

A DIFFUSIONIST'S VIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF „LANGUAGE FAMILIES“

by

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Summary

It is shown that in our real world, in a diffusionist's world-view, the concept of "language families", for similar reasons as the concept of "races" of mankind, does not seem to belong to the category of scientifically established fact, but seems rather to be of the nature of a suspect hypothesis quite susceptible of refutation. In a world of endless ethno-linguistic diffusion and amalgamation, going on for many millennia, only amalgam or creolized languages can be expected.

A "language family" is usually understood in a genetic sense. This means that languages, which are postulated to belong to a certain "language family", are visualized as being related to one another via a kind of genealogical tree ("Stammbaumtheorie"), in a manner reminiscent of the likewise hypothetical "genealogical trees" of palaeontology.

I HAVE TRIED to demonstrate in the accompanying Fig. 1 what is meant by this in practice. It is of course a purely hypothetical model for the sake of explaining the matter. Let us assume that at some time in the past there lived in southern China a population (A) capable of seafaring, speaking a certain language. From there they established colonies or offshoots in Mexico (B1) and Australia (B2). Later on these colonies

established new offshoots, to wit Peru (C1) and the Iberian Peninsula (C2) from Mexico, and southern Africa (C3) and the Yemen (C4) from Australia.

Understandably, in the course of time, as is human nature, languages B1 and B2, although originally identical with language A, would evolve differently from their mother tongue. Likewise with languages C1-C4 with respect to their respective mother tongues B1 and B2. The resulting genealogical tree (Fig.2) shows these relationships.

The level B languages would be genetic derivatives from the original mother tongue (A), and the level C languages would be genetic derivatives from their respective level B mother tongues.

