THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 2: THE INDO-EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 2: THE INDO-EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

Welcome to Episode 2 of the History of English podcast. In this episode, we are going to look at the oldest known ancestor of English – the ancient language known as Indo-European – or technically speaking the proto-Indo-European language. This is story of the discovery of that language and the man who is credited for that discovery – Sir William Jones.

In presenting a history of English, I believe that it is important to begin at this point. Many histories of English begin with the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in Britain in the 5th century. But Modern English is combination and blend of several languages – Anglo-Saxon English, Norman French, Latin, Greek, Old Norse languages of Scandinavia and even some Celtic influences. But all of these languages have at least one thing in common – they all evolved from the same ancient source – the language of the so-called 'Indo-Europeans' which was spoken several thousand years ago.

This is very significant in Modern English. For example, in English – unlike many other languages – we have multiple words for almost everything.

Take the word *father*. We can use the word *father* and we can make lots of other words with it like *fatherland*, *father-in-law*, *step-father*, *fatherhood*, *founding farther*, etc. We can even make it into a verb as in "He *fathered* three children." The word *father* is a Germanic Anglo-Saxon word which comes to us from the Old English word *fæder*. But we also have other words that mean father. For example, the words *paternal*, *paternity*, *paternalistic*, and *patriarch*. All of these words also mean father or relate to some aspect of fatherness. These words come to us – via French – from Latin. More specifically the Latin word *pater* which meant 'father' in Latin. And this is an example of why English has such a large vocabulary and how it pulls from multiple sources in creating words. In fact, as we will see in this podcast, this is a recurring theme.

For many basic words in English, we have a Germanic root word and an alternate Latin word. But here is the thing that may surprise you. The English word *father* from Old English and the Latin word *pater* are both derived from the same original word spoken by a tribe of nomads living on the Eurasian steppes about 5,000 years ago. That original word was likely very close to the *pater* used by Latin. For reasons that we will discuss in the next podcast, the 'p' sound shifted to an 'f' sound in the Germanic languages and ultimately became *father* in Modern English. So all of the words I mentioned earlier – *father*, *fatherland*, *fatherhood*, *paternal*, *paternity*, *paternalistic*, and *patriarch* – all of these words are interconnected and come for the same single root word. Linguists say that all of these words are 'cognates.'

For another example, consider the English word *foot*. This again is a Germanic word from Old English. From it we get lots of other words – *football*, *foothill*, *foothold*, *footing*, *footnote*, *footprint*, *footpath*, *footstep*, and *footstool*, just to name a few. But we also have another group of words which relate to feet. Consider these: *pedestrian*, *pedicure*, *pedal*, *pedometer*, even the word *pedigree* which comes from the fact that a genealogical family tree resembles a crane's

foot.   Do you notice a common theme? All of these word begin with '*ped*' which was the Latin word for foot. Again, the English word *foot* and the Latin word *ped* were once the same word in this ancient common language. The same shift from the 'p' sound to the 'f' sound which distinguishes English *father* from Latin *pater* is also at work here. In Latin the word retains its original 'p' sound and becomes *ped*, while in the Germanic languages like English it shifts to an 'f' sound and becomes *foot*. Again, we will explore these sound changes in greater detail in the next podcast, but the point here is that English did not just borrow words from Latin and other languages. It often borrowed words that were ultimately just another version of the words that English already had.

So that is why it is important to begin the history of English at the point of this ancient common language known as Proto-Indo-European rather than with the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in Britain. Because it is important to understand that the history of English begins before the Anglo-Saxons and before we have a language or dialect that we actually call 'English.' It is also important to understand that all of the languages which have come together to create Modern English are not completely separate languages – but are in fact part of a larger interconnected language family. To put it another way, English, Latin, Greek and Celtic languages are ultimately all cousins within the same language family and similarities between the languages can be found throughout all of them.

But the realization that there was an ancient language which was the ancestor of all of these European languages did not occur until the late 1700s. Before that, the actual history of the languages was a mystery. The Biblical explanation of the different languages was set forth in Genesis in the story of the Tower of Babel. Men tried to build a tower to heaven and God destroyed the tower and dispersed the people and gave them different languages so they could not communicate freely and attempt to challenge the power and authority of God. Beyond the Biblical explanation, there was an understanding that the so-called Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portugese, Italian, etc.) had evolved from the Latin spoken by the Romans. And it was obvious that there were similarities between those languages and the Germanic languages of northern and central Europe, as well as the Slavic languages of eastern Europe.

