

Language and culture in an archaeological perspective

John Hines^a

This paper contains general reflections on the contributions language and archaeology can make to the definition and interpretation of past and present culture(s). It seeks both to summarize the relationship between language and archaeology in terms appropriate to an archaeological readership, and to contribute to reflexive debate within the subject of 'archaeolinguistics' by posing the question of what sort of methods and results might be shared across its whole range. The first section discusses the differences between language and culture and how language history has consequently been perceived and employed in archaeology. The second section discusses how language history is itself an aspect of cultural history and thus an essential supplement to archaeology. The third section proposes that archaeolinguistics can be seen as covering a series of stages, distinguished by data of critically different character, and thus differing too in the scope of the analyses that can be made and the inferences that can be drawn from them.

KEY-WORDS: language, archaeology, culture.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN CONTRAST

"Language and culture" is a familiar pairing. It is actually surprising to discover that no more than two regularly catalogued international journals have these terms together in their titles. Entering the words together in a subject search of a bibliographical database produces hundreds of references. A textbook on language and linguistics written by one of Britain's leading professors of the subject has a closing chapter on *Language and culture* (Lyons 1981: 301–32). This level of attention can in fact be seen as evidence of the degree to which the relationship between the the two terms is still an area of both empirical investigation and theoretical debate.

A clear conception of "culture" is far from a natural cognitive phenomenon. "Has any of you ever seen 'culture'?" is a pertinent question posed by an anthropologist in

^a School of English Studies, University of Wales, Cardiff, Wales

an imaginary debate scripted by Clyde Kluckhohn and William Kelly (1945) fifty years ago and one which highlights a problem that needs to be given more than token attention whenever we involve ourselves in any work requiring a concept of “culture”. However there is nothing intrinsically wrong in the scholarly creation of a scientific category of “culture” to which we can assign certain elements of human behaviour or the human environment; for my own part let me state clearly from the outset that I take the best definition of culture to be that culture comprises all of the optional or variable features of human behaviour. Thus the fact that we eat is a biological, not a cultural, phenomenon. What, where, when, how and with whom we eat, however, are all culturally variable.

Culture becomes seriously problematic when we try to reconcile it with more complicated analytical formulae. One way in which this is commonly done is by the search for explicable, and preferably regular, relationships between phenomena within culture. This involves the argument that there are implicational connexions between superficially diverse aspects of culture – possibly, for instance, between conspicuous material consumption in funerary rituals and a high level of social stratification. The corollary of this position is that there are incompatible cultural phenomena, phenomena which cannot co-exist, at least within a stable cultural environment. If cultural compatibility entailed no more than the empirical fact that certain phenomena are known to co-exist, and had no demonstrable antitype of incompatibility, it would be of no significance. All cultural phenomena would be able to co-exist.

The concepts of structured cultural correlation and cultural opposition are closely linked in practice, especially in a historical-archaeological perspective, though they need not be so conceptually. Within the culture of some unitary context (*i.e.*, a given time, place and population) we can reasonably presuppose that there can be a range of different types of relationship between compatible cultural phenomena: varying from the situation in which phenomenon *a* depends on or necessitates *b* to that in which *a* can co-exist with *b* but the two are implicationally quite free of one another. Systems of interdependency lie at the heart of one way of identifying individual cultures (henceforward “Cultures”). The extent and practical importance (as well, of course, as the reality) of cultural interdependency are the key measures of the status of any Culture so identified. Another approach to cultural structure is to privilege one aspect of culture – for instance economic relations – and then to “explain” all the associated aspects of culture in terms of their “functional” relationship to this aspect. As a third approach, we remain free to define cultural difference in terms of free variables – mere fashion – if we choose, but if we do that and no more we are operating with the weakest sense of cultural identity (this situation presupposes, of course, that there is such a thing as “mere fashion” in the cultural record). In respect

of the archaeological past, theory and hypothesis inevitably play a large part relative to that played by empirical analysis in producing models of cultural integrity and groupings.

