

Lingo

A language spotter's
guide to Europe

Gaston Dorren

*With contributions by
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and Alison Edwards (translation)*

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Introduction

What Europeans speak

The attitude of English speakers to foreign languages can be summed up thus: let's plunder, not learn them. A huge proportion of English vocabulary is of French, Latin or otherwise non-native origin. But the natives have never had much of a taste for acquiring a foreign language in its entirety. 'Anything short of speaking the language I shall be delighted to undertake', Dickens had Mr Meagles say in *Little Dorrit*, while a century and a half later, British comedian Eddie Izzard explains his country's monolinguals: 'Two languages in one head? No one can live at that speed.'

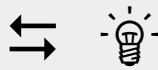
These are caricatures, of course, but the British passion for language, though intense, generally takes form in a somewhat exclusive fascination for English. Not only are the British incorrigible punners and ardent crossword puzzlers, but many are also enthralled by the history and diversity of the native tongue. And while the British love to complain about its quirky grammar and inconsistent spelling, I wonder how many would really want it otherwise. All this weirdness makes for excellent stories. What more could one wish for?

INTRODUCTION

Well, how about the life of other languages? In both their spoken and written forms, Europe's scores of languages may sound and look forbidding, but the stories about them are compelling. This book sets out to tell sixty of the best. You will hear how French, seemingly so mature, is really guided by a mother fixation. You will discover why Spanish sounds like a submachine gun. And if you thought German spread across Europe at gunpoint, prepare to be proved wrong. You will also venture further afield, as we explore the oddly democratic nature of Norwegian, the gender-bending tendencies of Dutch, the bloody battles fought over Greek and the linguistic orphans of the Balkans. Yet further off the beaten track you will be guided to the ancient heirlooms of Lithuanian, the snobbery of Sorbian and the baffling ways of Basque. And believe it or not, some of Europe's most incredible language stories are to be found right on Britain's doorstep – outlandish and inlandish at the same time, so to speak, in the islands' Celtic and travellers' tongues.

Lingo is a guidebook of sorts, but in no sense an encyclopedia: while some chapters are short portraits of entire languages, others centre on an individual quirk or personality. It is intended, as the French so enticingly put it, as an *amuse-bouche*.

Gaston Dorren, 2014



These two **symbols** are used at the end of each section, mainly to entertain. ⇄ introduces a word or two that English has loaned from the language under discussion, while 💡 highlights a word that doesn't exist in English – but perhaps should.



PART ONE

Next of tongue

Languages and their families

Europe's two big language families are Indo-European and Finno-Ugric. The lineage of Finno-Ugric is fairly straightforward, as are its modern variants (Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian). But the pedigree of the Indo-Europeans is a real tangle that ranges through Germanic, Romance and Slavic languages, and more. In some respects, though, its story is like any other family saga, complete with conservative patriarchs (Lithuanian), bickering children (Romansh), spitting-image siblings (the Slavics), forgotten cousins (Ossetian), orphans (Romanian and other Balkan languages) and kids who find it hard to cut the apron strings (French).

1

The life of PIE

Lithuanian

Once upon a time, thousands of years ago (nobody knows quite when), in a faraway land (nobody knows quite where), there was a language that no one speaks today and whose name has been forgotten, if it ever had one. Children learned this language from their parents, just as children today do, and they in turn passed it on to their children, and so on and so forth, for generation after generation. In the course of all the centuries, the old language underwent constant change. It was a bit like Chinese whispers: the last player hearing something quite different from what the first actually said. In this case, the last players are us.

And not only those of us who speak English, of course. Those who speak Dutch, too – which is practically the same thing. And German, which is not so different either. And Spanish and Polish and Greek, because if you look closely enough you'll see that even they look a bit like English. Further afield there are other languages, like Armenian and Kurdish and Nepalese, where you have to look quite a bit harder still to see the family resemblance. But each and every one of them emerged from a language that

was spoken by a people whose name we don't know, perhaps sixty centuries ago. And because no one knows what their language was called, a name has been invented for it: PIE.

PIE stands for *Proto-Indo-European*. This is not a perfect name. The word *proto* ('first') implies that no language preceded it, which is not the case, while the label 'Indo-European' suggests a language area that's confined to India to Europe. In fact, almost everyone in the Americas speaks a language that's descended from PIE, while in India more than 200 million people speak languages that have no historical ties to PIE at all. That said, more than 95 per cent of Europeans now speak an Indo-European language – in other words, a language evolved from PIE.