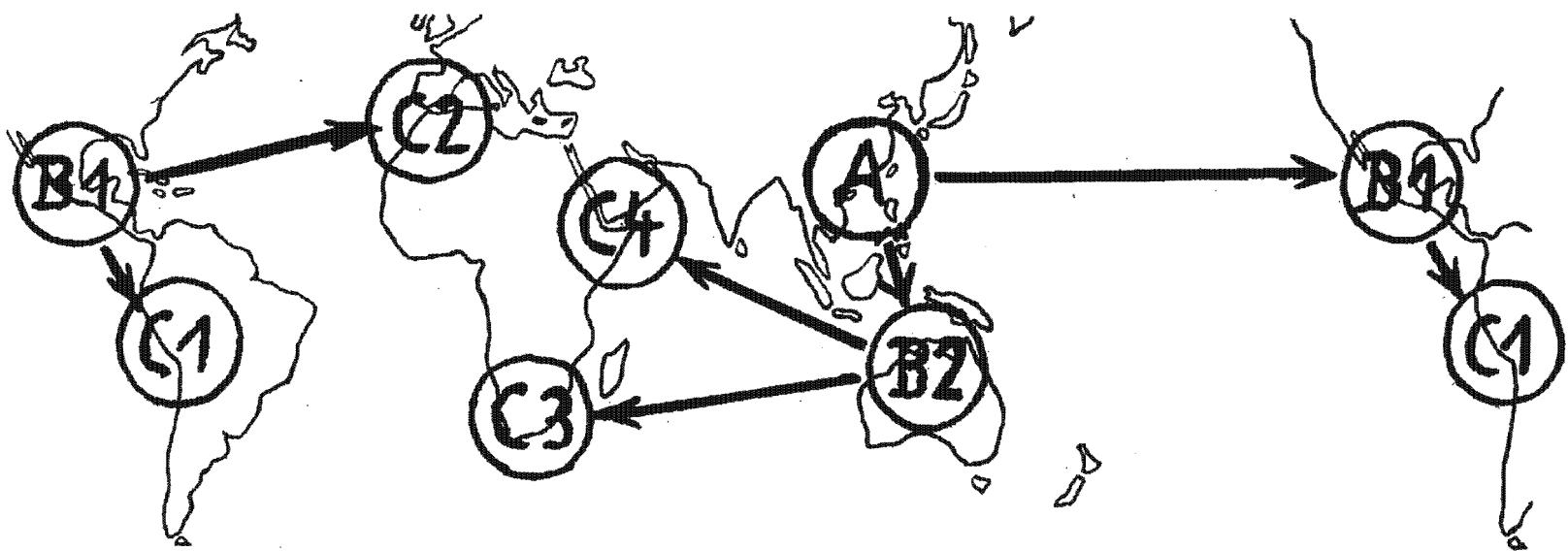
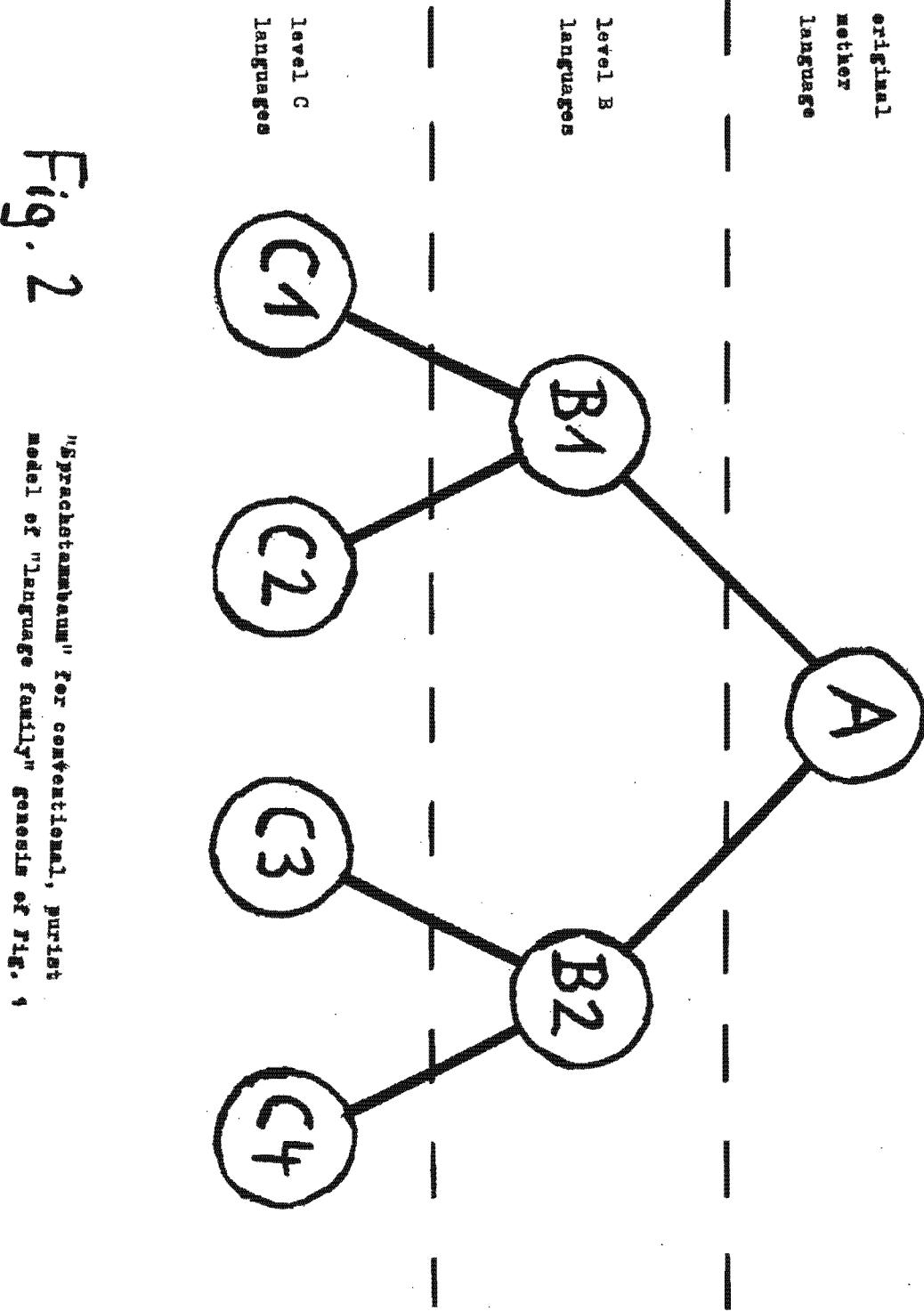


Fig. 1

Hypothetical model of ethno-linguistic diffusion
to illustrate genesis of parist "language families"

Fig. 2



In this idealized “Stammbaum” model, as my readers will have noticed by now, language would simply be one constituent of the ethnic “package” characterizing or distinguishing the respective people. There would be no other ethnic entities around which would be able to interfere, linguistically or “racially”, with the idealized process.

