Prologue: the Long View

We do not know for certain how old human language, as we understand it, is. Lieberman (2008: 359) argues for a date in the Upper Palaeolithic around 50,000 bc as the ‘start-point for fully human linguistic capacity’ [my italics]. Dixon (1997: 2) mentions 100,000 years as a possibility for the age of human language. Evans (2010: 14) suggests that language dates back to ‘long before’ 150,000 years ago. Foley (1997: 73) says that ‘language, as we know it, was born about 200,000 years ago’. And Dediu and Levinson (2013) argue, on the basis of their supposition that Neanderthals and Denisovans also had language (a possibility specifically excluded by Lieberman, and others), that it might even be 500,000 years. Whatever the answer may be, however, we are at least justified in describing human language as having been with us for ‘a very long time indeed’.

One of the points that I try to make in this book is that there are a number of linguistic phenomena which we can only fully understand by recognising (with Dahl, 2004) that some linguistic features take a very long time indeed to develop; and that there are other features which can be fully understood only by looking back at linguistic situations and events that occurred a very long time ago indeed.

Until relatively recently, historical linguistic research did not typically probe too far into the prehistoric linguistic past, not least because of the constraints which were imposed by the comparative method. But increasingly scholars are thinking back into the Neolithic, Mesolithic and Palaeolithic. For example, papers on the American-Siberian Dene-Yenisean connection in Kari and Potter (2010), following pioneering research by Edward Vajda (2010a, 2010b), discuss dates as far back as 14,000 bc; and Fortescue, in his Language Relations across the Bering Strait: Reappraising the Archaeological and Linguistic Evidence (1998), similarly discusses remote linguistic scenarios. So do the contributors to Bengtson (ed.) (2008) In Hot Pursuit of Language in Prehistory. Foley likewise goes back many millennia in his discussion of a possible genetic relationship between Australian languages and the Eastern Highlands languages of New Guinea (1986: 269ff.). And the language of hunter-gatherers – albeit mainly contemporary hunter-gatherers – is the subject of Güldemann et al. (2019).

In any case, whether we are talking about 100 millennia, 200 millennia or 500 millennia of human language history, it is clear that nearly all of the linguistic past took place in Old Stone Age societies; and that nearly all the rest of the linguistic past took place in New Stone Age societies. And even the New Stone Age did not see too much: if the earliest date for the beginning of the Neolithic anywhere in the world
was around 10,000 BC, then human languages were spoken during the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods for 90 per cent to 98 per cent of their history, depending on whether we go with Dixon or Dediu and Levinson. And if the earliest date for the end of the Neolithic anywhere in the world was around 4000 BC, then human languages were spoken in stone-age communities – neolithic and pre-neolithic combined – for 96 per cent to 99 per cent of their history. Post-stone-age societies have therefore had, in comparison, rather little of human language history; and so it makes sense for linguistic scientists to ponder over the issue of what stone-age languages were like.

Someone who has done some pondering is Comrie (1992). He hypothesises, in his paper ‘Before complexity’, that there must have been an earlier language state which was ‘typologically distinct from attested languages’ in that it was ‘less complex’ than attested languages. He makes a very persuasive case. He points out that there is a widespread belief amongst linguists that certain linguistic phenomena always develop from earlier linguistic states which those phenomena are absent from. For example, it is accepted that so-called tone languages such as Chinese acquired tone through tonogenesis. This is a process whereby pitch begins to be used contrastively where it was not so used before (i.e., phonetically conditioned non-contrastive pitch differences become contrastive through the loss of some conditioning environment). ‘We have solid evidence for the origin of tonal phenomena in nontonal phenomena: all tonal oppositions in language have nontonal origins’ (Comrie 1992: 207). Word tones have frequently appeared under the influence of the laryngeal articulations of adjacent consonants (see Haudricourrt 1954). Kingston (2011) shows the following tonogenesis path for the modern Vietnamese monosyllable pa:

*pa > pa [high level tone]
*pas > pa [high falling]
*ba > pa [low level]
*bas > pa [low falling]

We can therefore assume with some degree of certainty that the very earliest prehistoric languages were not tone languages.