It is in respect of the desire to divide the people and their products of the past into convenient groups that the contrasts between language and culture become particularly significant in an archaeological perspective. It is immeasurably easier to write a grammar of a Language (*i.e.*, an account of its internal structure), and has thus always appeared to be far easier to define the differences between separate Languages, than to explain the internal structure and define the boundaries between different Cultures. Language, moreover, is intuitively recognized as a phenomenon – I imagine universally – in a way that culture is not, presumably because language is more consciously taught to children than is the general mass of “the way we do things”, and because linguistic difference and problems of communication are usually more obvious and of more practical importance in contact situations than cultural differences are. Concomitantly, the conceptual link between language and identity – both self-attributed and in the way one classifies others – is demonstrably strong, at least in the sociolinguistics of the modern world (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985).

This notional difference between language and culture has appealed strongly to archaeologists. It appears, for instance, that language history has the ability to remedy deficiencies in the archaeological record: where one may be unable to trace a particular population or group in the material remains, one might be able to do so linguistically. Conversely, language has been used to underline the point that ethnic groupings and cultural groupings need not be coterminous by producing examples of clear misalignments between ethnic identity, cultural grouping, and linguistic affiliation (*e.g.*, Trigger 1978: 122–31). There is a clear danger when the latter argument is used, of course, that linguistic affiliation may come to be regarded as the “true” ethnic alignment.

Purported harmonies or contradictions between distinct material-culture groups and language groups have been well aired in relation to the Indo-European language group in recent decades, in studies ranging from Marija Gimbutas’s association of the “Kurgan Culture” and its “people” with an inferred parent language group, the ‘Indo-Europeans’ (Mallory 1989: 143–85) to Colin Renfrew’s book *Archaeology and language: the puzzle of Indo-European origins* (Renfrew 1987) which was provoked by an inability to accept the constraints of such a hypothesis and which, beyond simply criticising the hypothesis, offered an alternative hypothesis in its place. It is indicative of the heuristically governed and subjective character of the use of language history by archaeologists and anthropologists that grammarians and philologists have never shown anything like an equivalent interest in archaeology and anthropology.

LANGUAGE IN CULTURE

Archaeologists can, however, take some comfort from the fact that it is not only they who may find themselves accused of occasionally oversimplifying the nature of language. A great deal of writing and publishing in Linguistics involves one specialist in the field telling others that their subject is complicated and problematic in yet more, hitherto unappreciated, ways. Some of these problem areas within the science of language are particularly pertinent to the integrated study of language and archaeology.

Pre-eminent is the question of whether individual Languages really can be so much more reliably defined and described than individual Cultures. The widespread, and perhaps universal, human sensitivity to differences in linguistic form and practice invites fallaciously simplistic notions about the existence of discrete entities which can be called Languages or Dialects – a tendency to regard language as the sum of fixed and codifiable, reified varieties, rather than a highly complex and open-ended phenomenon endlessly modifying in response to a wide range of external stimuli (see Lass 1980: 129–33). The classic Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* is a distinction between an abstracted and static idealization of language as a complete and finite set of rules and forms and the markedly disobedient and fluid external embodiment of language actually found in the mass of speech and writing. In the speech of no small number of individuals, even within a single utterance, we can, for instance, observe persistent and frequent switching between “lects” (=notional language varieties) that have implicitly different sets of grammatical rules: *e.g.*, between more formal and more colloquial forms; higher or lower class sociolects; standardized language varieties and regional dialects; even, in code-switching bilinguals, between “Languages” (Romaine 1989; Eastman ed. 1992). The use of and response to language variation of this kind can have considerable functional significance within the community concerned.

The point is not that the constituent lects cannot reasonably be identified, or that when, for instance, a Hispanic American or a Polish American code-switches between Spanish or Polish and English one cannot easily and reasonably classify and distinguish the two languages: even when the former is highly anglicized, as in a sentence like *Policeman stoi na kornierze* (‘there’s a policeman standing at the corner’). The most important point for us is that the perception, classification and interpretation of the varieties concerned – the attribution of different degrees of salience to particular features, for instance, or the drawing of inferences about the language user from the form of language used – are operations extrinsic to the medium of language itself. The implicit concept of linguistic difference presupposes some concept of the integrity of the linguistic varieties which can thus be

different – something which the very data show to be an idealization. What can such metalinguistic idealizations be if not aspects of culture?

