Monday, September 5, 2011

Eric P. Hamp’s Email response to Jared Diamond Re

Let me state first of all my thanks to Jared Diamond for his having taken the time and care to make such an intelligent and understanding statement in a compact space regarding our recent work tracing the common basic linguistic ancestry across the Bering Strait. If I take particular issue with certain details in what follows it must not be held to dismiss, detract from, or withdraw my thanks for what he has written. I would merely like to add some remarks to clarify or perhaps correct a few details from the point of view of a linguist who will, I am sure, appear to some as dreadfully jealous of his terrain.

I highly commend Mr. Diamond's dismissal of Greenberg's Amerind and Nostratic formulations as well as application to all the world's languages. This statement does not mean that I attribute such judgment to other parts of my old friend Greenberg's fertile thought.

On page 292 the remarks alluding to Albanian really should be radically corrected since that language has been recognized as Indo-European since approximately Franz Bopp 1854. And I can attest that at the December meeting of the Linguistic Society in 1950 Sturtevant, having offered Albanian as an argument against Morris Swadesh presenting his current proposal regarding change, and argument, caused me, at Swadesh's request, to fill out Swadesh's list (compared to English) at the following lunch time. The result announced to the LSA after lunch was a perfectly good percent, even though Sturtevant opined that he did not believe it.

I might remark regardless of the P factor reported for Uralic and I-E the features entering for this result do not, in my opinion, adequately dim a residual possibility of claimed relationship here. A reader of the work in review will perhaps note that my list of criteria does not include this factor.

Four language families are mentioned as separating the two in question. Any such number will clearly not tell us relevantly about genetic relation.

Neither the one 1923 cognate nor the later set of examples could be used as evidence. What Vajda has found as a rigorous footing is quite different in substance from sheer numbers. He has identified systems of tones and complex strings of particular entities. These entities are not necessarily out of place in Siberia; their precise composition is nowhere matched, as is then later said, whereas the trans-Bering correspondences recur in detail What that paragraph goes on to say is the core of the entire argument. Notice then that neither statistics nor simple similarities count for really anything as criteria in such long-range comparison.

Mr. Diamond then properly raises some geographic questions, and fortunately answers to these appear to be fitting. To the last question, I would say the short answer is "by conquest."

Coming to the two questions Mr. Diamond asks, I would suggest that we can first of all reject the 5000 figure as leaving us too little room for certain cultural complexities. Therefore we must be grateful to our geological, archaeological and anthropological colleagues for now providing us with
the larger number. We then assume that our Athabascanist colleagues are correct in saying that their culture permits remarkable conservatism.

But I would also suggest that the kinds of change that happened came about in a fashion that we might call optimal. That is, what occurred managed to preserve sufficient maximal portions of form so that over time we are able to see enough parts of a sequence to hang the rest on. Such a result is heavily a matter of good luck for us.

For an example of such a result more familiar to many of us, take a look at Lithuanian, where almost every syllable pronounced by a pre-Indo-European before the Hittites, about 7000 years ago, is still heard today. An Albanian in the same time has managed to slur almost every syllable but one of each word and to scrunch to surprising shapes or absolute zero half or more of the consonants. When we know enough about the interim, we can with practice guess even at every step of the interim. You may ask why is an Albanian, or his grandpa, so sloppy? Well, ask (over a friendly ale) a Dane where half his consonants slipped away to. He'll probably ask, in reply, do you want me to sound like a fussy stuffy Swede?

And we can construct sketch rules to solve new problems. But we have few general rules to begin to apply in a given case; and many tiny rules over centuries and millennia. And we continuously apply improvements to our two hundred years now of rule-governed inferences.

And there are already orderly avenues of inference towards further trans-Bering relations; see other work of Mr. Fortescue.

Thank you Mr. Diamond for your patience and care. I'm afraid we can't promise you a daily diet of such happy news. Please note that Ed Vajda is every day also a distinguished Russianist and Slavist and that the cream of the Fairbanks Athabascanist erudition have been attracted into this fascinating effort.

Eric P. Hamp