

I Döda Språks Sällskap

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This is a book by a young Swedish linguist addressing a general audience with the aim of conveying his personal passion for dead languages, i.e. languages which are longer spoken, or rather those that serve no speakers as their Native language. Most languages which are no longer were extinguished along with their last Native speakers, some of them lived on nevertheless because they served very important functions, mostly religious but not necessarily. Hebrew is the supreme example which served a religious purpose, in fact without it Judaism as a cultural and religious phenomenon would not have survived. Sanskrit serves a similar role in Hindu mythology, and Latin of course is so ubiquitous in Western society that the author feels no need to dwell on it specifically, but lets instead cousin languages come to the fore.

There are two strains to the authors fascination. One as a linguist when he is intrigued by the languages as such, the other as a historian, because those extinct languages not only opens up a door to the past and obscure cultures but are in themselves cultures. Given the intended audience, the emphasis is on the latter part. The languages are not chosen arbitrarily but are drawn from the people who lived in the Eastern Mediterranean, thus predominantly Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic. The book then proceeds with a long catalog of old languages which are discussed from a historical and linguistic point of view, with some repetitions, as if the text has not been too closely revised and monitored.

His first choice is Sumerian, supposedly the 'deadest' of all 'dead' languages, It is also the oldest he considers. But despite its age it was already a literate language, meaning one with a written script (most languages have no written script, except possibly a retroactively imposed one), in this case the cuneiform script written on clay tablets, of which there is a profusion, as those tablets are potentially immortal, being hardened by heat and fire¹. In fact the script was the earliest one, so the Sumerian who formed the Mesopotamian culture were the originators of Western civilization. The cuneiform script was in fact adapted to many languages, and they were not being deciphered until the 19th century, and Sumerian was not the first language deciphered, instead it was Old Persian and Akkadian, and the Sumerian did only appear at first as an incomprehensible one. Thus the discovery of Sumerian was an archaeological one. From a linguistic point of view, Sumerian is interesting as an isolate, meaning having no relatives. Admittedly most of the tablets are not interesting, or at least not arresting, mostly dealing with various keeping of accounts. Sumeria died out as a spoken language, possibly around 200 B.C. but kept its prestige, possibly because of its written language which inspired other languages such as Semitic Akkadian which replaced it. Now Sumerian is an ergative language, although not common to languages as a whole, a fourth of all languages actually are ergative. It means that the subject attains an ending not the object. The subject in an intransitive sentence (i.e. one

¹ Thus a fire in a library of clay tablets merely fixes them for eternity.

without an object) is treated like the object in a transitive sentence. Thus in Sumerian there is a strong distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs influencing the entire grammatical structure.

The Akkadian language that replaced the Sumerian, although as we have already noted, took over its writing form, with some necessary modification, was the language of the Assyrian and the Babylonians (of course with different dialects), and remained the major language of the Mesopotamian region for one and a half millenia, as a result there is an abundance of written material to be studied, yet the language remains unknown to most people. One of the major texts concern the laws of the King Hammurapi, draconian in spirit, and the well known 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' familiar through the Hebrew Bible, stems from this and not from the Bible. Akkadian is compared to Latin by the author, through its formal elaborate grammar and the combination of crudeness and poetic flexibility. Our knowledge of the Classics depend to a large extent of the texts which the Monks found worthy to copy, with Akkadian everything was preserved, and there are huge amounts as of yet untouched. Hence this gives us unique possibilities to really sample everyday life².

The remarkable thing about Hebrew is its close relation to religion, especially the Bible. In fact to Orthodox Jews it is a language only to be used in Biblical studies and religious observance, and it would be a sacrilege to use it in everyday life, thus the decision to use Hebrew as the national language of the new State of Israel was rather controversial, and the resurrection of a dead, religious language to become a Native one is also somewhat strange, but the movement to revive it as a living language goes back to the 19th century as a parts of Zionism (clearly Modern Hebrew differs significantly from traditional Biblical Hebrew, and this is of course inevitable, keeping in mind the uses it is put to). One may wonder what everyday language Jews used in the past if Hebrew was so sacred. In fact many other languages were used depending on location, so in the diaspora, Hebrew remained the main link between them. But as Jewishness is not a question of race but culture, and a culture which is religious if anything, Hebrew has been the language that have created and then sustained the Jewish culture for millennia, and through the Old Testament, it was also a language Christian ministers needed to know until Modern times³.