Two other absentees from these earliest of languages will have been nasal vowels and morphophonemic alternations. It is widely agreed that contrastive nasal vowels always arise from earlier sequences of oral vowel plus nasal consonant, where the vowel first becomes allophonically nasalised and then the nasal consonant is lost, as with French vin /vâ̂n/ from Latin vinum. Given that this is the case, we can assume that the very earliest languages did not have nasal vowels. Similarly, morphophonemic alternations such as English mouse–mice always arise from earlier states where there were no such alternations. In the specific case of mouse–mice, the earlier pre-umlaut stage consisted of singular mûs versus plural mûsiz. We can therefore similarly suppose that the world’s earliest languages had no such alternations.
In my own work, I have suggested that insights into the nature of prehistoric languages may be gained from work in sociolinguistic typology, a theme I will take up at greater length in Chapter 1 of this book, ‘Prehistoric Sociolinguistics and the Uniformitarian Hypothesis: What Were Stone-Age Languages Like’. The point is that there are many obvious respects in which the structure of palaeolithic, mesolithic and neolithic societies was very different from the structure of contemporary societies; and that this social fact might be reflected in certain aspects of the structures of these languages, as a sociolinguistic fact. The demographies of stone-age societies were very different from those of the modern age. Communities then were very small: Mailhammer (2011: 672) suggests that people lived in groups of 25 to 100 during the final stages of the European Palaeolithic. Because of that, social network structures would have been dense, and there would have been large amounts of communally shared information. There were also far fewer communities. Hassan (1981), as quoted by Nettle (1999: 102), reckons that the human population of the entire world 70,000 years ago was 1,200,000 – about the same size as modern Prague or Adelaide. Biraben (1979) suggests an even lower figure of 500,000 for 40,000 BP [Before Present]. Such estimates are obviously subject to large margins of error, but, in any case, the average density of population in the inhabited parts of the globe at that time was very low indeed compared to today. It would of course be an error to imagine a scenario in which the population of Prague was spread out evenly across the entire globe, because obviously there would have been uninhabited zones as well as particular concentrations in different areas. But this thought experiment does make the point that, in the Middle Palaeolithic, there would have been a much lower degree of intergroup contact than today, and therefore a much lower degree of language contact. And even by the Mesolithic period, population density was still astonishingly low by modern standards: Mallory (2013) reports research indicating that the population of Ireland in the Mesolithic – which in Ireland lasted from c. 8000 BC to c. 4000 BC – was about 3,000, or about 0.04 people per square kilometre (i.e., 25 square kilometres (c. 10 square miles) per person), with comparable figures for elsewhere in the British Isles including, for example, a possible total population of 800 for Wales.

A number of other distinguished linguists have also been pondering over various different aspects of linguistic prehistory. Vennemann (2010a), for example, has argued that the first important language-contact events which have significance for modern western European languages took place a very long time ago indeed: his story begins way back in prehistory at the end of the last Ice Age, so perhaps around 8000 BC. The scenario which Vennemann outlines goes as follows: during the last glacial period, the only area of western Europe where human habitation was possible was the Franco-Cantabrian Refugium. This was an area which stretched from the Asturias region, in northern Spain, to Provence in southern France (Gamble 1986). As the Ice Age was ending, there was a gradual repopulation of the northwestern part of the European continent, as the ice receded. This
repopulation, as climatic conditions became more favourable, took off from southern France, the only area north of the Great Divide – the barrier which was posed to easy movement and migration by the Pyrenees and the Alps – where human habitation had been possible during the glacial period.

Vennemann’s theory is exciting and ‘provocative’ (Baldi & Page 2006: 2184), and is also quite naturally highly controversial. I cannot do justice to his extensive argumentation and linguistic exemplification here, but Vennemann hypothesises that the people who were involved in this Mesolithic migration out of the Franco-Cantabrian Refugium were speakers of Vasconic – a language from which modern Basque, the only language truly indigenous to western Europe, is descended. In time, Vasconic came to be spoken in ’almost all of western, central, and northern Europe’ (Vennemann 2010: 388). Eventually, there must have been, one supposes, a number of Vasconic varieties in western Europe: Mailhammer (2011) writes that it was only when Europe was repopulated, mainly from the continent’s south-west, that people and languages were given space to go off in separate ways. Mailhammer then supposes that this state of affairs continued for a few thousand years until the arrival of the Indo-European languages. In other words, the first significant language contact events which subsequently took place in western Europe, and which have present-day relevance, were those which occurred, during the late Neolithic and/or early Bronze Age, between Vasconic and the languages of the first Indo-European speakers, as these arrived from the east.

In this book, albeit from a mainly sociolinguistic perspective, I follow Comrie and Vennemann in attempting to take a long view of language change processes, their genesis and their consequences. In Chapter 3 ‘First-Millennium England: a Tale of Two Copulas’, I note an attempt to account for aspects of the structures of certain modern western European languages in terms of a form of inheritance from Proto-Vasconic, which might perhaps ultimately go very far back in time. According to Vennemann, the Urheimat – the ‘cradle’ or primeval home of Vasconic – lay very close to the current modern Basque homeland, and dates back to maybe 12,000 BC.

Less remote in time, but still a matter of a distance of many millennia, was the genesis of the Proto-Eskaleut (Eskimo-Aleut) language, which seems to have arisen around the Bering Strait perhaps five millennia ago (Fortescue, 1998; Fortescue & Vajda, fc.). And it does indeed seem to be necessary to go back a very long way, as I do in Chapter 2 ‘From Ancient Greek to Comanche: on Many Millennia of Complexification’, in order to account for the degree of complexity demonstrated by the polysynthetic languages which descend from Proto-Eskaleut. This protolanguage (which Dumond (1987) dates to some time between 4000 and 2000 BC) has been suggested by Bergsland (1986) to have begun to separate into Eskimo and Aleut around 1000 BC. And, according to Fortescue (1998) and Fortescue and Vajda (fc.), Proto-Eskaleut itself can be argued to descend from Proto-Uralo-Siberian, which dates back to 8000–6000 BC.
The Native American Indian language Comanche, which is another of the topics treated in Chapter 2, is a member of the Numic language branch of the Uto-Aztecan family, with the Proto-Uto-Aztecan family being thought to have come into being in what is now southern Arizona, southern New Mexico, northern Sonora and northern Chihuahua, in around 3000 BC. The development of certain of the characteristics of this language, too, will be argued in Chapter 2 to be comprehensible only if a very long view is taken.

