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A history of East Baltic through language contact

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to place the East Baltic languages in their prehistoric linguistic context through the analysis of lexical borrowings. The work will be divided into two sections: in the first, I will critically assess the evidence for the established prehistoric contact relationships with Slavic (1.1), Germanic (1.2) and Finnic (1.3) and examine proposals of contact with other Uralic languages (1.4). The second half of the dissertation will be devoted to the question of contacts with unknown languages, a complex and no doubt controversial subject, which has not yet had an extensive treatment. One of the aims is to establish applicable methodological principles for analysing this kind of material, and this half of the dissertation can be seen as a practical demonstration and evaluation of these new methodological tools.

The result will be a detailed catalogue of the contact relationships in which the East Baltic languages participated. In order to stratify these linguistic events, I will also attempt to incorporate evidence from other disciplines, specifically archaeology, archaeobotany, and genetics, to evaluate the context and nature of the individual contact situations. This will be particularly important in the analysis of contacts with unknown languages (2.4), as we *a priori* have no other information about the other participants in these contact events.

The focus of this dissertation will be on East Baltic specifically. This is in itself unusual. Sabaliauskas (1990), for instance, stratifies the Lithuanian lexicon into the layers “Indo-European”, “Balto-Slavic”, “Baltic” and “Lithuanian”, without distinguishing a separate East Baltic

layer. Discussions of vocabulary exclusive to the Baltic languages likewise often fail to demarcate East Baltic as a distinct unit (e.g. Zinkevičius 1984: 229–234 and Larsson 2018: 1687–1688 are only concerned with isoglosses involving Prussian). This reflects a wider tendency in the literature, where one can easily find grammars and handbooks both on Baltic (such as Stang 1966; Endzelīns/Schmalstieg 1971; Dini 2014) and grammars and handbooks on individual East Baltic languages (e.g. Endzelīns 1923; Kazlauskas 1968; Zinkevičius 1980–1981; Forssman 2001), but very little discussion of the East Baltic languages together, and basically no systematic attempt at reconstructing a separate proto-language.

There are, however, clear arguments for the separate study of East Baltic. Firstly, while the status of “Baltic” as a branch of Balto-Slavic has been disputed (Kortlandt 1977: 323; Derksen 1996: 1; Andersen 1996a: 63; Kallio 2008: 265; Kim 2018: 1974),² the coherence of East Baltic as a subgroup appears to be universally accepted (albeit often implicitly). This can be demonstrated by a small but robust set of innovations exclusive to East Baltic. Clear cases are the following:³

1. **ai* and **ei* merged into **ē* in certain environments (becoming further diphthongized to /ie/ in both standard languages), thus Lt. *líepa*, Lv. *liēpa* ‘linden’ (= Pr. TC *leipen* ACC.SG., R *лúна*)

² Villanueva Svensson (2014: 164) mentions Иванов/Топоров (1958) and Harvey Mayer (e.g. Mayer 1978) as sceptics of the Proto-Baltic theory, but the scepticism in both cases seems more directed at the *Stammbaumtheorie* in general and against Balto-Slavic unity in particular. Both use the term “Baltic” liberally in the traditional sense.

³ Most lists only note differences between East and West Baltic without distinguishing innovations from archaisms (Endzelīns 1944: 17–21; Forssman 2001: 42–46), or include isoglosses with which Slavic also participates (Petit 2010: 12–17).

- beside Lt. *sniėgas*, Lv. *sniegs* ‘snow’ (= Pr. E *snaygis*, OCS снѣгъ) (Hirt 1892: 32–41; Stang 1966: 53–57; Hill 2016: 208).⁴
2. Probably related to this is the appearance of a prothetic *v-* in the word for ‘one’, cf. Lt. *vienas*, Lv. *viēns* (contrast Pr. III *ains*) (cf. Fraenkel 1950a: 26–27; Petit 2010: 14).
 3. A stem with *-v-* has been generalized in the paradigms of the 2SG. and reflexive pronouns, and corresponding possessive adjectives. Thus ACC.SG. **ten* (> Pr. III *tien*, OCS та) and DAT.SG. **tebVi* (> Pr. III *tebbeī*, OCS тебѣ) have been replaced by Lt. *tavė*, Lv. *tevi* and Lt. *táu* (< *tāvi*), Lv. *tev*, respectively (Petit 2010: 14; Hill 2016: 209–210).
 4. Initial *m-* has been generalized throughout the paradigm of the 1PL. pronoun: cf. Lt. *mūsų*, Lv. *mūsu* GEN.SG. (against Pr. III *nou̯son*, OCS насъ) (Forssman 2001: 44; Petit 2010: 14).⁵

Aside from this, a number of convincing isoglosses can be found between East and West Baltic,⁶ but also some seemingly non-trivial

⁴ Although the conditions of this merger are not fully resolved (see the discussions in Kuryłowicz 1956b; Stang 1966: 58–61; Mathiassen 1995; Petit 2003: 96–97), the high level of agreement between Lithuanian and Latvian shows that we cannot, at least, be dealing with a later areal development.

