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Prehistoric population contact and language change

Languages change gradually over time: on the one hand, words become obsolete and structures are eroded; on the other hand, new words are created and new morphemes and structures develop through grammaticalization (see entry in handbook). However, another means of linguistic change is through language contact. In these cases, a language whose speakers are in contact with speakers of another language may change and become more similar to the contact language. Such contact may continue for an extended period of time, with both languages being maintained. On the other hand, speakers may also give up their heritage language in favour of the contact language. In this case, all that might remain of their original language are traces of substrate influence in the newly adopted language. If such population contact took place in prehistoric times, not much, if anything, may be known about the contact situation. In this case it will be difficult to come to conclusions about the kind of contact that was involved in the development of the language recorded today. It is here that molecular anthropological investigations can be of assistance. Since human DNA, especially the mtDNA and the Y-chromosome, are relatively stable in time and space, genetic analyses can provide an indication of prehistoric migrations, intermarriage with other groups, and language shift. The results of such studies can then be compared to the results of linguistic analyses, providing the potential of obtaining a more complete picture of the factors that shape language over time.

Outline:

- 1) Introduction: Why combine genetic and linguistic analyses?
- 2) Language change through contact influence
- 3) Molecular anthropology
- 4) Examples: prehistoric language shift, e.g. Caucasus (Azerbaijanians, Armenians); language contact without evidence for language shift: Siberia
- 5) Conclusion: more such case studies are needed to establish correlations between kinds of prehistoric contact and kinds of linguistic change to obtain a better view of how language is shaped over time, how it evolves.