

LITHUANIAN AND INDO-EUROPEAN

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There is a widely spread belief among the English-speaking peoples that Lithuanian is either a) the oldest language; b) the oldest living language; c) the oldest language in Europe; d) the oldest living language in Europe; e) a very old and archaic language, very difficult to learn; f) a direct descendent of Sanskrit, and very similar to Sanskrit even to this day, etc. Most of these opinions are based on some exaggerated statements supplied by scholars or would-be scholars who have never made any serious effort to learn Lithuanian, or at least to get acquainted with this "mysterious relic" of the early Indo-European development.

It is not surprising, therefore, to read in the 9th edition of the **Encyclopedia Britannica** the following statement:

"Their language has great similarities to the Sanskrit. It is affirmed that whole Sanskrit phrases are well understood by the peasants of the banks of Niemen".
(**Encyclopedia Britannica**, 9th edition, 1882, see Lithuanians.)

This was written by Prince Kropotkin, a Russian who did not know Lithuanian and had only heard about it. It is amazing that this belief, in the legendary similarity between Lithuanian and Sanskrit, is still very much alive. There is a certain charm (as there is in all legends) attached to this legend and therefore it is still holding strong. As late as 1954 we read:

"The Lithuanian language is more ancient than Greek, Latin, German, Celtic and the Slav tongues. It belongs to the Indo-European group and is the nearest idiom to Sanskrit. The resemblance, indeed, is so close that Lithuanian peasants can understand Sanskrit sentences pronounced by learned scholars."
Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. XVII, p. 482, 1954; entry unsigned, ergo, compiled by the editors).

In 1882, the Russian Prince Kropotkin, realizing that he did not know Lithuanian, at least said: "It is affirmed...." but the **Encyclopedia Americana**, vintage 1954, plainly states: "...indeed..." while describing that unusual resemblance and closeness between Lithuanian and Sanskrit.

Some people have carried it even further. This writer once noted with amusement a statement by a professor at one of the leading universities in Chicago. He asserted in several lectures and in one article that a Lithuanian peasant of his day (the time was ca. 1927) could easily be understood by and could understand a peasant in the Kashmir Valley speaking one of the ancient dialects of Kin dustani, the descendent of Sanskrit...

But the plain truth is that a Lithuanian peasant of today would understand just as much Kashmiri-Hindustani as a Turk would understand a Finn speaking Finnish. It is true that scholars can construct sentences in one language that sound similar to those in another, related or not, but this is not proof of a historical relationship or of a close similarity between two languages.

What, first of all, is Sanskrit? Many people still believe it to be a sort of "grandmother," or even real "mother," of all the Indo-European languages. But actually, this name refers to a very small part of the Indo-European family: namely, it is popularly used for the more scientific term Old Indie. In its turn, Old Indie, or Sanskrit, is only a branch of a branch of Indo-

European languages, namely, of the Indo-Iranian branch. The only reason why Sanskrit is so famous is because it was a highly developed literary language that has been recorded earlier than any other branch of the Indo-European languages. Its first manuscripts date to approximately 1500 B.C., thus giving us invaluable recorded forms of the state of Old Indie about 3400 years ago.

It is true that the Sanskrit of 1500 B.C. and the Lithuanian of 1547 (the first recorded Lithuanian—the Catechism of Mažvydas) and even the Lithuanian of 1957 have certain similarities, but one will find similarities also between Lithuanian and Old Celtic, Latin and Lithuanian, Old English and Lithuanian, etc.

It is also true, partly because of its inherent character, partly because of geographic and historical circumstances, partly due to the character of the Lithuanian, and partly due to reasons still unknown to modern linguistic science, that Lithuanian has preserved very many archaic features in its phonology (sounds), morphology (forms), accentuation and even syntax. But so have other Indo-European languages, such as Latin, Greek, Slavic, Germanic... It is impossible and not rational simply to call any language that grew and developed naturally, unlike Esperanto, for instance, very old. Even French might be called very old, since many of its modern forms nevertheless go back to medieval Vulgar Latin, and these in turn go back to classical Latin, and classical Latin goes to a branch of the Italic prototype, and this in turn goes back to Primitive Indo-European. Counting in the popular manner, Chinese would be perhaps the "oldest" language, but it has also changed greatly. We now have clay tablets in Sumerian that go back to 3500 B.C., thus being about 2000 years older than the recorded forms of Sanskrit! One can perhaps speak of a language as having preserved many (or only a few) archaic forms, or ancient features, but to call a language "old" or "ancient" is, to our way of thinking, very amateurish and unscientific.

