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Q5(c)

Glottochronology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Linguistic Anthropology.

(d) Linguistic Anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on glottochronology
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Glottochronology dates language splits from retained basic vocabulary.

Swadesh lists and an assumed replacement rate are the core.

Hymes helped move the tool into anthropology.

Bergsland and Vogt showed that rates vary.

It remains a rough relatedness clock, not an absolute date.

Introduction

Glottochronology tries to date the split of related languages from the share of retained basic vocabulary. It is a linguistic clock, and anthropologists have used it with more hope than the clock can always keep.

Body

The method

- **Morris Swadesh** built 100- and 200-word lists of supposedly stable meanings such as body parts and pronouns, a method called **lexicostatistics** when used only to measure relatedness.
- Glottochronology adds a constant rate, often taught as about 14 per cent loss per thousand years, to turn the shared percentage into a date of divergence.
- **Dell Hymes** and others brought the tool into anthropology as a companion to archaeology when no inscriptions exist.

Limits

- **Knut Bergsland** and **Hans Vogt** showed that real rates are not constant, using cases such as Icelandic.
- Borrowing, taboo replacement, and poorly chosen lists break the clock, which **Lyle Campbell** and historical linguists still stress.
- The method can still rank closeness of dialects; it should not be treated as a radiocarbon date for a people.

Flow diagram

Swadesh list -> Shared basic words

Shared basic words -> Date of split

Rate not constant -> Date of split

Conclusion

Glottochronology is Swadesh's dated **lexicostatistics**. It is a heuristic for language split, not a precise prehistoric calendar.

Facts & figures

Morris Swadesh

Built standard basic-vocabulary lists and the glottochronological dating idea.

Lexicostatistics

Measurement of shared basic vocabulary to estimate linguistic relatedness, with or without a clock.

Bergsland and Vogt

Classic critique that replacement rates are not constant across languages and centuries.

Dell Hymes

Anthropological linguist who discussed the use of these measures in culture history.

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