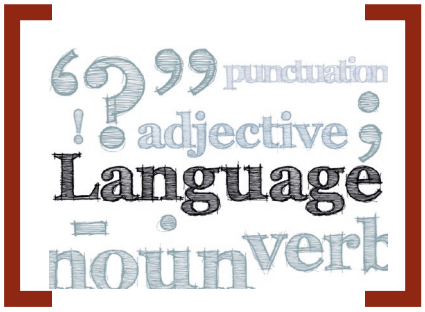
Ask a linguist

Experts answer your questions



In the pull-out poster of the family tree of Indo-European languages that appeared in Issue 3 of Babel, Armenian did not descend from a family, but constituted a branch in and of itself – why is this?

Changes in Armenian

One of the yardsticks to measure the maturity of a language is to catalogue the changes of its etymology and grammar over a cycle of 500 years. A ratio of up to 10% change is considered to be the pace of normal evolution for a mature language.

Within this context, the evolutionary process of English might shed some lights on the development of Armenian and English. Below is the Old English text of the Lord's Prayer widely in use in the 15th century:
Faether ure, thu the eart on heofenum
Father our, thou that art in heavens
Si thin nama gehalgod
Be thy name hallowed
To becume thin rice
Arrive thy kingdom

Compared to Modern English, it is fair to state that all aspects (syntax, grammar and vocabulary) have gone through significant changes. Yet, an average command of Modern Armenian is enough to fully understand the original text composed 17 centuries ago (circa 425 AD).

Ð³Ûñ Ù»ñ áñ Û»ñÏÇÝë »ë êáõñµ »ÕÇóÇ ³ÝáõÝ ùá, °Ï»ëó¿ ³ñù³ÛáõÃÇõÝ ùá,

Perhaps the Armenian version of the Bible, composed around 425 AD is a testimony of its phonetic and etymological stability and its maturity throughout the ages.

Armenian origins

In using the comparative method to classify Indo-European languages into separate branches, Armenian constitutes an independent branch.

Benveniste, among other comparative linguists, considered learning Armenian key for Indo-European studies researchers. In addition to constituting an independent branch, Hubschmann suggested that Armenian stands on the border of the Aryan-Balto-Slavic languages, between Iranian and Balto-Slavic. His extensive research on the Armenian language suggests that would be the missing link in the chain of Aryan/Persian and Balto/European languages, and not merely an independent branch. If Armenian is to be the connection between Iranian and Balto-Slavic, between Aryan and European, Hubschmann concluded, it must have played the role of an intermediary at a time when they were still very similar to one another, a period when evolution had not yet drawn the present sharp boundaries between them and they were still related to one another as dialects.

Until recently, the geographical origins of Indo-European languages were thought to be the



Balkans/Kurgan steppe region. Today, the region historically known as the Armenian Plateau (modern day Eastern Anatolia region of Turkey) is becoming a very credible alternative as the birthplace of Proto-Indo-European. An evolutionary biologist, Quentin Atkinson and his colleagues at the University of Auckland in New Zealand have studied the vocabulary and the geographical space of over 100 Indo-European languages to determine the most likely origin. They concluded that "we found decisive support for an Anatolian [historical Armenia and birthplace of Armenian language] origin over a steppe origin." If this theory is accepted, perhaps a new linguistic evaluation of Armenian may be in order. ¶

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Do you have a burning linguistic question, something you've always wanted to know about language? Contact us on twitter, facebook or email and we will pose your question to an expert linguist and attempt to answer it in the next issue of Babel.