The Hebrew alphabet is not the original one used for the language, that was a form closer to Phoenician. The modern form was borrowed from the Aramaic during the captivity in Babylon during the 6th century B.C. Characteristic of the Hebrew script is that vowels are not written out, which is rather impractical, and hence special signs, at least for long vowels, came into use. Hebrew for all its sacredness is a typical Semitic language where the roots of a word is given by a sequence of consonants, and the cluster of words associated to it are formed by filling our with vowels or adding slight elaborations. Also old Hebrew did not have temporal variations, the imperfect versus the present was more

² One may compare this to the distinction between a photograph and a painting. Every detail in a painting has been chosen to be there on the canvas, but that is not necessarily true of the photograph, thus this fascination we have of the photographs as somehow more authentic representation of reality being unmediated.

³ Goethe even studied Hebrew in his youth as retold in his autobiography

a question whether an act was extended in time or not, later that would change.

As noted the Bible is what we foremost associate with Hebrew, and the Bible is a compendium of widely varied texts compiled during a period of a thousand years. The oldest ones are poetic in their nature, in particular the rather obscure songs of Deborah are considered the oldest texts in the Bible probably stemming from 1100 B.C. and then being orally transmitted until eventually being incorporated in the Book of Judges.

Coptic is another language not known to people in general. One could say that the old Egypt with its Pharaohs, survived through Coptic to modern times. Egypt was conquered by the Greeks during the Hellenic period, and Greek was the language of prestige, while Coptic was that of the masses. It acquired its own script and the ancient Hieroglyphs were forgotten. The important thing about Coptic is its Christian, in particular Gnostic, association, and in spite of Muslim dominance, which made Coptic obsolete as a spoken language, there is still a sizable Christian, i.e. Coptic minority, in Egypt. Thus most of its texts are religious in nature. Most notable are the Gnostic texts found in the Egyptian desert back in 1945. The Gnostic held that the material world is a prison created by a false God and his underlings who want to enslave men and keep them ignorant. Yet within them there remains a sparkle (gnosis) stemming from the true divine world, and through it people can connect to the real world lying beyond the physical. The analogy to Platonism is of course striking but could stem from an older (common?) tradition. The author notes that the worldview expressed in modern films like 'The Matrix' is just old Gnosticism revived.

Like all languages there are linguistic peculiarities to be expounded on. Scripts are only ways of encoding spoken language, and the author remarks that if a new script would be introduced to Swedish, forgetting about the old one, the encoding would probably introduce some surprises. In many Swedish dialects the object form 'henne' (her) is replaced by a short 'na' which becomes attached to a verb ('sgna' short for 'sg henne') and may in a new encoding appear as a mere ending on a verb, thus objects would be replaced by verb-endings. Many such real examples (as opposed to hypothetical as in the example above) can be observed in Coptic in connection with an entirely new form of script.

The author concludes that Coptic appears rather Modern in the sense of having a simple structure, in contrast to the complicated involutions of Latin or Classical Greek.

The Hittites formed a powerful empire in present day Turkey around 1600 BC. However, in spite of its former power and influence it went extinct some four hundred year later and was forgotten until it was rediscovered in the 19th century. The word 'Hittites' was familiar from the Hebrew Bible but that referred to another people. The language like Sumerian was discovered among cuneiform tablets. It is remarkable for being Indo-European, in particular the word for 'water' turns out to be 'watar'! This was a big surprise and forced the linguists to revive their hypotheses about older Indo-European languages which were based on Vedic and Ancient Greek. In particular there were a much less involved conjugations and the syntax turned out to be very different from what they had imagined an old Indo-European language would possess. Hence there were explanations to the effect that Hittites was not really an Indo-European language, if obviously related to it, explanations which are now being rejected.

It is also noted that the Hittites when they adopted the cuneiform script greatly

complicated it, which is natural when scripts designed for other languages have to be adopted to new ones. The disappointment is that there is no rich literature associated to it as there is with other Classical Indo-European languages such as Ancient Greek and Sanskrit.