The human language faculty, as far as we know, is universal, and thus, in itself, a non-cultural aspect of human life. But like the biological necessities such as sleeping, eating and mating, it is taken hold of by culture and can therefore be fitted to cultural moulds and purposes. Within language studies there has been much debate over the question of “linguistic universals” – linguistic features common to all natural language (*e.g.*, Greenberg 1966; Comrie 1989). Strict linguistic universals are very few, and may simply be physiologically governed – *e.g.*, that all natural language uses a sound system containing both vowels and consonants. Much more interest has properly come to focus on so-called ‘universal tendencies’: namely recurrent features that are not found everywhere but whose frequency significantly exceeds what could be expected if language varieties could make a random choice from all the known options. An example is the preference for the element order SUBJECT-OBJECT (SO) in a transitive sentence, *e.g.*, ‘**Anthony (S) attacked Brutus (O)**’ (translating Cicero: *Antonius oppugnat Brutum*) (Comrie 1989: esp. 86–91). It is conceivable that the implicit normativity of the SO order represents a universal psychological predisposition to model relations on the clear and simple transitive relationship in which S as agent and initiator does something to O irrespective of O’s knowledge, compliance or consent. One consequence of this sort of grammatical structure is that in English (for instance) it is difficult to express easily any neutral position between the contrasting agent and patient roles of the speaker in a pair of sentences such as:

and: I thought that
That thought occurred to me.

Structural features shared over a range of Languages are the basis for forming groups in what is called “linguistic typology”. The question naturally arises whether there can be any significant correlation between linguistic type and cultural type: whether, in other words, in a given context non-linguistic aspects of culture, language and cognitive structures can be expected to form a mutually harmonious configuration. Relatively little, however, in the way of positive examples of such linkage has ever been suggested, and even less has been shown to be well founded. Some such suggestions have been made in respect of ergative/absolutive languages: languages in which the subject of an intransitive verb (a verb with a subject but no object), *e.g.*, “**I fell**”, is formally identified with the object of a transitive verb, “**someone pushed me**”. Michael Halliday is the most recent scholar to interpret such grammar as representing a world view characterized by concepts of continuity and equilibrium rather than cause, change and effect (Halliday 1994: 163–75 and 285–8). It has been suggested that such languages are appropriately characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies (Seely 1977: 196–7 and refs.; Plank 1979: esp. 16–28) but the proposition need be paid

little attention: ergativity is very rare amongst African languages, and survives in languages such as Basque millennia after any possible hunter-gatherer phase (I acknowledge with gratitude comments on this topic from Robert Blust, Larry Trask, Kevin Tuite and other colleagues on the ARCLING discussion list); moreover pseudo-ergative/absolute constructions are regularly created in notionally non-ergative languages through sentences using the “mediopassive” verb: *e.g.*, “**that field plants well**” (the association of this phenomenon with ergativity is, however, strongly disputed by R.M.W. Dixon [1994: 20–1]).

Worthy of more serious consideration appears to be a proposition that is superficially the corollary of the above but in practice is independent: that the development of modern science has been accompanied by linguistic changes in the form of the development and use of complex noun phrases and abstract nouns (*e.g.*, **radiation**: actually Halliday refers to this as the “objectification” of the phenomenon of an object emitting rays) and a wider use of causative verbs in active transitive sentences (Halliday and Martin 1993). However none of the features that Halliday and Martin identify as fundamental to modern scientific discourse in English are absent from much earlier varieties of English, and indeed if one looks at writing in the right contexts in the Middle Ages – *e.g.*, in theology and historiography, and in Latin as well as English – the same results appear to be achieved in ways so similar that the underlying *langue*, in Saussurean terms, can scarcely be claimed to be different. There is nonetheless a detectable difference between a more common medieval expository style with arguments of the form {*a* happens (=A-clause) because/therefore *b* happens (=B-clause)} and the style that is more common in modern discourse {*a* (noun phrase) causes/is caused by *b* (noun phrase)}. As an example of the latter, Halliday quotes Sir Isaac Newton’s *Opticks* of 1704:

“The usual Refraction is therefore perform’d by a original property of the Rays”.

A sentence from a famous Old English sermon of the year 1014 usually known as the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, in which Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, seeks to explain the suffering of the English at the hands of Danish Vikings, nicely illustrates both the typically medieval {clause+clause} structure and the capacity of Old English to construe and analyse experience through an eclectic use of abstract nouns:

...and us stalu and cwalu, stric and steorfa, orfcwealm and uncoðu, hol and hete and rypera reaflac derede swiðe þearle, and us ungylda swyðe gedrehtan, and us unwedera foroft weoldan unwæstma; forðam on þysan earde wæs, swa hit þyncan mæg, nu fela geara unrihta fela and tealte getreowða æghwær mid mannum.