PIE and its speakers are shrouded in the mists of time, but linguists are working hard to dispel the fog by reconstructing how PIE may have sounded, on the basis of its descendants. Old documents in ancient languages such as Latin, Greek and Sanskrit are particularly useful for this, but there's a role for more recent sources, too, ranging from Irish ogham inscriptions (fourth century) and the Old English *Beowulf* (ninth century or thereabouts) to the first written remnants of Albanian (fifteenth century) and even modern Lithuanian dialects.

To reconstruct the PIE word for 'tongue', for example, linguists will look at the words that these later languages use, such as *lezu*, *liežuvis*, *tengae*, *tunga*, *dingua*, *gjuhë*, *käntu*, *język* and *jihva* (taken from Armenian, Lithuanian, Old Irish, Swedish, Old Latin, Albanian, Tocharian A, Old Slavic and Sanskrit, respectively). At first glance these have little in common. But if you compare series like these in a systematic way, all sorts of patterns emerge. It gradually becomes clear that language A has changed ('corrupted', if you like) PIE words consistently in one way, whereas language B has changed them consistently in another. Once you've identified these processes, you can work your way back to the original word.

LITHUANIAN



A MAP OF EUROPEAN LANGUAGES (1741) WITH THE FIRST LINES OF THE LORD'S PRAYER IN LITHUANIAN.

This kind of detective work has yielded a great deal of information. Unfortunately, though, the results are not greatly enlightening for non-linguists. 'Tongue', as it turns out, appears to have been **dn̥ǵʰwéh₂s* in PIE. The asterisk here signifies that the word has been reconstructed on the basis of later languages. The other characters all represent a sound – but as to *which* sound, only specialists can tell (and, even for them, some sounds remain obscure). The result, in short, is rather abstract and not readily comprehensible.

Is there any way to bridge the divide between the language of our distant ancestors and ourselves? Can we not make PIE more accessible, its speakers more human? Can we bring the language and the people to life? The answer is yes, to some extent. And Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, is a good place to do it.

Vilnius is the birthplace of Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994), a linguist who, in the 1950s, came up with the so-called 'Kurgan

hypothesis', which located the speakers of PIE in the vast steppes north of the Black and Caspian seas (today's Ukraine and southern Russia) around 3700 BC. 'Kurgan' is a Turkic word for a tumulus, and is applied to ancient burial mounds that are found all over this region. Gimbutas proposed that the culture that produced some of these mounds – a culture sufficiently developed to have tamed horses and even ridden chariots – would have been the source of PIE. Though her theory is not entirely uncontroversial, the gist of it has gained wide acceptance.

And if you're keen to get up close and personal with PIE, Vilnius is your best destination, because of all the world's living languages, Lithuanian is the one that most closely resembles PIE. Today's Lithuanians might not be able to chat with the Indo-Europeans of old, but they would be able to get a grip on the language a lot faster than a Greek or Nepali, let alone a Brit. The similarities are many. 'Son', for example, is *sūnus* in Lithuanian and **suh₂nus* in PIE. *Esmi* in PIE means 'I am', as it does in some Lithuanian dialects (though the modern standard language of Vilnius uses *esu* instead). The Lithuanian language has preserved the sounds of many PIE words, while other languages have moved on – in the case of English, in a move so drastic that it's known as the Great Vowel Shift. Consider the word 'five', for example. Both the English word and the Lithuanian *penki* are descendants of **penk^we*. But only an expert can spot any resemblance between **penk^we* and the English 'five', while anyone can see the likeness in the Lithuanian word.

Perhaps even more striking are the grammatical similarities. PIE had eight cases, and Lithuanian still has seven. Other languages, such as Polish, also have seven cases, but only in Lithuanian do the cases still sound a lot like those in PIE. Similarly, like PIE, some Lithuanian dialects have not just the regular singular and plural forms, but also a special 'dual': a

LITHUANIAN

plural referring specifically to two things. This is rare among modern Indo-European languages, Slovene being the major – and proud – exception.

Verb conjugations, syntax, emphasis patterns, suffixes – many features of Lithuanian testify to its PIE origins. All of them have survived for two hundred generations with relatively little alteration. Lithuanians, therefore, are the undisputed European champions of Chinese whispers.

