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# Indo-Europeanization – day one

Elite recruitment and the beginnings  
of language politics

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## Introduction:

### Power relations as an arbiter of Indo-Europeanization

Language politics, or the instrumentalization of language by those with political power, has a long history. The lives of human beings and their activities inevitably unfold within a web of power relations, and their means of communication must be viewed in the same context. This is a commonplace of cultural and political history and needs no further explanation. In English-language terminology, the distinction is made between two basic concepts: politics and policy. Whereas politics refers to the overall framework of political decision-making, concrete measures and strategies to implement decisions are referred to as policies. Every state throughout history has featured some kind of language politics, ranging from the monopoly of an exclusive language of the state to various forms of federalism which grant equal rights to several languages. Examples of the former are ancient Egypt, Assyria, Greece, tsarist Russia and France. Examples of the latter are the Hittite empire, Switzerland, Belgium and Spain.

Although the agendas of language politics have been widely studied, little is known about the origins of the relationship between language and politics. There has been much uncertainty regarding the origins of political power in human history. Consequently, it is not surprising that the history of the relationship between political power and language has appeared as an opaque aspect of prehistory. However, recent research has produced insights into the initial emergence of power relations in human society. These point to a close link between the emergence of power relations and the spread of language.

The first example of political power being exercised and clearly manifesting itself in society in the European context has been identified in the coastal region in the northwest of the Black Sea. Around 4500 B.C.E., an event which occurred there had a profound and lasting effect on the future development of culture and society in the region. These changes subsequently spread throughout southeastern Europe and beyond. Comparatively little is known about the causes and how the event unfolded in detail, and, as yet, there has been no systematic analysis of the consequences of the rise of élite power and of stratified society for community life. For example, in the most comprehensive survey of the prehistory of Europe, the gold treasure in the Varna Necropolis is mentioned without any further explanation of the sociocultural changes associated with it (Cunliffe 2008: 156). In fact, Cunliffe's survey does not address the specific issue of Indo-Europeanization, a fundamental trend in European cultural history, at all.

It is appropriate that a discussion of power relations should begin with a definition of the basic concept of "political power", which should preferably distinguish between it and the concept of "authority". These concepts are elements in a network

of sociopolitical conceptualizations, and their related meanings may be paraphrased in the following way:

The essential differences between authority and power lie in the ability to control. Authority rules mainly through persuasion and example, and tradition. Power, while not neglecting these, rules by compulsion. The measure of power is the sanctions it can impose. By sanctions is meant the mechanisms of restrictive and punitive social control that are available to the leaders. Rulership of the restrictive and punitive kind, according to sociologists, comes about when, and only when, first of all, the leaders control the *sources and distribution of wealth*, and thus can offer or withhold the means of subsistence, and second, when they possess some organized means of *physical coercion*, and thus can directly force mass obedience. The *ideological acceptance* of the rulers as a special and superior class of persons legitimizes their economic exploitation and use of physical force. (Donlan 1997: 40 f.)

At Varna, an élite was established in communities where there had been no stratified society beforehand. Coming from the steppes of southern Russia, those who assumed power were Indo-European pastoralists who were attracted by the wealth of the trade centers on the western coast of the Black Sea. The archaeological finds in the prehistoric Necropolis of Varna, which contains graves dating to a period between approximately 4600 and 4200 B.C.E., are sensational in that they provide evidence of the earliest example of social stratification in the history of European society, which featured a clear distinction between the rich and ordinary society (see chapter 6). Of equal significance is the fact that this event marked the simultaneous beginning of the process of Indo-Europeanization, that is, the spread of Indo-European languages beyond the area of origin of the Indo-European peoples, and their languages and cultures. The Proto-Indo-European population was originally concentrated in the Pontic-Caspian region, bordering on the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

The event that changed European history – that is, the introduction of élite power at Varna – raises many questions not only concerning the phenomenon of political power itself, but also many other issues that are related to this change in society (see Corning 2004 for the evolution of politics). To make sense of what happened at Varna and of what was set in motion by it, we must discuss the following questions:

- How can relationships of political power be defined in terms of anthropological conceptualizations?
- What are the necessary conditions for the rise of political power as a phenomenon of human society? Are the conditions socioeconomic in nature or otherwise motivated? If they are not socioeconomic, then what are these motivations?
- Is the rise of a social élite and of political power inextricably linked to the transition from foraging to agrarian lifeways, or are other socioeconomic systems responsible for the emergence of political organization in society?
- Does political power always evolve within the confines of a state entity? In other words, is the existence of a state a precondition for the existence of politi-

cal power? Is there any form of political power that may exist outside of the web of state institutions?