⁵ I exclude: (a) the change **-tl- > -kl-*, which is also shared by North Russian (Николаев 1989: 190–198; Зализняк 2004: 49), and is therefore to be considered an areal phenomenon which might have spread through an already diversified East Baltic; the development also seems to have taken place in the Prussian dialect of the Elbing Vocabulary (cf. in particular *sasin-tinklo* ‘snare’ where we cannot blame the graphical confusion between ⟨c⟩ and ⟨t⟩); (b) likewise, the loss of the neuter gender in nouns seems already to have been spreading to the dialect of the Prussian Third Catechism (cf. Endzelīns 1944: 84; Fraenkel 1950a: 28); cf. *unds* NOM.SG. ‘water’ against Pr. E *wundan*. On alleged traces of the neuter in Finnic loanwords, see 1.3.3.3.

⁶ See most recently Villanueva Svensson (2014) and Hill (2016), against which Kortlandt (2018). Here I would like to add another argument: the 1 PL. and 2 PL.

isoglosses between the East Baltic and Slavic (Villanueva Svensson 2014: 163; Kortlandt 2018: 176). For the purpose of this dissertation, an agnostic stance can be considered acceptable, as the internal structure of the Balto-Slavic family does not have any bearing on the validity of East Baltic as a subbranch.

While William Jones' famous idea that Germanic was "blended with a very different idiom" can be seen as foreshadowing a whole subfield within Germanic studies (cf. Kroonen 2012: 240), the reputation of Baltic has developed quite differently. As Antoine Meillet famously put it (1913: 205, despite Dini 2014: 45, fn. 21, I have verified this quotation to be genuine), a person who wishes to hear an echo of what Indo-European sounded like "va écouter les paysans lituaniens d'aujourd'hui". This continues a legend present in non-specialist literature since the 19th century. Thus, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (9th edition, 1882; cited per Klimas 1957) claimed that "whole Sanskrit phrases are well understood by the peasants of the banks of Niemen", and one still often comes across claims that Lithuanian is "the oldest" (*Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, 2004, ed. Phillip Strazny, p. 119) or "most archaic Indo-European language still spoken" (as in the current online edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*).

It is true, of course, that Lithuanian is remarkably archaic in certain aspects. In terms of phonology, it probably can indeed lay claim to

pronouns, Lt. *mēs*, *jūs*, GEN. *mūsų*, *jūsų* correspond exactly (except for Innovation 4, above) to Pr. III *mes*, *ioūs*, GEN. *noūson*, *ioūson*. In OCS, we find *мы*, *вы*, GEN. *насъ*, *васъ*, where the oblique forms are old (cf. Lat. *nōs*, *vōs*). To explain the Baltic oblique forms, it seems we have to assume a two-stage development: first, the strong stem **jūs* spread throughout the 2^{PL}. paradigm, yielding a new GEN. **jūs-un*; second, the vocalism of the 1^{PL}. **nōsun* was modified after the 2^{PL}., resulting in a new stem **nūs-*. These two non-trivial and consecutive developments seem to provide strong evidence of a common Baltic stage.

being the “most archaic”, and in nominal morphology its only serious competitor is Slavic (see the discussion in Erhart 1995). If we take the liberty of writing the Sanskrit *sandhi* variant -s (rather than usual -h), then it is not difficult to assemble a collection of forms where Modern Lithuanian and Vedic Sanskrit appear almost identical:

Table 1. Words similar in Lithuanian and Vedic Sanskrit

Lt. <i>výras</i> ‘man’	Skt. <i>vīrás</i> ‘man, hero’
Lt. <i>sūnùs</i> ‘son’	Skt. <i>sū́nus</i> ‘son’
Lt. <i>ugnìs</i> ‘fire’	Skt. <i>agnís</i> ‘fire’
Lt. <i>šuõ</i> , GEN.SG. <i>šuñs</i> ‘dog’	Skt. <i>śvā́</i> , GEN.SG. <i>śúnas</i> ‘dog’

For context, compare the Modern Hindi *bīr* ‘hero’, *āg* ‘fire’, and *sūnā* ‘dog’,⁷ or the continuants of these words in other modern languages: Irish *fear* /fʲar/ ‘man’, Icelandic *sonur* ‘son’, Slovene *óganj* ‘fire’. The surface similarities in the above table are admittedly partly accidental, but mainly result from a phonological conservatism on the part of Lithuanian. This conservatism has no doubt led to the stereotype of Baltic as a ‘pure’ dialect which has had “little or no non-IE contact” (Nichols 1998: 254) and “has not mixed with any other Indo-European or non-Indo-European language” (Klimas 2002).

Finnish in many respects holds a position similar to that of Lithuanian: many words in the modern language “appear almost bizarrely archaic” (Aikio 2022: 5), being identical to their reconstructed Proto-Uralic predecessors; thus e.g. *muna* ‘egg’ (< PU **muna*), *pesä* ‘nest’ (< PU **pesä*). At the same time, we know that the Finnic languages did not develop in isolation. In the Proto-Finnic lexicon, we can identify layers

⁷ According to Turner’s CDIAL. I cannot find the word for ‘dog’ in modern dictionaries, so it is perhaps obsolete, or at least dialectal (perhaps Turner’s source was John D. Bate, *A Dictionary of the Hindee Language*, 1875, p. 724).

of loanwords from Slavic (cf. Kalima 1956; Kallio 2006), Proto-Norse (collected in LÄGLOS I–III) and Baltic (see 1.3), while North Finnic also contains a significant lexical substrate from Sámi (Aikio 2009). Thus, a conservative phonology does not necessarily presuppose a conservative lexicon.

I hope that this study will go some way towards dispelling the myth about the ‘purity’ of Baltic, and East Baltic in particular, in demonstrating that this branch, like any other, has a complex history and has been subject to numerous external influences.