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Diversity and Convergence**



**UNIVERSITÉ  
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PROLEGOMENA TO SAUL LEVIN'S STUDIES  
OF SEMITIC AND INDO-EUROPEAN

J. P. MAHER

I differ from many writers... whose strongest credentials are a Ph.D. (or an equivalent degree in theology) under the tutelage of a highly reputed professor, who in his youth went through a similar apprenticeship. —The trouble with that sort of guidance is that in effect, if not always deliberately, the junior scholar is forever committed to his mentor's ideology... [S]cholarship, alas, is riddled with fallacies, some of which go back more than a few generations.—Saul Levin, *Guide to the Bible* (2009)

THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on Historical Linguistics (3ICHL) was held in August 1977 at the University of Hamburg. It brought together nearly a hundred scholars, including Raimo Anttila, Eugenio Coseriu, Ernst Pulgram, Henning Andersen, Niels Danielsen, James Poultney, Henry Hoenigswald, Konrad Koerner, Yakov Malkiel, to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

Saul Levin's 3ICHL paper was on the cognates Hebrew *'adam*, 'man' and Latin *hūmus* 'earth, soil' and congeners. It was one of the most memorable contributions to the conference. The term *cognate* here means "historically related," whether by descent from a common ancestor, by diffusion from one society to another, or any combination of these. Hostile critics have taken the term *cognate* to refer narrowly to a genetic relative, so to speak, *à la* "mother tongue, sister and daughter languages," etc. In Italian your *cognato* is a brother-in-law, not a blood relative.<sup>2</sup> Anyone looking for a balanced and competent appraisal of Levin's work should begin with J. P. Brown (1997).

My first meeting with Saul Levin was in 1971, when I was on a visit to my alma mater.<sup>3</sup> We had never heard of each other. We exchanged offprints and have stayed in touch ever

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<sup>1</sup> Attendees reported hearing from mainstream linguists that they would not attend, claiming the conference would be biased against them. Would they have boycotted a conference biased in their favor?

<sup>2</sup> Levin compares some 'possible remote cognates' to the Semitic root *mlā* 'full' (1995:182). He compares forms in Tagalog, Malay, Turkish, Mandarin Chinese, etc. Kaye (1999) incautiously ignores Levin's cautionary term *remote* and his explicit concept of diffusion of trade terms becoming totally *naturalized* words. In English, *cognate* and *loanword* are not mutually exclusive; since, next to *father*, English *paternal* is a loanword, a borrowing by a Germanic language of an Italic cognate, a *tatsama*.

<sup>3</sup> Now called Binghamton University, the school was founded after World War II for veterans in Binghamton, Johnson City, and Endicott, NY, as Triple Cities College, a branch of Syracuse University. The school was re-named for local Revolutionary War figure, Robert Harpur, on its takeover by the State of New York. A clerk in the Surveyor General's office, Harpur is thought to be the man who adopted classical names for the townships of Aurelius, Brutus, Camillus, Cato, Cicero, Dryden, Fabius, Galen, Hannibal, Hector, Homer, Junius, Locke, Lysander, Manlius,

since. With some ancient Indo-European languages and a batch of modern ones in my kit, I was equipped with some pre-requisites for grappling with Saul's work. But I did not have any Hebrew or other Semitic languages. I wrongly assumed at first that Saul had been brought up in the rabbinical tradition, just as I had worked my way through and out of Catholic school and seminaries on my path from priestly celibacy to the asceticism of U.S. linguistics of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Saul's was not a religious family. He first read the Bible when he was twenty-five years old and took to reading Scripture not for salvation, but to see for himself what was there.

For the next three years after meeting Saul Levin I read a good bit of his work. It was hard going, but I accumulated an informed outsider's familiarity with Semitic. You get to that point when you can ask questions. Yaron Matras (1999) recommends: first read Levin's chapter, "Echoes of Prehistoric Life and Culture," browse the indices, then read it like an encyclopedia. He also advises: "...there are in my opinion two ways of appreciating the book—single and wholesale. It can be used as a stimulating source of information on single suspected cognates, or it can be taken in its entirety to represent a mystery yet unsolved."

Saul Levin communicates a specialist's findings to scholars who want to follow developments outside their own special fields. And he works with real texts, not models. This is how the LSA worked in 1925. One member, Edward Sapir, had interests ranging from Europe to America to Tibet and Africa; he applied the discipline and disciplines he learned in Germanic philology to American Indian languages and more. Sapir wrote "Internal Evidence from the Language for the Northern Origin of the Navaho" (1936) in a manner meant to be comprehensible to readers with a total lack of the Navaho language. Like me, Sapir dealt there with just nine etymologies. The nucleus of Levin's work is some eighty etymologies, with thousands of ramifications.