AND IN THIS model, in a like manner as these languages would be related via a genealogical tree in the sense of the “Stammbaumtheorie”, would also the respective populations, speakers of those languages, forever remain related to one another via this genealogical tree. And if for some reason at a later time the original mother civilization A and its direct colonies B1 and B2 should disappear from the face of planet Earth, languages C1-C4 would nevertheless forever form a “language family”.

Purist “language families” not possible in the real world

As my readers will have surely noticed, such an idealized model could only function in an idealized world, on an “empty planet” so to speak, i.e. on an Earth without any other human (*homo sapiens*) inhabitants, with only the plant and animal kingdoms present, and perhaps some “apemen” at most.

Those people from southern China would, in our model, be the only human populations on our planet, and therefore no other people would be able to interfere with the further evolution of their descendants in Mexico, Australia, Peru, the Iberian Peninsula, in southern Africa, and the Yemen.

In our real world, in a realistic scenario, all those places where the offshoots of any original “mother civilization” like our example (A) in China, arrived were already inhabited by other ethno-linguistic entities, especially in places favourable for the founding of a new civilization.

Amalgam or creolized languages natural result of diffusion

Of course scholars knowledgeable in the field of cultural, ethno-linguistic diffusion, know this. Strangely enough, however, even when they do not have any illusions about the state of contemporary historical linguistics, most often they tend to take the hypothesis of allegedly existing “language families” seriously.

Now I would like to emphasize that I do not regard the idea of “language families” in the genetic sense, i.e. of genealogical language “trees” (“Sprachstammbäume”), as total nonsense. There may have been occasional, exceptional cases in the history of mankind where situations reminiscent of the purist idea did occur.

But in general I would like to state my opinion, even my conviction, to the effect that the real worth of the idea of “language families”, as they are understood by today’s mainstream historical linguistics, has been grossly overvalued in a rather bizarre way.

HOW THIS came about, is an interesting question. I believe the explanation is relatively simple. During the 17th-19th centuries Western thought had become used to regard the idea of distinct “races” of mankind as founded in some ethnic respectively anthropological reality. Today we know better. It seems that the rather “windy” concepts of “races” and “language families” had to support each other.

In a real world I think we will have to reckon, since untold millennia, with general ethno-linguistic diffusion on a grand scale, and that therefore we will have to accept it as a fact that all languages spoken on our planet will be necessity have to be regarded as amalgam languages, or creolized languages, whichever expression one prefers. We will now discuss how this came about, in a quite natural way.

"Layers" of languages: substrata and superstrata

I am convinced that the most important factor in the development of the linguistic "landscape" on our planet have been instances of linguistic superstrata overlaying substrata, i.e. instances where the language of a newly arrived ethno-linguistic superstratum has affected the language of the "indigenes" or "natives" of the substratum, which may also in all probability have been of mixed or amalgam character.

QUITE OBVIOUSLY most, if not all, ethnic entities on our planet have been formed in a manner reminiscent of the layers or strata of geology, by layer upon layer of ethno-linguistic superstrata, with the difference that the strata of geology remain more or less separate and distinct, whereas the ethno-linguistic layers will, in the course of time, tend to result in an ethno-linguistic amalgam. As an example I bring here, in Fig.3, an illustration showing the ethno-linguistic "layers" (with "deposition dates") with which we have to reckon for the ethnogenesis of the Bavarians(1), the most thought-provoking of the German tribes.

Characteristics of amalgam languages dependent on many factors

It is easy to understand that the final result or outcome of a process constituting an amalgamation of languages, will depend on many factors. Vennemann (2) has described such processes in a masterly manner. Already in the simple case of an amalgamation of two languages, i.e. the language of a newly arriving ethno-linguistic superstratum (in the diffusionist "Weltbild" it will normally arrive from afar, by sea) and the language of the local "indigenes" or "natives", we will have to reckon with the following factors:

- Numbers of individuals of arriving superstratum and substratum.