The same is also true of data I present in Chapter 2 from Klamath, a language which has sadly been extinct since 2006, but which was formerly spoken in the USA around the shores of Klamath Lake in southern Oregon and northern California. This language, along with Nez Perce, Molala and Sahaptian, has been argued to be a member of a probable or possible Plateau Penutian family of languages spoken on the Columbian Plateau of eastern Washington state and north-central Oregon. The status of any broader ‘Penutian’ language family is a matter of some considerable doubt, dispute and discussion (see DeLancey & Golla 1997; Shipley 1980), but for the Plateau Penutian family (Berman 1996) there is some evidence, according to Cressman (1956), for continuous occupation of the Klamath Lakes region dating back to about 5000 BC.

The Austronesian language family is the main focus of Chapter 6 ‘Deep into the Pacific: the Austronesian Migrations and the Linguistic Consequences of Isolation’. The homeland of the Proto-Austronesian language has been securely located to the island of Formosa/Taiwan (Blust 2009), and is generally dated to approximately 4000–3500 BC (Nichols 1997; Greenhill et al. 2010). In Chapter 6, I take a long view of Austronesian languages geographically as well as chronologically, given that a number of rather impressive phonological developments occurred in this language family as its speakers, over periods of several millennia, gradually spread from Formosa out across the thousands of square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean.

It is also relatively easy to take a very long view of Greek. The 3,500 (albeit not entirely unbroken) years of written records we have of Greek (Horrocks 2010) quite naturally invite a long view of its history. Proto-Greek has been located by Georgiev (1981) to northwestern Greece and southern North Macedonia and Albania (as Indo-European speakers spread southwards into the Balkans) and to a date of around 2500 BC. Various aspects of Greek language history are discussed at some length here in Chapter 2, as well as in Chapter 7 ‘The Hellenistic Koiné 320 BC to 550 AD and Its Medieval and Early Modern Congeners’.

The Celtic languages appear to descend from a proto-language which was located in Central Europe around 1300 BC. The Proto-Celts are often identified with the archaeological Urnfield culture dated 1300 BC–750 BC and located in an area stretching from western Hungary through what is now Austria and southern Germany to eastern France. According to MacAulay (1992: 1):
The earliest named Celts (in Greek and Latin sources) are associated with two major Central European Iron Age cultures, the Hallstatt, dated to the seventh century BC, and La Tène, dated to the fifth century BC. The archaeological evidence suggests a cultural continuity backwards through the late Bronze Age Urnfield Culture with no material evidence that the Celts were newcomers to the region. [my italics]

The Celtic languages come into the discussion in a major way in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book, where I argue that the structure of English may well have been influenced by speakers of Celtic languages as a result of language contact situations which occurred, not only in Britain in historical times, but also in continental Europe before – and in some cases long before – the arrival of Germanic-speaking peoples on the island of Britain.

Proto-Finnic has been argued to date to around 1000 BC (Sammallahti 1977: 131–3), with its speakers having been situated in the zone around the shores of the Gulf of Finland, between Finland and Estonia (Itkonen 1983). Finnic appears in these pages in Chapter 2, where I discuss millennia-long developments in Finnic including phenomena associated with the putative ‘morphological cycle’. Finnic descends from Proto-Uralic, which dates back to 4000 BC (Nichols 1997) and quite possibly beyond that to Proto-Uralo-Siberian (see above), as judiciously argued by Fortescue (1998).

This book itself is written in a tongue that is a member of the Germanic language family, which is treated in a number of places in this book: in Chapter 4 ‘The First Three-Thousand Years: Contact in Prehistoric and Early Historic English’; in Chapter 5 ‘Verner’s Law, Germanic Dialects, and the English Dialect “Default Singlars”’; and in Chapter 8 ‘Indo-European Feminines: Contact, Diffusion and Gender Loss around the North Sea’. The Urheimat of Germanic is thought to have been located, perhaps around 2000 BC, in southern Scandinavia; but the developments involved in Verner’s Law, having occurred some time after 2000 BC, are still having consequences in modern Germanic dialects today, three or four thousand years later, as I show in Chapter 5. And in Chapter 8, I discuss how and why feminine grammatical gender, having arisen as a new grammatical category in Proto-Indo-European perhaps 6,000 years ago, has now disappeared – or is in the process of doing so – in Germanic languages spoken all around the shores of the North Sea.