- Was the shift to élite power at Varna due to internal social evolution or induced by foreign intervention? In other words, did the political system at Varna change with the arrival of the pastoralist élite or had there been a local élite which was replaced by steppe intruders?
- If the people from the Eurasian steppe who established themselves at Varna were Indo-Europeans, how did the concept of élite power emerge in their society?
- If the event at Varna was crucial for the spread of Indo-European languages, what is the direction of spread?
- Did political power affect language alone or was culture affected in the same way, that is, did Indo-European cultures spread also, or just their languages?

The assumption of political control in the trading center at Varna by Indo-European pastoralists marks a significant change not only in the history of European society. This event in the middle of the fifth millennium B.C.E. constitutes the earliest example of a stratified social order in world history. There is no evidence of a shift to hierarchical society and to élite power of this kind occurring anywhere in the world before this time. When compared with elsewhere in the world, however, it appears somewhat paradoxical that the early establishment of a political élite at Varna did not lead to the early emergence of statehood. There is no evidence for the existence of state entities in Europe prior to the second millennium B.C.E. (Laffineur and Niemeier 1995). Political power monopolized by a social élite emerged at Varna and continued to exist into the third millennium B.C.E. in a context in which no state existed (see chapter 6).

In the past, Mesopotamia or Egypt has usually been identified as the earliest example of élite power and chiefdom (see Roscoe 2011: 244 f. and Andrea 2011: 385 ff. for recent instances). However, these examples date to a later period than the Varna event. Ancient Sumer and ancient Egypt have in common that the rise of élite power was quickly followed by the formation of early states. In this, they differ from Varna.

The rise of élite power in Predynastic Egypt dates to the late-fourth millennium B.C.E. The consolidation of local chiefdoms in Mesopotamia occurred no earlier than this (Maisels 1999: 60 f., 156 ff.). In ancient China, evidence for the emergence of a clan system with a hierarchical infrastructure dates to the third millennium B.C.E. (Maisels 1999: 291 ff.). This means that the emergence of a hierarchical society at Varna predates all analogous developments in other regions where élite power shaped early civilizations in their formative periods, such as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient China. Of equally fundamental global importance are the consequences of the Varna event for the spread of Indo-European language and culture, or Indo-Europeanization, which constitutes one of the most important examples of the spread of language and culture in world history.



In order to appreciate the magnitude of the changes caused by the Varna event, we must discuss the conditions that facilitated the invasion of a nomadic élite into an area where agriculture had been practiced. The region of Varna had developed into a contact zone where different ethnic groups, diverse systems of economic subsistence and contrasting worldviews interacted. Before discussing the historical event of the establishment of élite power, we must first describe the ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities of the two populations involved in that process. In doing so, we will define the area where Indo-Europeanization began and describe how it developed from there.

### Cultures, languages and social systems in transition: The European scenario

There are many aspects to history. There is geological history, climatic history, biological history, the history of human ecology, and other important facets of historical change. However, the history of Europe's peoples, cultures and languages is the history of Indo-Europeanization, which is an ongoing process. Nowadays, the great majority of European populations speak Indo-European languages, with non-Indo-European languages representing only a small minority of spoken languages. However, up to the Bronze Age, the opposite was the case, with Palaeo-European languages of non-Indo-European origin dominating the linguistic landscape (Haarmann 2011a: 62 f.).

The Palaeo-European languages that can be identified as individual linguistic complexes were scattered throughout the northern region of the Mediterranean. These are the following:

- Old European (language of the bearers of the Danube Civilization) in southeastern Europe
- Minoan in ancient Crete
- Lemnian on the island of Lemnos in the eastern Aegean (closely affiliated to Etruscan)
- Etruscan in Etruria (Tuscany)
- Remnants of (non-Indo-European) pre-Greek languages in Sicily
- Palaeo-Sardinian in Sardinia
- Camunic in the Alpine region of northern Italy
- Rhaetic in the Swiss Alps
- Ligurian in the region of Genoa
- Aquitanian in southwestern France
- Basque in southwestern France and northern Spain
- Iberian in northeastern Spain
- Cantabrian in northern Spain
- Tartessian in southern Spain
- Lusitanian in southern Portugal