(...and theft and killing, sedition[?] and plague, cattle-death and epidemic, malice[?], hatred and plundering by pirates have done us great harm, and immense taxes have greatly afflicted us, and terrible storms have too often ruined the harvest; because upon this earth, as one might discern, there has for many years now been much wickedness and wavering loyalty everywhere amongst the people.) (Text after Bethurum 1957: 255–60; translation by the author)

It is appropriate to go into some detail over this issue because the question of whether a different (and perhaps culturally relevant) style constitutes a different language itself emphasizes the complexity of the problem of identifying discrete Languages.

Language is perhaps most clearly an aspect of culture in its transmission through time and from generation to generation. This is self-evidently one of the most natural ways in which particular varieties of language come to be associated with clear, organically created and related, social groups. In the course of constant transmission, language can undergo consciously or subconsciously manipulative change, as, for instance, one generation passes on only a selection of the features it has learnt to the next. Such changes can have clear cultural implications, such as the abandonment of the singular/plural distinction of the second person pronoun (**thou/you**) in English even as intimate and polite forms of address respectively. It is not the case that the notion of politeness or that of friendliness in address in English became socially redundant, and indeed historically it was apparently a phase in which (for some social reason) the polite form was so frequently used, along with supplementary emphatic forms of address such as **Sir, Madam, Darling etc.**, in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, that allowed the **thou/you** system to evaporate. One can point out that some marked forms in a language are likely to be continually replaced so that the linguistic encoding of the context (*e.g.*, the need for politeness) remains clear. This, however, only means that the change in English in this case does not necessarily imply social change; it still implies the social determination of language change. Innovations too can be introduced into language for various symbolic and practical reasons and then spread from user to user. Linguistic divergency from a common source is the result of deletions and/or innovations in linguistic transmission that are restricted to particular groups or areas. It should be noted that it is well attested that languages can converge as well as diverge over time (Hock 1986: 491–512 and 556–67).

A widely used and slightly narrower definition of culture than that given at the start of this paper is that culture is socially acquired knowledge. This means that culturally specific behaviour is a response to – usually an imitation of – a known model or norm. Such information can be transmitted verbally or non-verbally. In so far as it is transmitted verbally, language appears not only as a feature of culture but also the medium of culture. There is, however, no conceptual problem in accepting that culture thus contains the means of its own transmission.

It seems in fact that we may create considerably larger problems for ourselves if we try to insist that language change is not cultural change than if we accept that it is. Unless we accept that linguistic change has at its root some contextually relevant explanation – *i.e.*, that it is purposeful, or “teleological” (see Anttila 1993) – we seem forced to the conclusion that the observable separation and divergence

of language varieties is the result of purely random and capricious drift or stasis. We cannot rely solely on some innate tendency of languages to change (*cf.* the discussion of the English **thou/you** structure, above) in predictable ways – *e.g.*, that all languages tend towards an SO element order, or to harmonize the vowel sounds in words – amongst many other reasons because that argument cannot account for divergency between the daughter-languages of a certain parent without our introducing contextual constraints to accelerate, delay, divert or thwart any such innate direction of change. It is thus difficult to see how the fact that language varieties take on distinctive forms can be regarded as anything other than a form of contextual adaptation and thus cultural, even if the significance or purpose of such adaptation is often totally obscure.

A widely discussed theory which implies a particularly close correlation between language, cognition and thought is that known as the “linguistic relativity” hypothesis (or, quite commonly, as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” because of the influence of the American scholars Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in its formation). In a stark “strong” form (which virtually only exists as an illustrative starting point for subtler discussions) this alleges that linguistic categories condition and thus control cognition and thought, and thus must control mentally directed behaviour. Serious discussion focusses only on measuring how widely relevant the “weak” form of the hypothesis is: that linguistic resources **influence** the patterns of human perception and reflection. While the strong version is a myth both in the sense that it is not true and in the sense that nobody seriously suggests it is true, the second version may be held to be weak in the sense that it is so obvious as to be a simple truism, and that empirical research designed to test its significance has shown that to be very limited indeed (Lucy 1992a; 1992b).

