

# Familial words suggest there was parent language

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About 230 years ago, Sir William Jones made an amazing intellectual breakthrough.

He was a gifted learner of languages, and by an early age had mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. He even translated Persian into French. In 1783, arriving in Calcutta where he'd been appointed as a judge, he started learning Sanskrit, the classical language of northern India – one of the first Britons to do so.

He was astonished by what he found. Could it just be a coincidence that the Latin word “pater”, Greek “patēr” and Sanskrit “pitár” all meant father”; and that Latin “frater”, Ancient Greek “phrater” and Sanskrit “bhratar” all meant brother”? After all, Sanskrit had been spoken 3,500 miles from Italy, the home of Latin. But the similarities were undeniable, especially in the grammar: Latin “est” (it is) was “asti” in Sanskrit; “sumus” (we are) was “smas”; and “sunt” (they are) was “santi”.

In a famous lecture, Jones argued there was “a stronger affinity” between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek “than could possibly have been produced by accident”. Others had also noticed this, but Jones’ breakthrough was to state that the affinity



■ The Latin, ancient Greek and Sanskrit words for ‘brother’ all bear striking similarities.

was so strong that no linguist could examine the three languages “without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists”.

That was the big new idea: there was an earlier parent language which had since disappeared. Previously, scholars had misguidedly wondered which of the world’s existing languages had been the “first” language – Hebrew was often mentioned. But Jones argued that the only way to explain these affinities, over such a large geographical area, was that there had once been an language which had gradually turned into Latin, Greek and Sanskrit – and Celtic, Iranian and Germanic – just as Latin had changed into the Romance languages Italian,

Spanish, Rumanian and French; and Sanskrit had turned into vernacular North Indian languages. Sanskrit ceased to be spoken as a native language around 500 BC, and morphed into languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali.

From Irish in the west to Bengali in the east, Icelandic in the north to Greek in the south, most European languages, and many of those of west and south Asia, developed over time out of that same single source, which has now not existed for 5,000 years. Today we call it “Indo-European”.

Sir William died in 1794, aged only 41. But he revolutionised our way of thinking about language history.