↔ While PIE stands at the root of English, Lithuanian has handed almost no words to English. The word ‘eland’, for a South African antelope, may have come from Lithuanian (*ėlnis*) but only via Dutch and German (where it means ‘elk’).

☼ *Rudenėja* – the Lithuanian word for the beginning of autumn, as manifested in nature.

2

The separated siblings

Finno-Ugric Languages

What language do Finnish tourists in Hungary speak? ‘English’ might be your immediate answer, and you would probably be right. Finnish and Hungarian are related (they belong to the Finno-Ugric family, sometimes known as the Uralic), but they are simply too different for Finns to have a hope of making themselves understood in Budapest if they stick to their mother tongue. This linguistic distance reflects not geographic distance, but historical distance. Living far apart needn’t be a problem – as Australians and the English prove. Spending a very long time apart, however, is a different proposition.

And the period of separation between the Finns and the Hungarians is a long time indeed: their linguistic ancestors went their separate ways more than 4,000 years ago. At that time, the changes that were to make English different from Russian and Greek and Hindi were yet to take place.

And yet, if you look very closely, there are many similarities between Finnish and Hungarian. For one thing, they have a few hundred so-called *cognates*, literally ‘born-together’ words,

which share the same origin. A famous sentence to illustrate this is ‘The living fish swims underwater.’ The Finnish translation is *Elävä kala ui veden alla*; in Hungarian it runs *Eleven hal úszik a víz alatt*. With other cognates, the resemblance can be rather less obvious. Historical linguists are positive, for example, that *viisi* and *öt* (‘five’) are cognate pairs, as are *juoda* and *iszik* (‘drink’), *vuode* and *ágy* (‘bed’), and *sula-* and *olvad* (‘melt’). But it’s not so clear to the rest of us, even to a Finn or Hungarian.

So how can linguists be sure that the connections are there? Well, there are some twenty other languages, most of them small and spoken in northwest Russia, that form a bridge over the abyss that separates Hungarian and Finnish. The word for ‘five’, for instance, takes on forms such as *viit* (in Estonian), *vit* (Komi), *wet* (Khanty) and *ät* (Mansi), a sequence that neatly joins the Finnish *viisi* to the Hungarian *öt*.

And vocabulary is of course just one aspect of language. When it comes to phonology (the sounds of a language) and grammar, the kinship of Hungarian and Finnish is easier to see. In terms of sounds, both have a large set of vowels, which is exceptional in itself. More tellingly, among these vowels are two that English and most other languages don’t have – they are equivalent to *eu* and *u* in French, or *ö* and *ü* in German. What’s more, both languages divide their vowels into two sets, and all vowels within each individual word have to belong to the same set. Finally, all words are stressed on the first syllable.

Finnish and Hungarian also share at least six grammatical features that are rare in Europe. Both of them ignore gender to the point where they have only one word for ‘he’ and ‘she’ (*hän* in Finnish, *ő* in Hungarian). Both have more than twelve cases. Both have postpositions rather than prepositions. Both have a great love of suffixes – a word along the lines of *establishmentarianistically*, consisting mostly of suffixes, wouldn’t raise an eyebrow. Possession is expressed not with a verb but with

THE SEPARATED SIBLINGS



THE FINNO-UGRIC WORLD – A SOMEWHAT LONELY AND DISCONNECTED PLACE IF YOU STRAY TOO FAR FROM FINLAND AND ESTONIA.

a suffix; instead of saying ‘I have it’, they say something that could be rendered in English as ‘it is on me’. And finally, numerals are always followed by a singular (‘six dog’ rather than ‘six dogs’); if the number has been made explicit, why go to the extra trouble of modifying what follows?

Surely all these similarities are enough to convince you that Finnish and Hungarian are siblings? But here’s a twist. Nearly all of the phonological and grammar similarities between these two are *also* shared by Turkish. So you could think there’s another family member here. And that’s exactly what linguists used to think, and some still do. Most, however, now feel that in spite of the similarities, the evidence is inconclusive. They prefer to keep Turkish separate from the other two, arguing that the similarities

are explained partly by chance, partly by influence. (Hungarians and speakers of Turkic languages have a history of contact that goes quite far back.)

Yet it *could* be true. We just can't be sure. If only there were languages, however small and endangered, to bridge the gap between Turkish and Hungarian. They may never have existed, or they've become extinct. We'll probably never know.

⇒ ⓘ For Finno-Ugric loan-words and words that ought to be imported into English, see the individual chapters on Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian and Sami.