What Hebrew is to the Jews, Sanskrit is to the Hindu. Not spoken, yet still widely used for literary and religious purposes. To its users it is a Holy language, the language of the Gods. While there is no Bible in Sanskrit there is literature, such as epics as Mahabharata, although it is a matter of convention whether a text should be considered religious or literary, much of the Bible for one thing consists of stories with no particular religious, as opposed to cultural, nature. The Mahabharata epic itself, like the Bible, is a compendium of stories and poems greatly varying in style, and can be put to similar uses.

It was the striking similarities between Sanskrit and European languages which started modern linguistic. The name to remember, but for some reason not mentioned in the book, is William Jones (1746-94) a judge stationed in India⁴ He may rightly be seen as the father of comparative philology, as illustrated by the following quote.

The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from a common source, which, perhaps no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family.

With Jones the idea that languages change and can be grouped into related families was born. He was also the founder and President of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, which set the precedent for similar societies all over Europe championing Asiatic cultures, in his case especially the Indian. The Sanskrit language is archaic, so at first one believed it would be the mother of all Indo-European languages, but as the previous discussion of the Hittite language shows, this is not true. Sanskrit is in fact an elite version of Old Hindu, and the name means 'well-ordered' and 'refined' which would indicate that it is a constructed language, and thus one may be tempted to conjecture that much of its sophistication is intentional and designed.

Sanskrit is also associated with a superior race - the Aryans - (*ryia*, meaning noble *del* in the more archaic Swedish) who came from the north and subjugated the more dark-skinned indigenous people. A notion that acquired a great deal of popularity but it turns out that the people closest to the Aryans today are the gypsies. Yet of course the stories of superior people and their military exploits play an important role in their mythology (just as the chosen people in the Jewish myths). Those stories were at first not written down

⁴ whose (much older) father incidentally was a mathematician mostly remembered for his introduction of the symbol π . Jones was as a child a linguistic prodigy, commanding a mastery of Latin and Greek superior to that of his teachers, both at school and at university. He is supposed to have had complete mastery of eight languages (including in addition to the obvious also Hebrew and Arabic), fluency in an additional eight, and great familiarity with a further twelve.

but orally transmitted by generations of people, as much value was laid on learning things by heart. This latter view was incidentally also shared by the Greek and Socrates regretted the advent of the script as it put less demands on people's memories, and hence made their relations to the texts less intimate. The author notes that although the transmission may have been faithful, the meanings of the texts eventually got lost and had to be explained to the Natives by Western scholars.

Nowadays Sanskrit is written in the Devanagari alphabet, just as is Hindi and Marathi. but it was not always so. There is a great variety of alphabets in India but they are all rather similar and can be traced back to the Brahmi script in which the emperor Asoka wrote down around 200 B.C his conversion to Buddhism apologizing for his military exploits. It is a script that notes the consonants with are supposed to be followed by the vowel 'a' which predominates among Sanskrit vowels, for others you do slight embellishments on the consonants. When it comes to pronunciation, the Sanskrit has the retro-flex sound, in which t, and d are pronounced with the tongue rolled back, which gives Indian English its characteristics (the sound has spread to most Indian languages and may have its origin in Dravidian languages).

One characteristics of Sanskrit is its predilection for compound words, and compounds of compound words, which lead to very complicated words. Sanskrit grammarians have classified compounds into several types, a classification that is also useful for other languages with the same habit, such as Swedish and German. The first type, referred to as *dvandva* means that the word AB means both A and B, such as in Swedish 'blgul' meaning something both blue (bl) and yellow (gul). The Sanskrit term simply means 'two-fold' or 'couple'. The second type *kharmadhraya* meaning that A is B, as in Swedish 'storskogen' where 'stor' stands for 'big' and 'skogen' for 'the forest', in other words the forest which is big. The third type *tatpuruṣa* then A and B are grammatically related to each other, say B being an object of A or is owned by A, and could as well had a preposition before it. Swedish examples are 'stolsben' (the leg (ben) of a chair (stol), chair's leg) 'kvinnohatare' (some one who hates (hatare) women (kvinnor), thus in English a women-hater). Finally the fourth *bahuvrihi* is the most complicated. It refers to something whose B is A. In Swedish we have 'dumskalle' meaning someone whose 'skull' (skalle) is stupid (dum). It is not the 'skull' which is stupid, but refers to a someone who is stupid, i.e. his head meaning his enclosed brain is stupid. Another example would be in 'Pippi Longstocking' (Pippi Lngstrump in the original Swedish title). It is not the s[t]ock which is long, but the person whose sock is long. As compounds can be compounded the verbal constructions can become quite complicated. As an example one can take *asru-purna-akula-iksana* meaning tear-full-confused-eye, which is a compound of two compounds 'asru-purna' which means filled with tears and akula adds to make 'filled with tears and confused' and the final word makes it into 'one whose eyes are tear-filled and confused'. This habit of forming compounds easily makes Sanskrit the language with most synonyms, because the number of synonyms to a compound AB will literally be the product of the number of synonyms of A and B, which by themselves can have many. This gives to the poet a great freedom when it comes to rhymes and meter. As an example the author presents the following column.