But these similarities were largely explained through borrowing. All of these peoples lived in relatively close proximity, so over time they borrowed words from each other and that was why the languages sometimes appeared to resemble each other. And certainly this process of borrowing did happen. But the idea that the all of these languages evolved from a common ancestral language didn't really come in play until the late 1700s. And when the discovery was made, it wasn't made in Europe. It was actually made in India – a continent away. The story of how this discovery was made involves European imperialism, private armies and a tax on tea which led to the loss of Britain's colonies in America and the unintentional acquisition of a new colony in India.

The story begins with the arrival of European traders in India the 1600s.

Initially, the Europeans arrived in India not as colonizers, but as traders. India's silks, spices, dyes, and tea were irresistible to Europeans. And all of the major powers of Europe established private trading companies to trade European money and goods for those Indian products. The British East India Company was chartered in 1600 and soon established trading ports with Mogul Empire which ruled India at the time. One of those British trading ports was Calcutta in the territory of Bengal in northeastern India. The British East India Company – and its rival companies established by other European powers - made vast amounts of money during this period. But the Mogul Empire began to fall apart in the 1700s and India fell into a state of unrest and civil conflict. This was not good for business. In fact the unrest was enough to cause the Dutch and Portugese to leave town altogether. That left the French and British – and neither wanted to abandon India and thereby leave the Indian market to the other. This was the height of the Franco-British rivalry in Europe and both extended their competition to control the Indian trade.

But in order to stick it out in India, the trading companies were going to have to find a way to survive in the unrest and protect their own interests. And the best way to do that is to have your own private army. And that is exactly what happened. By the mid 1700s, the British East India Company was operating with a private army staffed largely with native Indians and led by British officers. The French were doing the same. It was probably inevitable that the French and the British companies would come into direct conflict, and that is exactly what happened.

In the 1750s, the French and the British East India Companies fought for control of parts of India. This was actually part of a larger conflict between the French and British known as the 'Seven Years War' which is considered by many to be the first world war. The North American theater of that war between the French and British is known in America as the 'French and Indian War' (but the Indian here refers to the native Americans). So it was in fact a global war spread over multiple continents.

To make a very long story just a little bit shorter, the British ultimately won out – in Europe, in North America (which opened the Ohio Valley to British settlement), and in India which left the British East India Company as the dominant power in the region including vast portions of southern India and the entire territory of Bengal. The company now found itself with vast sections of India under its control. But it was a company – not a government. The wars had been expensive and the prospect of establishing a bureaucracy and actually governing these areas would prove to be even more expensive. By the late 1700s, the East India Company was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. And the British government itself wasn't doing a whole lot better. The government had racked up a massive debt as a result of the Seven Years War.

And this is where the story of English intersects with the story of colonialism in India, and even intersects with the beginning of the American Revolutionary Way, because in order to help pay for the British debt incurred during the Seven Years War, and to help bolster the finances of the East India Company, the British government passed the Tea Act in May of 1773. And the Tea Act provided a way to unload 17 million pounds of excess tea sitting in Britain with no one to buy it. The Act removed the tariffs which the Company had to pay to the British government for tea imports to the American colonies. So now the East India Company could undersell the Dutch

tea smugglers who were providing mos to the tea to the colonies. But it also meant the colonists had to pay a 3 pence per pound duty of the new British tea coming in. So even though the tea would be cheaper, it would also require the payment of a tax to the British government.

Well, all of this tea and tax business ended pretty poorly for the East India Company in North America. You probably already know about the Boston Tea Party, which ultimately culminated in an American War for Independence. And while the result of all of this was the loss of the 13 British colonies in North America, it also left the British with a new colony in India. One which the British government never really intended to acquire. And it was the British involvement in India which paved the way for the discovery of the ancient links between the languages of Europe and India.

In 1773, the same year that the Tea Act was passed by Parliament, additional laws were enacted which gave the British government more oversight in the East India Company's involvement in India. This was the first step in what would eventually lead to the British government formally taking over governance of India as a colony a few years later. But for now, the company was still in charge of the day-to-day government responsibilities of its Indian territories.