We usually divide the whole Indo-European family of languages into 13 groups, or branches, or families (our list is from East to West):

The Indo-European Languages:

- I) Tokharian (Dialects A and B; dead).
- II) Indo-Iranian:
 - 1) Indie:
 - a) Old Indie — Sanskrit
 - b) Middle Indie
 - c) Innumerable languages and mixtures of a) and b).
 - 2) Iranian
- III) Armenian
- IV) Thracian-Phrygian: (West Asia Minor, East Balkans; dead).
- V) Illyrian; dead.
- VI) Albanian (Some scholars believe Albanian to be a descendent of Illyrian).
- VII) Greek.
- VIII) Italic or Romance languages: Latin, Rumanian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, etc.
- IX) Celtic
- X) Slavic:
 - 1) East Slavic:
 - a) Russian
 - b) White Russian
 - c) Ukrainian
 - 2) South Slavic:
 - a) Bulgarian
 - b) Serbo-Croatian
 - c) Dalmatian
 - d) Macedonian
 - 3) West Slavic:
 - a) Polish
 - b) Czech
 - c) Slovak
 - d) Kashubian
 - e) Wendish
- XI) Baltic:
 - 1) East Baltic:
 - a) Lithuanian
 - b) Latvian
 - c) Couronian; dead.
 - 2) West Baltic:
 - a) Old Prussian; dead.
- XII) Germanic:

- 1) East Germanic:
 - a) Gothic; dead.
 - b) Burgundian; dead.
 - c) Langobardian; dead.
- 2) North Germanic:
 - a) Danish
 - b) Swedish
 - c) Norwegian
 - d) Icelandic
- 3) West Germanic:
 - a) German
 - b) English
 - c) Dutch
 - d) Frisian
 - e) Flemish
 - f) Yiddish

XIII) Hittite (some linguists believe that Hittite, with recorded words as old as 1800 B.C., older than Sanskrit, was a "sister" of Primitive Indo-European and thus an "aunt" to all the other groups, I-XII. This question has not yet been solved.

Since all the languages listed above have developed from one prototype, the Primitive Indo-European, Lithuanian is related and has at least some similarities with all these languages. Indeed, there are sounds, words and forms that are more or less similar in all these languages. Therefore the older the sounds, forms, and words in a language, the more important is that language in comparative Indo-European linguistics or philology (in the more specific, narrower sense of this word).

What has Lithuanian preserved in this aspect?

In phonetics, Lithuanian has preserved the Indo-European vowels, especially in stressed syllables :

Primitive Indo-European	Lithuanian
e	e, and also long e
i	i
u	u
a	a, and also long a
o	a, and also long a
ē	ė
ī	y = long i
ū	ū
ā	o
o	uo

Of course, the Lithuanian distinction between long and short vowels does not represent the exact Primitive Indo-European pattern. Some long vowels were lost, some were shortened. Some originally short vowels were lengthened. But by and large, the Lithuanian vowel system is one of the best-preserved vowel systems among the Indo-European languages, and definitely the best preserved among the living Indo-European languages. Compared to it, the English vowel system has changed incomparably more:

"If we compare the English vowel system with that of Primitive Indo-European we find it changed beyond recognition. Numerous factors, e.g., influence of consonants, monophthongization, diphthongization, breaking, and most of all mutation (umlaut) have played havoc with the inherited system. This is the main reason why the actually close relationship with the Lithuanian language is now all but obliterated." (A. Senn. **The Lithuanian Language**. Chicago, 1942; p. 31).

The Indo-European consonants in Lithuanian are as follows:

Primitive Indo-European	Lithuanian
p	p
t	t
k	k
b	b
d	d
g	g
bh	b
dh	d
gh	g
k'	š

g'	ž
g'h	ž

As we see, the Indo-European palatals k' g' g'h changed to sibilants š ž ž, as in all the Indo-European languages of the satem-group: Indo-Iranian, Baltic, Slavic, Armenian... The same palatals were preserved as stops in the centum-group: Italic, Germanic, Celtic, Greek, Tokharian, Hittite. But the other consonants have been preserved quite well, even in the final position.

Nearly all the other Indo-European languages changed their consonants more than Lithuanian, except perhaps Latin and Greek, but even those two have many changes in their consonant systems, and they would have changed more if they had lived. (Modern Greek has changed greatly.)

In morphology, Lithuanian has also preserved many archaic forms. It still has seven declensional cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, locative, and vocative. Dual is also preserved, although not widely used in the standard literary language. Just compare, for example, the declension of today's Lithuanian u-stem nouns and that of Gothic (recorded 1500 years ago):

	Gothic		Lithuanian	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Nom.	sunus	sunjus	sūnus	sūnūs
Gen.	sinaus	sunive	sūnaus	sūnų
Dat.	sunau	sunum	sūnui	sūnums
Acc.	sunu	sununs	sūnų	sūnus

Although it cannot be stated that Lithuanian has preserved the inherited Indo-European accentuation system, nevertheless the Lithuanian free pitch-accents come closer to the original pattern than those of other Indo-European language.

It is impossible in this article to give all the examples and material possible to illustrate these statements, but any interested reader could consult the literature listed below.

The Indo-European languages closest to Lithuanian are Slavic and Germanic languages, and not today's Kashmiri-Hindustani (descendants of Sanskrit), nor even old Sanskrit itself, but that will be the theme for future articles.

Literature:

Alfred Senn. **The Lithuanian Language**. Chicago, 1942.
 Ernst Fraenkel. **Die baltischen Sprachen**. Heidelberg, 1950.
 Antanas Salys. Baltų kalbos (In: **Lietuvių Enciklopedija**, vol. 2, Boston, 1954).