However, an important distinction in respect of this theory is that between “habitual thought” – what we might call instinctive responses – and “specialized thought”: self-conscious analysis and reasoning. In this, as in other cases of cultural-linguistic interrelationship discussed here, it can be argued, with empirical support, that linguistic inertia may hinder cultural adaptation. Thus the lower social-class population described by Basil Bernstein as being linguistically handicapped as well as deprived in various other ways could to a significant degree fail to make the most of the educational opportunities available to it through an inherited unfamiliarity with various forms of “privileged” grammar such as that of the discourse of science described by Halliday and Martin (1993) (Bernstein 1971–1992). Nonetheless the fact that language can adapt or be adapted, in some cases quite radically, to new requirements indicates that it can be governed by its cultural circumstances as much as it governs them. And the adoption of a certain language variety by some social groups and not by others self-evidently requires a social (and so by definition a cultural) explanation, not a linguistic one.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LANGUAGE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ARCHAEOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS?

The preceding section contains a brief survey of various ways in which language and culture can be understood to be correlated. In so far, then, as archaeology is concerned not just with material culture alone but with the total cultural system – even if, indeed, it is concerned only with the question of whether there actually is any such thing as a “total cultural system” – archaeology must be concerned with language history. Like any subsystem within culture, language has its own characteristics and principles of analysis, and these indeed are such as require considerable specialization to understand them. There is, however, nothing intrinsic to language that should privilege it over other aspects of culture in answering cultural-historical questions: for instance in tracing the history of genetically related populations, or defining ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, one crucial difference between language and material culture is that prehistoric – *i.e.*, unrecorded – stages of language history are reconstructable. This process is based largely on phonological principles (rules concerning sound-systems) and cognate words (words of common ancestry found in different Languages). It is easy to recognize that words in sets like Sanskrit *dvr*, Greek *θύρα*, Latin *foris*, Lithuanian *durys*, Welsh *drws*, Polish *drzwi* and English *door* are interrelated. From an understanding of human speech-sound production (“articulatory phonetics”) it is also a relatively easy matter to construct thoroughly plausible accounts of the mechanics of the changes that have taken place; and then even to infer certain persistent phenomena in sound-change itself – widespread tendencies if not all-embracing rules (Hock 1986 : 34–166). This eventually allows the extrapolation of further grammatically significant features such as ranges of noun endings, verbal tenses or aspects *etc.*, which are attributed to hypothetical parent languages such as Indo-European, creating the great “phyla” headed by the inferred ancestors of the observable data.

Linguistic reconstructions from comparative data are based on certain principles, principles which are empirically well founded and which within the discipline have to be applied with the consistency of rules. They are not, however, the sort of rules that guarantee the absolute veracity of the reconstructed language. It is nonetheless easy to understand why the opportunity thus provided by language to generate and add something into the picture of a poorly illuminated past, not just from fragments of material surviving from that time but from what are often masses of material surviving from later times, has led to prehistoric studies claiming the lion’s share of the joint study of archaeology and language. The brief analysis of the nature of language and culture outlined above implies that there is no need for what I propose to call archaeolinguistics to be confined to or even

dominated by that field. There are, however, considerable differences between the identifiable fields or stages of archaeolinguistics, governed principally by the degree to which the linguistic data concerned are observable or reconstructed. These stages represent different levels of contemporary knowledge. They should **not** be confused with the evolutionary stages of language posited by “stadialism”, although the two schemes should certainly be compared. There may be no single methodology applicable over the whole range of archaeolinguistics but the methods used and their underlying theory ought at least to be consistent, and it may be that more consistent questions could be asked of this branch of study too. I shall conclude with a very brief sketch of what I regard as six basic stages of archaeolinguistics with suggestions of the usefulness of comparing them, and thus conceiving this subject as an integrated whole. This scheme of six stages is no less of a convenient simplification of the material than any other analytical system discussed so far in this paper. As far as I am aware, however, it is a more elaborate and more general scheme than any hitherto constructed or proposed, and it will have served its purpose even if it has only a transient place in the development of a more comprehensive archaeolinguistics.