lotus	eye	lotus	eye
<i>kamala</i>	<i>netra</i>	<i>padma</i>	<i>nayana</i>

<i>pundariġa</i>	<i>caksus</i>	<i>saroja</i>	<i>ġksana</i>
<i>amburuha</i>	<i>aksan</i>	<i>arawinda</i>	<i>drsa</i>
<i>kairava</i>	<i>locana</i>	<i>indirlaya</i>	<i>ambaka</i>

Out of this we can of course build 64 *bahuvrġhi* compounds meaning those whose eyes are shaped like the leaves of lotuses. Most of the texts in Sanskrit are written in verse, and as indicated above, given the restrictions of any meter it is nevertheless possible to find words that fit into them. Thus Sanskrit verse becomes untranslatable. In fact the point of Sanskrit poetry such as *kvya* is not so much the presentation of new and striking meanings but to stick to standard themes and to express them by adhering to strict rules, thus a kind of sophisticated handicraft. The most extreme examples being text that can be read both backwards and forwards. One example constituting a summary of the epic *Mahbarata* read one way, but a summary of *Rmyana* read the other way. A kind of literary acrobatics practiced by Queneau but in its most extreme forms possible only in Sanskrit.

As noted in connection with *ryan* the Gypsies come from Northern India and their language *romani* is a vernacular form of Sanskrit, and through the gypsies some Sanskrit words have come into Swedish usage, such as *tjej* for girlish woman, *kille* for corresponding boyish man.

Intimately connected to Sanskrit is Old Persian, the languages have since diverged mostly because of the strong Arabic influence in Modern Persian, apart from the big influx of borrowings its alphabet is derived from the Arabic, and indistinguishable from it to the untutored eye. One should not forget that Persian was the official language of the Indian Moguls, Turkish Nomads that were civilized in Persia, thus further forging the links between the languages. Also Urdu, the lingua franca of Pakistan, is a persianised version of Hindi. Because of the close kinship one speaks specifically about Indo-Iranian languages. Old Persian though was written in a cuneiform based alphabet, but the meaning of the symbols very different though, and the system was much simpler (and more rational) than say in the Akkadian version. The Persian empire is often seen in the West as a despotic Oriental one vanquished by the Occidental Greeks signifying the ascendancy of Western civilization. The author notes that by the standards of the day it was very enlightened, for one thing introducing freedom of religion and encouraging multi-culturality, so much lauded today. For one thing the empire released the Jews from their Babylonian exile. As a language Old Persian shares with Sanskrit an involved system of conjugation of verbs and nouns, but unlike Sanskrit it shies away from compounds, and the syntax is rather simple and straightforward devoid of the sophisticated elaborations to be found in Greek, Sanskrit and Latin. There is not much of literature to be found either.

The book closes with discussions of Oscan, a close cousin to Latin, Etruscan, generally considered to be veiled in mystery, due to the scant sources, Gothic and Old Saxon, two Old Germanic tongues, but of course relatively recent in time when compared to the other ancient languages discussed in the book. Etruscan, although spoken on the Appenine peninsula, is not considered an Indo-European language, and due to the limited sources, it has not been easy to pinpoint its linguistic location as opposed to its geographical.