It was into this complicated political-commercial mixture that Warren Hastings arrived as the first formally appointed Governor-General of Bengal. Hastings had an appreciation of the ancient native Indian culture. He also realized the limitations that were inherent in a commercial enterprise trying to govern a vast territory like India. He believed that the British 'company governments' should be based on traditional Indian models and that most of the administrative work should be done by Indians.   As far as the administration of the courts was concerned, British judges were to supervise the courts, but Hindu law would be applied as a general rule (except in predominantly Muslim areas where Islamic law would be applied). The company would try to work within the existing culture rather than impose a new and foreign culture upon it. But for British judges this posed another problem. How exactly were the British supposed supervise the courts and apply Hindu law when they didn't know what those laws were? Most of the Hindu legal traditions were written in ancient Sanskrit. There were no western-style legal codes which could be easily consulted for answers.

Sanskrit was the ancient language of northern India and the ultimate ancestor of Hindi and many other modern Indian languages. Its position within Indian culture was similar to that of Latin in Europe in the late Middle Ages. During that time, Latin was no longer spoken as a primary language in Europe, but it was still in very active use as the language of the church – which was the dominant institution in Europe at the time. It was also used by academics, scholars and was still being used as a common language for communication throughout Europe in ways which are similar to the way English is used today.

In India, Sanskrit held a similar status. The language was no longer spoken as a first or native language, but many ancient texts were written in Sanskrit. So Sanskrit was still utilized as the primary language for interpreting those religious and legal texts. Since the British judges were not fluent in the language, they were forced to rely upon local experts in Sanskrit and Hindu legal traditions. The experts were called *pandits* which is the root of the modern English word

pundits. The pandits were well-versed in Sanskrit, as well as the legal, religious and philosophical traditions expressed in Sanskrit. But there was always a concern among the British judges about the reliability of the translations offered by the pandits. In a country in which bribery was a way of life, how would the judges know if the pandit's translation was accurate or if it was bought and paid for?

Into this judicial dilemma arrived the key figure of this episode. His name was William Jones. Jones was not only a jurist and scholar, he was also an expert in languages including the Persian language which was related to Sanskrit. Jones had been born in London in 1746 to a Welsh father. As a student at Oxford, he had studied a wide variety of languages, including Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic and many others. In fact, it is difficult to know how many languages Jones actually mastered. Some accounts suggest he knew as many as 28 languages, but studying a language and speaking it fluently are not the same thing. Regardless, he was very proficient in the study of languages.

While at Oxford, he also became fascinated with Near Eastern and Far Eastern cultures. The term used during this period to describe those who studied Asian cultures was *Orientalist* and Jones quickly amassed a reputation as one of the leading Orientalists in Britain. At the age of 22, Jones accepted a commission from the king of Denmark to translate a Persian manuscript into French which Jones accomplished and published in 1770. The publication earned Jones an election to the prestigious Royal Society of Copenhagen. The following year he published A Grammar of the Persian Language (1771) which was the first English guide to the language. He published other works during this period and became known as a highly respected academic. He also studied law and became a barrister. And he befriended other influential scholars and thinkers of the day – one of whom was Benjamin Franklin who resided in London for many years before the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War.

Speaking of that war, which I have mentioned a couple of times, Jones wrote a series of pamphlets after the outbreak of the war which were sympathetic to the colonists' cause. And when Benjamin Franklin traveled to Paris to obtain French support for the war, Jones traveled from Britain to Paris to meet with Franklin to discuss a possible resolution of the conflict. Ultimately, nothing came of the meeting. But by this point Jones' attention was focused more on India than the American colonies. The Supreme Court in Calcutta had a vacancy and Jones was more than qualified given his interest in Asia and his vast knowledge of languages, including Persian. Remember the Governor-General of Bengal Warren Hastings wanted British judges and other administrative personnel who would take an interest in Indian language and culture. And Jones seemed perfectly suited for the job. In reality, it took some time for Jones to secure the appointment from the British government, probably in part due to his open sympathies for the colonial rebellion in America. But nevertheless, Jones ultimately received the appointment to the court on March 4, 1783. He was also knighted a couple of weeks later and thereafter acquired the title 'sir.'