- Did the superstratum arrive with their womenfolk with the intention to colonize, or were they only warriors or merchants?
- Which side is in possession of the higher, i.e. more sophisticated culture or civilization?
- Did the two populations mix and intermarry in the course of time, or did the superstratum tend to remain separate as a ruling class or caste for an extended period of time?
- On which side was more charisma, or impressive personal character?
- Did the superstratum possess military superiority, e.g. by superior weapons, or were both populations more or less on a par?
- Were the world-views of superstratum and substratum mutually compatible, or worlds apart, or if assimilable, in which direction?
- Did the substratum perhaps constitute a not yet wholly consolidated ethno-linguistic amalgam, when the new superstratum arrived?
- Were the social systems (social classification, nobility, land ownership etc) of substratum and superstratum compatible or somehow mutually adaptable?
- Was the amalgamation of the two populations achieved by force and brutal oppression, or relatively peacefully?
- Was cultural and linguistic consolidation and unity achieved relatively quickly, or did bilingualism prevail for centuries?
- Were the languages of substratum and superstratum only distantly related, i.e. for practical purposes unrelated (in conventional doctrine: did they belong to different "language families"?), or did they show affinities with respect to vocabulary, modes of expression, grammar, phraseology?

To this list might be added yet other factors. But I think this may suffice for our present

1945 A.D.	ethnic Germans from Bohemia, Silesia, Pomerania, East Prussia, the Balkans...
circa 800 A.D.	Atars
circa 500 A.D.	"Baiern" (= Suebians, Skirians, Herulians, Geths, Huns...)
circa 450 A.D.	Allemannians
15 B.C. - 483 A.D.	"Romans"
circa 500 B.C.	Celtic expansion
circa 600 B.C.	Prete-Romanes-speaking population
circa 750 B.C.	Rhaeto-Ligurians
circa 1200 B.C.	<u>Hamite-Semitic (Atlante-Semitic) influence on prete-Germanic tribes</u>
circa 3000 B.C.	Vasconic (also Berber?) substrate

Fig. 3

Tentative representation of ethno-linguistic "layers" (with "deposition dates") in Bavarian ethnogenesis, incorporating also Vennemann's thesis of a Vasconic substrate for Europe, and of an Atlante-Semitic influence on early Western Europe, especially on prete-Germanic and prete-Celtic populations.

purposes. My readers will have probably noticed that only one, the last one, of these twelve factors is of an immediately linguistic nature, i.e. refers to the two languages spoken by the substratum and the superstratum.

“Language families” as suspect as “races” in a diffusionist world-view

I think I have shown elsewhere on the pages of this journal (3) that cultural and ethno-linguistic diffusion have always been present, on a grand scale, on our planet during the many millennia of the history of mankind, of the human race. Because of the resulting, ever-present ethnic amalgamation, the idea of distinct “races” of mankind can only be regarded as highly suspect.

AT BEST THERE may have occurred, for some centuries at most, approximations to “races” under exceptional conditions, i.e. in geographically or topographically relatively isolated regions, but these were only ephemeral, i.e. transitory phenomena.

Likewise we can only deduce that, because of endless “racial” amalgamations, there may at best exist today, and have existed in the past, approximations to the purist idea of “language families”, but not in the purist genealogical sense. And these, too, only ephemeral.

For such approximations, “language groups” might at first appear as a much more appropriate term, but only on first sight. Because when we study e.g. Morgan Kelleys comments on such “groups” (4), with almost every scholar grouping the languages of the world together in a different manner after different criteria, we seem to stand no better off. We must also not forget that the great pioneer scholar of language comparison, Arnold Wadler (5), had to arrive at the conclusion from his worldwide researches that the idea of “language families” had to be a phantasm,

- A) because of the results of his practical researches in language, especially vocabulary comparisons, and
- B) on theoretical grounds, because of the obvious monogenesis of all languages on our planet.

Strangely enough this great scholar has almost disappeared into oblivion, perhaps because his research results in his time (between the two World Wars) were incompatible with then current preconceived notions of an allegedly existing special, superior “Aryan race”. I regard him as one of the greatest linguists and general scholars of the last centuries, including such great names as e.g. Sir William Jones, Franz Bopp or F. Max Müller (6).

