Substitutions of palatovelars in the earliest Indo-European loanwords in the Uralic languages?

Although there have been intensive contacts between the Uralic (Finno-Ugric) languages and several branches of Indo-European, possible contacts between the Indo-European and Uralic protolanguages are a more controversial issue.

Researchers who support the contacts between the two proto-languages, such as Koivulehto (see especially Koivulehto 2003) have argued that in the earliest loanwords, PIE palatovelars *ḱ, *ǵ(h) are usually substituted by the Uralic affricate *ć or sibilant *ś (for example PU *ćanka 'handle' ← PIE *ḱanku- 'peg, nail') or by the glide *j (PU *aja- 'to drive' ← PIE *(h_2)aǵo-), in few controversial cases also by the Uralic velar spirant *γ. Some of these etymologies are confined to Western Uralic or "Finno-Permian" languages, and it has been argued by Koivulehto that these western loans have been acquired from an archaic IE dialect in Northern Europe, pointing to an early arrival of speakers of Western Uralic to the Baltic area and Fennoscandia.

In this paper it is shown that these substitutions involve numerous problems. It is impossible to establish regular environments for the various different substitutions, and in almost every case it is impossible to prove that the Uralic substitutions reflect the retained palatal stops. Some of the etymologies are shown to be false, (such as *ćolki 'Spange' ← PIE *ḱolH-o- > ? Old Indic śala'rod'), and while many of the etymologies are probably Indo-European loans indeed, they can rather reflect the *satem* reflexes of Indo-Iranian or Balto-Slavic; Koivulehto himself reconsidered some of these loans in his later works (Koivulehto 2006), and Kallio (2008 and personal communication) has expressed similar views regarding some loans such as Uralic *ćiḷkaw 'pole' (from North-West Indo-European *ǵhalgha- or Balto-Slavic *źalga-).

The results cast doubt on the existence of Proto-Indo-European and North-West Indo-European loanword layers in Uralic, and open new prospects in the research of early contacts between the two language families.

References

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