On board the ship which took him to India in that same year (1783), Jones envisioned the creation of an Asiatic Society to investigate and promote Indian culture and society. Upon arriving in India he met other European linguists and Orientalists who had been recruited and

encouraged to come to India by Warren Hastings. Together with these other similar-minded Europeans, Jones founded the Asiatic Society the following year – 1784. Jones initially served as Vice-President of the society under Warren Hastings, but Hastings soon resigned and Jones became the President of the society. He would remain the President until his death.

Part of Jones's mission in India, which he inherited from Warren Hastings, was to translate the ancient Hindu legal codes from Sanscrit to English. This would eliminate the need for British judges to rely upon the pundits. But Jones didn't actually speak or know Sanscrit. So soon after arriving in Bengal, he embarked on the study of the language so he could translate traditional Hindu laws and customs. What he quickly discovered is that Sanskrit – this ancient Indian language – shared many similarities with Greek and Latin. And these similarities were much the same as those found in other European languages as well as Persian.

But here was the key. Similarities among European languages could be explained as being the result of long-term borrowing between neighboring peoples. The Latin-speaking Romans interacted with the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine for centuries before the Roman Empire collapsed and the Germanic tribes poured into Roman territory. So linguistic borrowing was an accepted fact within the various European languages. But that could not explain the similarities with Sanskrit. How could the Germanic speakers from icy climes of Scandinavia borrow such a large number of words from the ancient residents of India? There had to be another explanation.

In 1786, Jones gave a lecture to the newly-formed Asiatic Society which he had helped to establish. In the lecture, he highlighted the close similarities between the three apparently 'dead' languages – ancient Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. He announced that Sanskrit derived from the same source as Greek and Latin. He also believed that the 3 were related to Gothic (a Germanic language spoken in Europe at a time before the Anglo-Saxons had found their way to Britain). He also concluded that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek were all related to Persian as well.

The following quote from Jones' lecture is often cited as the first formal statement that there was a ancient Indo-European language:

> "The Sanskrit 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 the 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 some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists."

By the way, a 'philologer' is a fancy term for someone who studies the history of languages and the relationships between them. Basically what we're doing here.

Jones also asserted that Persian, Celtic and German probably belonged to the same family of languages as Latin, Greek and Sanskrit. Years of subsequent research has confirmed that he was correct in all of these assertions.

To be completely fair, I should note at this point that there were others who were reaching the same conclusions as William Jones around the same time. In fact, about 20 years earlier, a French Jesuit named Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux had identified similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, German and Russian. For example, *bhratar* in Sanskrit and *brother* in English. But his work was not as fully realized as Jones's work, and he didn't have the same profile as Jones. So Coeurdoux's work went largely unnoticed at the time.

Sometimes the person who gets the credit for a discovery is the person who brings it to the world's attention, not necessarily the first person to actually discover it. Christopher Columbus still gets most of the credit for being the first European to discover America, even though he arrived almost 500 after the Viking Leif Ericson. But it was Columbus's discovery that sparked an age of exploration in the new world – so he gets lots of cities named after him – and poor Leif's discovery gets relegated to a footnote.

So it was with William Jones as well. Jones's discovery sparked a dramatic increase in the study of ancient languages throughout Europe. Connections between ancient Sanskrit and European languages may have been noticed before Jones. But is was only after Jones that people began to take the connections seriously and began to study it in detail. In fact the entire discipline of linguistics was developed in the 1800s in large part to determine which languages belong to the Indo-European family and which do not. And we'll look at that research in more detail in the next podcast.

So, in case you're curious, what type of similarities was Jones seeing as he compared these various languages? Let me give you an example. You will recall earlier that I mentioned that English has the word *father* and Latin has the word *pater* and both words came for the same original source word. The Greek version of the word is very similar to Latin and is pronounced *pater*. The Sanskrit version of the word is *pitar*. So *pitar*, *pater*, *pater* and *father*. You can start to see how linguists realized that the 'p' sound shifted to an 'f' in the Germanic languages. But let's hold off on that to the next podcast.

In addition to having a very similar word for father in all of these languages, they also shared a compound word for *God* which used the word *father*. The term was literally '*sky father*.'

In Sanskrit, it was '*dyaus pitar*.'
In Greek, it was '*Zeu-pater*.'
In Latin, it was '*Iu-peter*.'

And the Greek version of the word – *Zeu-pater* – later became simply *Zeus* after the *pater* part was dropped.