Substrata and superstrata already amalgams

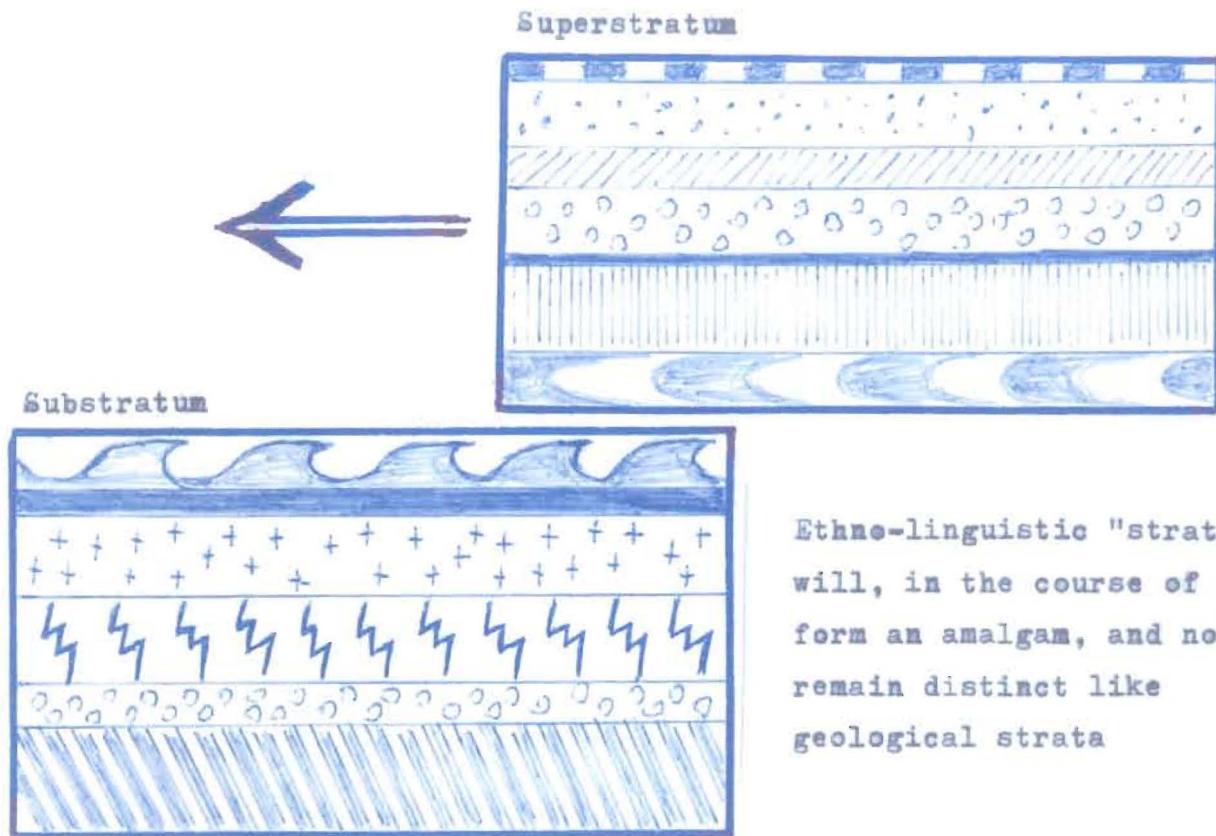
In the diffusionists view of things, and I think it is the only realistic one, when an ethno-linguistic superstratum overlays a native substratum, which already inhabits the country, it would have to be regarded as self-evident that both, the superstratum as well as the substratum, had already a long, rather chequered prehistory with many ethno-linguistic “admixtures”, and constituted ethnic amalgams speaking amalgam-languages with elements from many sources. I include here Fig.4 to exemplify this principle.

Wadler’s affinities between distant languages have to be expected

IN SUCH a scenario it is no great miracle that Wadler has found bewildering (to the believer in “language families”!) affinities, especially with respect to vocabulary, between today far distant languages. In view of the eternal, unceasing population movements by land and sea which have been going on for millennia on our planet, such affinities have to be expected.

Fig. 4

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Ethno-linguistic "strata"
will, in the course of time,
form an amalgam, and not
remain distinct like
geological strata

Exemplification of principle that substrata
and superstrata themselves are again also
composed of many former superstrata which
later on, together with the respective
substrata, become new part of the whole
ethno-linguistic substratum.

Again and again Wadler gives examples of words in some language, which do not occur in the other languages of that (alleged) “language family”, but which resurface in amore or less identical form in far distant languages belonging to other “language families”.

ISN'T THAT incidentally, most convincing evidence for the underlying unity of mankind? Such examples occur in abundance worldwide, but any serious discussion of this astounding facet or aspect of linguistics is shunned by the mainstream, probably to not endanger the paradigm or dogma of “language families”.

