Linguistics 51
Proto-Indo-European Language and Society

Discussion Questions for Monday, October 17th.

Probably the most remarkable fact about the speakers of Proto-Indo-European is that the language that they spoke is ancestral to nearly all the languages of Europe as well as much of central south Asia from Iran to India. Ever since this fact became evident in the late 18th century, competing views have arisen regarding how this extraordinary expansion took place. Since we are dealing in large part with prehistory, that is, human events prior to the existence of written records, the range of interpretations has been, perhaps, as wide as the very expansion of PIE itself.

At one extreme, the ‘Indo-European people’ were aggressive, horse-riding warriors who streamed out of the steppes of the Pontic-Caspian region in successive ‘invasions’, conquering, enslaving or even eliminating all other groups, who (viewed positively) may have been peace-loving, matriarchal goddess-worshippers but (viewed negatively) were degenerate ‘inferior races’.

At the other ideological extreme, the Indo-European languages spread not through war and destruction, but rather through a slow process of population expansion, intermarriage, and increasing economic influence, perhaps even radiating from Anatolia and associated with the introduction of agriculture to paleolithic populations.

For class on Wednesday, be prepared to discuss this issue. Consider the following questions:

(1) What evidence supports the ‘invasions’ view and what evidence supports that ‘gradual expansion’ view?

(2) How might the ideology of the researcher influence his or her interpretation of the historical scenario?

(3) Suppose you belonged to an ethnic-cultural group that did not speak a Proto-Indo-European but was in contact with a group of PIE speakers? What might or might not prompt you, or your children, to learn to speak PIE?

(4) Suppose you belonged to a ethnic-cultural group that spoke PIE. What might prompt you to interact with speakers of other languages?

Use these questions to guide your reading of Anthony’s book; we are not concerned with the wealth of archeological detail he brings to bear on the issue, but we are focusing on the kinds of arguments he uses for his interpretation of prehistory.