STAGE I: THE CONTEMPORARY FIELD

As is implicit throughout what has preceded, the consideration of “language and culture” is fairly commonplace in modern linguistics. It has been developed most extensively and systematically in sociolinguistics: the study of correlations between linguistic variation and the complexity of the social context. From such studies it has become widely accepted that linguistic variation – often socially governed – is often the start of more general linguistic change, and so a diachronic dimension has been added to the subject, albeit of very short range: restricted, in effect, to living memory (Milroy 1992, 1993; Labov 1994). The archaeological counterparts of sociolinguistics are ethnoarchaeology and the sociology of material culture. I am not aware of any studies of the correlation between language and material culture in this field at any more general level than incidental observations in the case of analyses specially focused on particular groups, places or domains. Within this field it appears that the very volume of data available emphasizes the artificiality of generalizations so much that the focus of study is practically inevitably highly localized – linguistically, focussed on the personal idiolect, local area dialect, or the sociolect of some small social group or gang.

STAGE 2: THE HISTORICAL FIELD

The second stage is that of the historical field, a field in which linguistic changes are attested in the form of observable data, their context is illuminated by historical (*i.e.*, documentary) sources, and the archaeological record is likely, for

various reasons, to be copious. The historical field is not, of course, a uniform and totally evenly illuminated entity, but the phenomena described here are common enough to render this a substantial and significant situation. In some contexts the available data may seem as overwhelming as in the contemporary field, encouraging a focus on discrete case studies; overall, however, this is a field that is open to a scholarly willingness to discern larger patterns in the events of the past than in those of the present. Work that has been done within this area shows the continuing dominance of social, economic and political aspects of cultural history, represented by documentary sources, over ideological history, symbolism and material culture (*e.g.*, Wright 1982; Romaine 1982; Görlach 1995: esp. 1–19 and refs.). This stage is of great potential importance as it is still, in respect of all the major elements of study (*i.e.*, history, archaeology and language), very much a field of the real not the hypothesized, albeit that this reality is analysed and represented through interpretative models. In so far as the historical past is seen as the source and precondition of the present it is also a very sensitive field. In relation, for instance, to nationalist versions of history, in which language often plays a major part as a token of ethnic identity, work in this field may be of value not so much by providing truer historical explanations of the present as by deconstruction, providing “de-explanations”: specifically by encouraging a greater sense of the multiplicity of operative factors, including convenience and artifice rather than nature or destiny, in the use and development of language through the past.

STAGE 3: THE PROTO-HISTORICAL FIELD

This can be regarded as a narrow but distinct field on the threshold of the historical field. It is particularly important as an intermediary stage between history and prehistory in archaeolinguistics. The linguistic data used are reconstructed, but are close enough to observable data for the reconstructions to have a very high degree of probability, not just as linguistic forms but also in terms of their inferred chronological and geographical location. The historical circumstances are usually likewise relatively secure on the basis of their proximity either to the historical period in the same context or to neighbouring, already historical, contexts (what Christopher Hawkes, 1954, christened “telehistorical” circumstances); over much of the world, of course, this field represents the very recent past. The archaeological record may be anything from rich to poor, but where available both its direct and its symbolic encodings of the cultural circumstances have to be included in the reconstruction. This stage is one of the “nearly real”: it is real enough for the experimental application of, say, sociolinguistically derived models to data, which can be evaluated simply in terms of how well they fit. Properly

reviewed and controlled, such experiments will also be valuable as a measure of how far our understanding of the modern world – which itself can be improved – can be applied to the obscurer past. The intermediary place of this stage also means that it is occasionally possible for chance finds of relevant material to corroborate or subvert previously formulated hypotheses.

STAGE 4: THE FIELD OF THE MAJOR PHYLA

I have resisted calling this stage the prehistoric field both because more than one prehistoric stage is to be identified and because to have done that would have been to give the stage a chronological status that is to be avoided. It is rather a pseudo-chronological entity. It is the field of the great reconstructed entities such as Indo-European, located configuratively by inference – *i.e.*, before their descendants, Common Germanic, Celtic, Slavonic, Baltic, Italic *etc.* – and conjecturally on the basis of the implied common word stock of the language. Generally these seem (I emphasize the word “seem”) to point to a context for the most unitary stages of the major phyla between 5,000 and 12,000 years ago (Renfrew 1991; Hegedűs, forthcoming).