Vennemann's reconstruction of Western Europe's linguistic prehistory

In a previous issue of this journal (7) I have reported on Vennemann's tentative reconstruction of Western Europe's prehistory, especially in its linguistic aspect. I have to refer my readers to that article for details, respectively to Vennemann's own publications listed there. Here I would only like to mention some details of Vennemann's scenario which, coming from an eminent linguist, to me seem to speak strongly for an diffusionist approach to historical linguistics.

In Vennemann's scenario (wherein, however, I miss the Berbers and the Rhaeto-Ligurians) the oldest linguistic stratum is Vasconian, then arrives a Semitic superstratum by sea from afar, namely from around the Strait of Gibraltar, in his opinion “Urheimat” of the Hamito-Semitic peoples, and then arrived an Indo-European superstratum by land from the East. However, though the Semites generally arrived first, and the Indo-Europeans later, in certain places it was vice versa, which of course made a difference linguistically.

Vennemann states that “the thesis of a Hamito-Semitic substratum underlying Insular Celtic (is) one of the most reliably

established pieces of scientific knowledge there is in any empirical discipline” (8).

Another statement relevant for the problems discussed here: “Insular Celtic, e.g. today's Irish, has ... more similarity structurally with the ancient Semitic languages and also with classical Arabic, than any other Indo-Germanic language... The Insular-Celtic languages, too, are something new, which we cannot adequately explain in the framework of Indogermanistics and Celtology: in their linguistic substance they are mainly Indo-Germanic, namely Celtic, in their linguistic form, however, partly Hamito-Semitic; i.e. they are hamito-semiticized Celtic” (9).

And his thesis with respect to the Germanic Languages: “Germanic is adstratally and substratally Vasconized, adstratally and superstratally Hamito-Semiticized Indo-Germanic. Germanic... has three parents: Indo-Germanic, Vasconic, and Hamito-Semitic” (10).

Author's own diffusionist scenario for ancient Europe

Greatly impressed as the present author is by Vennemann's highly qualified, pioneering work: for my personal use I have tried to modify and amend a bit his scenario, first by attenuating the role which the alleged “languages families” are said to play, second by postulating a twofold influence from ancient India on Europe.

I DO NOT believe in an “Indo-European migration” from somewhere in the West to India. My own scenario (greatly influenced by Vennemann) is illustrated in the accompanying map (Fig.5). I refer my readers to my remarks there. I feel there was a Sanskrit-related (“Indo-European”), more warlike and less cultured and sophisticated influence from the East, and another, highly sophisticated one by sea around the Cape of Good Hope.



Fig. 5

Amalgamation of Vennemann's scenario with proposal by author for a twelfth influence from ancient India on Europe

We must not forget that in late-prehistoric times, India will have probably been the most populous country on our planet, and that it seems to have been a seafaring nation since times immemorial, with a very active merchant caste. I cannot imagine that her ships should have stopped at the Cape of Good Hope. In my opinion they will have followed the West coast of Africa, and in due course will have arrived, as charismatic culture-bearers, on the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula.

In how far there will have been an interconnection with those Proto-Hamito-Semitic seafarers, whose original "motherland" Vennemanns sees in the region around the Strait of Gibraltar, I cannot say at this moment.

As I said above, instead of the conventionally postulated "Indo-European migration" from somewhere in the West (preferably Europe) as far as India, I see migrations of less sophisticated, more war-like tribes, designated (C) on my map (Fig.5), from India towards Europe as much more probable.

THESE TRIBES may have been forcibly expelled from the Indian subcontinent by the advanced civilization there. Perhaps the legendary tradition of Parashu-Rama, "Rama with the Battle-ax", an "avatar" or divine incarnation (not to be confused with the Rama of the Ramayana epic, another "avatar"), refers to such an event. He is said to have expelled war-like races from India.

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Zusammenfassung

In einem diffusionistischen Szenario kann die Vorstellung von „Sprachfamilien“ – wie übrigens auch die Vorstellung von angeblichen, streng von einander unterscheidbaren „Rassen“ der Menschheit – keinesfalls als „wissenschaftlich erwiesenes Faktum“ betrachtet werden. Die Vorstellung muß eher in die Kategorie zweifelhafter Hypothesen eingeordnet werden, die aus streng wissenschaftsphilosophischer und erkenntnistheoretischer Sicht sehr wohl widerlegbar erscheinen. In unserer realen Welt, in der offensichtlich schon seit Jahrtausenden ethnolinguistische Diffusion und Vermischung in großem Maßstabe im Gange ist, können offenbar nur Kreol- oder Amalgam-Sprachen erwartet werden.