The Latin version of the word – *Iu-peter* – later became *Jupiter* after another sound shift changed the 'y' sound to a 'j' sound. This also happens sometimes in English. For example, when we say '*did you*' really fast, we sometimes convert the 'y' to a 'j' sound. So it becomes '*did joo*' as is 'Did joo go to the store.' So the later Romans and early French made this sound change and *Iu-peter* became *Jupiter*.

So all of that means *Jupiter* and *Zeus* were both connected. Both words came from the same original root word in the ancient Indo-European language which meant '*sky father*.'

There is another aspect of this same original Indo-European word which is of interest to English speakers. The early Germanic tribes whose languages would evolve into the Germanic languages we have today – including English – also had a God whose name came from the same root word.

As we will see in the next podcast, just as the 'p' sound shifted to an 'f' sound in a lot of Germanic words, the 'd' sound often shifted to an 't' sound. We can see that change today in a word like *duo* which comes from Latin and Greek, and the English word *two*. *Duo* has the original 'd' sound, and *two* has the later Germanic 't' sound. Both came from the same original Indo-European root word. We also see it in the Latin word *decem* meaning 'ten' as in the word *decade* and the English word *ten* with the 't' sound. So we often see a 't' sound in English where we have a 'd' sound in Latin or Greek.

Well that same sound change within the early Germanic language affected the name of the original Indo-European sky father **dyēw*. The Old Norse language had a god named *Tir* and the same god came into Old English as *Tiu*. This god's name derives from the same root as *Zeus* in Greek and *Jupiter* in Latin. And the reason why the Germanic god *Tiu* might be interest to you is because one of our five days of the week is named after him. 'Tiu's day' became *Tuesday*.

So let's go back to Sir William Jones for a minute. He had announced an original source language, but he pretty much left it at that. He identified the languages which he though were part of this larger family of languages, but it would be left to others to sort out how the languages fit together and which ones evolved from the others. In other words, further research would provide us with a family tree of languages which we still use today.

So that just left the name. So far I have referred to the language as the 'Indo-European language' – technically the 'Proto-Indo-European language.' And just to be clear in that regard, 'Indo-European' is sort of the family name or surname of the languages. 'Proto-Indo-European' is the technical term for the original language. If you imagine a family tree which begins with an ancestor named John Smith. All of the members of the family might be called 'Smith,' but the original ancestor was 'John Smith.' The same thing applies for the Indo-European languages. All of the languages within the family are called Indo-European languages, but the full name of the original source language is 'Proto-Indo-European' – meaning the first Indo-European language.

The basis of the name 'Indo-European' should be self-explanatory at this point. The languages spoken in the family are located throughout Europe and all the way into India. But the term 'Indo-European' was introduced later.

Jones developed his own term for the language. He noticed within Sanskrit and Persian literature that there were persons who spoke the languages and called themselves 'Aryans.' The term *Aryan* meant 'noble' in Sanskrit. So since these were the earliest documented speakers of the this family of languages, he called the original speakers the 'Aryans' and the language became known as the Aryan languages.

I bring this to your attention because the term is still used in some of the older literature. And I think you can probably see why the term 'Indo-European' is used today instead of the term 'Aryan.' At the time Jones coined the term, it was not meant to refer to blond-haired blue-eyed northern Europeans. In fact, it was presumed that these Aryans – whoever they were – lived in Asia in the vicinity of ancient Persia – which is modern-day Iran. In fact, the name 'Iran' comes from the Persian word meaning 'home of the Aryans.' It was much later that the term came to be used in Europe by Nazis and other racists to refer to a supposedly ideal race of Europeans. But for now, it was a more or less innocent term to describe a specific ancient linguistic group of Central Asia. During the 20th Century, when the term came to be used as a racist term – it was largely discarded by linguists and the term 'Indo-European' became the standard term which is still used today.

So I am going to conclude this podcast on that note. In this episode we looked at how the oldest known ancestor of English – the ancient Indo-European language – was discovered. We also looked at how connections were made between a large number of the languages of Europe and Central Asia. In the next podcast, we a going to look at the family-tree of Indo-European languages. And then we will also look at how a famous fairy tale collector – one of the famous Brothers Grimm – opened the door to our knowledge and understanding of the Germanic languages and how his work helps us to determine how English fits into that family tree of languages.

So until next time – thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.