There is, however, a crucial shift in the credibility of any reconstructed language between stages 3 and 4. From our understanding of how languages can change and forms can diffuse by influence there is no need for there ever to have existed a “Proto-Indo-European” Language like any particular variety of language we can experience in the contemporary or historical world, and thus no necessity for a geographical or chronological point of origin (see Lass 1993). Conversely we cannot exclude the possibility that there actually once was, at a particular place and date, a Language essentially identical with our reconstructed Indo-European, from which our modern and historical Indo-European languages have descended. We have to cope with a fundamental paradox in comprehending this field. Prehistoric linguistic reconstruction can only reasonably be based on principles inferred from observed language history. In respect of, say, divergency and convergency, this allows for widely differing conjectures. It is obviously impossible to verify in any way consistent with the empirical production of those principles that those principles still hold in the very different context (particularly in terms of the cultural circumstances and the spatial/chronological dimensions that may be involved) of the prehistoric fields. Perhaps the best general lesson to learn from this stage is that of how to balance quite substantial possibilities with equally substantial uncertainties. As in stage 3, it is possible that in the future archaeological and scientific advances, such as the mapping of demographic movement and influence through mDNA analysis, may significantly affect the range and character of reasonable reconstructions in this field.

STAGE 5: THE MACROPHYLA

Macrophyla are truly nebulous entities which postulate parents and grandparents for the hypothetical proto-languages of phyla such as Indo-European, Dravidian, Caucasian, Hamito-Semitic, Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, *etc.* They go under names such as Nostratic, Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Sino-Caucasian. Again these can be constructed (at this stage I prefer that term to reconstructed) in a properly principled manner on the basis of lexical, phonological and morphological correspondences. At this level, however, the quantity of evidence for relationship at a common source is so much attenuated that the postulation of whole ancestral linguistic systems and divergency and descent from a unitary source of this kind has far lower probability than in the field of the major phyla. There is as yet no consensus over the layout of the notional family-tree at this level. While there is no obvious reason to oppose on principle the proposition that there may be a number of identifiable linguistic roots, implied by now extremely widely distributed cognate forms, of such great antiquity, the location of hypothetical entities such as "Proto-Languages" of this stage in the far past of mesolithic, or more often palaeolithic, prehistory cannot safely be regarded as anything more than a culture-historical metaphor: it is simply a model that helps us to conceptualize the relationship between these constructs and the reconstructions and observable data discussed above.

STAGE 6: GENESIS

The apex of the ultimate macrophylum is Proto-World. At this stage the fundamental question of the evolution of language in relation to human evolution has to be addressed. This topic seems to lie utterly beyond the scope of empirical archaeology though not perhaps beyond primate biology; nonetheless a functional definition of human language and culture consistent with all that has been proposed above can be applied here to close the series. As articulately formulated by Gábor Győri (forthcoming), language can be seen as an instrument that aids the environmental adaptation of Man by allowing for complexity and flexibility in the perception of circumstances, their analysis, and the sharing of these responses. This is a satisfactory model because it comprises the biological, the psychological and the cultural in an understanding of what language is there for, and as individuals, groups and circumstances differ allows for linguistic difference as a predictable outcome of this essential and consistent – *i.e.*, truly universal – function of language.

CONCLUSION

As we pass back through the stages of archaeolinguistics we pass from real time and space into increasingly imaginary time and space. Despite this, all the stages can be placed within an integrated system of cultural history. Language as a cultural phenomenon is pre-eminently a medium for analytical thought and interpersonal communication. It is therefore always especially closely associable with significant trends in social and intellectual activity. The proposition that language may be a far more powerful and sensitive aspect of culture in these respects than any branch of material culture (Hines 1994) has serious implications for archaeology.

There are also useful critical comparisons to be made between all of the stages of this scheme. Generally, such comparison discloses the selective approach to the cultural:linguistic relationship taken in different contexts. Since, over much of the world, there are contexts in which different stages are encountered effectively side-by-side, a clear understanding of their relative character seems much to be desired. Above all, the comparison of the near and the far, the real and the hypothetical, in this system emphasizes the fundamental uncertainty of the earliest stages. That does not make the comparative undertaking merely a negative exercise in academic fault-finding. The "principle of uncertainty" argued for here in relation to the prehistoric phases helps one to perceive the artificiality of the attribution of group-defining status to linguistic varieties. The desire to establish and promote both Languages and Cultures on that basis has very much more significance as a palpable phenomenon of cultural history in the historical period than as a heuristic assumption on the part of scholars past and present. Properly understood, even as apparently bland a statement as that Languages and Cultures can be yoked to one another but are not intrinsically correlated has implications for the analysis of cultural history and politics up to and including the present day that are far from banal.

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