Gothic is the oldest form of a Germanic language we know of, and the only representative of East-Germanic, and thus for the linguist completing the picture of Germanic languages otherwise only known for their Western and Northern versions. The main source

for our knowledge of Gothic is through the translation of the Bible made by Wulfila (also known as Ulfila, meaning little wolf) in the 4th century. He also invented a script for it, dispensing with the Germanic runic system, allegedly too pagan, and instead basing it on Greek as that was the language of his ancestors (hence he was not a Goth himself). One particular notorious handwritten copy of it stems from Ravenna in the 6th century and eventually found itself in Prague from where it was stolen by Swedes during the Thirty Years War and is now located in Uppsala, where it is known as the Silver Bible (Codex Argenteus). Most likely there was a rich indigenous literary tradition among the Goths as you find in Germany and Scandinavia, but if so no traces of it remains. For a long time the Goths were thought of having originated in Scandinavia, especially in Southern Sweden, known in Swedish as 'Gotaland' and this spawned a lot of romantic notions in the beginning of the 19th century. The Goths formed great empires in Western and Southern Europe during the era of great migrations, but the official language used was Latin, and traces of Gothic words and expressions are rare indeed, in fact their once dominance left no tracks. The last traces of the language were to be found on Krim until the 16th century. It is as noted the most archaic Germanic language, still keeping dual forms, so 'we' is translated into 'wit' when it deals with only two people, but 'weis' if more, similarly for 'you'. Like Modern German conjugation of nouns, verbs and pronouns is elaborate. There are only two tenses, one for the present and one for the past, and the latter is formed in three ways not only two as in other Germanic languages. In addition to the weak form, adding an ending (in fact close to that of Modern Germanic language) and the strong form, involving a change of vowel (which also has survived in the Modern Germanic versions, such as in 'drink' and 'drank, but only involving a few, if common, verbs), there is also a so called reduplication, to be observed in other Indo-European languages such as Latin, where the initial consonant is duplicated in the front. When it comes to cases, Gothic has a fifth, in addition to nominative, genitive, accusative and dative as in Modern German, namely vocative. It can also be instructive to count in Gothic *ains, twaj, þreis, fidwor, fimf, saihs, sibun, ahtau, niun, taihun, ainlif, twalif*. Of particular interest are the last two, namely eleven (elf, elva) and twelve (zwlf, tolv). *ainlif* means literally one left (over) and *twalif*, two left (over). One may also note the words for 'hundred' and 'thousand' namely *hunda* and *þusundi*, if as linguists are prone to do, you speculate that *sundi* is a variant of *hunda*, then one may guess that the word for a thousand originally meant a big hundred. The author concludes by remarking that Gothic is a typical Germanic language sharing all the qualities which set those languages apart from the other Indo-European ones.

The final chapter is devoted to Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, the language of the Germanic invaders. This choice stands out a bit, as it should be rather well-known for any student of English. The noteworthy thing is that Old English is slightly more understandable to Scandinavian speakers than to Native English ones, due to the transformation English suffered during Norman times. The diphthongs in English are of a later period, and the strange spelling of English, which disconcerts many beginning users, at least initially, is actually archaic and hints at old pronunciations. *dead* e.g. was initially pronounced 'de-add', and it is reasonable to believe that the mute 'k' in *knee, knight, knit, knot, knife, know, knead* etc was pronounced just as in Swedish 'kn, knekt, knut, kniv'. Also the 'ght' as in *bought, fright, thought* indicates a once guttural sound as in Modern Dutch. Old

English still has kept the typical Germanic conjugations and the four cases, sometimes supplemented by the instrumental, which has totally evaporated in the modern variant. As in many Germanic languages there were only two tenses, the latter use of 'have' and 'had' is a more recent invention as in Swedish and German. Old English were brought to Celtic Britain by the Angles and the Saxons (cf Sachsen i.e. Saxony) and fought among each other, finally settling down to seven kingdoms Wessex, Sussex, Essex (with obvious connections to Saxon) as well as East Anglia (with a wink to the Angles) and finally Kent, Mercia and Northumberland (with no such obvious connotations). By the time they were united they had another Germanic player to contend with, namely the Vikings, whose contributions to the English language actually penetrated its very core, namely involving replacements of their basic pronouns.

The author concludes with the pious hope that at least some reader would be inspired to try and learn an old dead language, and thereby making it a bit less dead.

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