an overly cautious approach considered “safer,” and consistently hostile to the idea of a common language core.

Our efforts to answer the difficult question of how language came about may very well be in vain. However, the gift of the etymological database of world languages, given to us by Anatolyevich Starostin (head of the Moscow School of Comparative Linguistics, founder of the site “The Tower of Babel” in 1998), and by Joseph Greenberg, linguist and anthropologist, is too often neglected or ignored. We deplore that it remains a subject of controversy instead of serving, as it should, as a starting block for world linguists. Only by working along with the mass comparison of languages undertaken by these eminent linguists, will research advance in the understanding of language ancestry. We will some day be able to transcend political taboos which, for example, persist to consider Japanese or Basque as “isolates.” By simply stopping to hinder progress will we advance and find what is at the origin of language, even if we may not be able to clarify how language exactly appeared.

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