Levin argues that Hebrew is aberrant in the Semitic family and at bottom is an Indo-European language with a Semitic, in particular an Akkadian superstratum. Only with this awareness can readers fathom Levin's ideas, chief of which is that Hebrew, from the evidence of lexical items in attested contexts, shares with Indo-European biconsonantal roots, inflexions, productive morphological patterning, and ablaut.

This contradicts the simple idea of the Nostratic and Afro-Asiatic schools that Semitic and Indo-European branch off from a common ancestor. To borrow a concept from plate tectonics, there have been many subductions of Indo-European and Semitic societies and languages. Traces of their "plate tectonics" pervade the record called history, whether such

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Marcellus, Milton, Ovid, Pompey, Romulus, Scipio, Sempronius, Solon, Sterling, Tully, Ulysses, Virgil. Fine wooden houses in the Classical Revival style, popularly known as "southern colonial", dot the countryside and towns; marble is used in the capital. I had just transferred there from St Bernard's Seminary and College in Rochester after concluding I was to flunk celibacy. Harpur's strength in humanities and medieval studies made it a congenial place for a student migrating from the Middle Ages. I augmented my Greek and Latin with courses in Italian language, art and music, Middle and English, and Russian language, geography and history. Today Binghamton University is rated among the best public universities in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Joos (1957:96): "Children want explanations, and there is a child in each of us; descriptivism makes a virtue of not pampering the child."

is recorded in texts or retrieved from other evidence. Because of the substratum/superstratum relation, no reconstruction of any proto-language ancestral to both Semitic and Indo-European is feasible until contact matters have been sorted out, which is what Saul Levin is doing.

Semitic and I-E peoples have been in contact for millennia. Contacts of I-E, Semitic and Egyptian in historical times go back farther back than lusty old Samson and Delilah, or giant Goliath and boy David, or the love triangle of King David and Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. Egyptologists in the 1920s shook the scientific world with the discovery of the Amarna letters, in which the widow of an Egyptian king is involved in match-making with the Hittite King Suppiluliuma. We may assume that the matchmaking and subsequent pillow talk were conducted in Egyptian and /or in Hittite, maybe with other language(s) tossed in. Frank Kammerzell (Kammerzell, Borchers, & Weniger 2001) finds evidence for contact between Indo-European and Ancient Egyptian in the proto-period.

Egypt was ruled for generations by the I-E Hyksos. Then came I-E Seleucids and Ptolemies. Farther West in today's Tunis, Semitic Dido loved and lost I-E Aeneas. Hannibal and Cato had it out. Maccabees vied with Romans. Saul of Tarsus learned his letters in Greek and Hebrew. Jihads and Crusades came and sometimes went, Reagan vied with Ghaddafi, Bush 41 with Saddam, Bush 43 with Saddam and those who moved into the vacuum left by his removal.

The picture snapped into focus for me when I read the paper that Saul Levin submitted for the first LACUS Forum in 1974. The title was a sleeper—"Some Occupational Terms in Greek and Hebrew." Levin demonstrated that the Oedipus tale and the Moses story share elements from common ancient sources. I knew it would turn out to be sensational to a learned audience, so I scheduled it for the last paper of the meeting, to go out with a bang. The meeting went out with a bang.

THE BORDERS OF SEMITIC AND INDO-EUROPEAN. Ten years after the end of WW II, my professor at The Catholic University of America Martin R. P. McGuire mimeographed a syllabus, typed at his own expense, for Introduction to Classical Studies.<sup>5</sup> I augment it a bit here and prose up McGuire's catch-phrase format:

Indo-European unity ended in the course of the third millennium B.C., with migrations of Indo-European speakers and the emergence into the light of history of

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<sup>5</sup> This, rather than "Classical Philology" was McGuire's preferred term because of the confusion of "philology" with "linguistics" in English countries (1954:32). About a decade later, on the dread news that he had an incurable cancer, McGuire was offered an honorary degree by The Catholic University of America. McGuire declined the consolation prize. Had the pontifical university, he told them, provided money for a typist for him when he was young and productive, that would have been genuine support of scholarship. This melancholy information was passed on to me in Hamburg in 1975 by another distinguished scholar of the university, Bernard Peebles. At the age of 70. Peebles, already retired, was shot one evening by a hold-up man in Northeast Washington. He got home, but bled to death before help arrived. Peebles shared an irony with me that MRPMcG himself would have relished: the day of McGuire's death was the Ides of March.

the various Indo-European dialects. Theories on the original home of the Indo-Europeans have swung with changes of fashion. From the 1930s to World War II the Baltic homeland was much in favor in Northern Europe among misguided patriots. In the mid-1950s there is a general return to the old hypothesis (of Schrader and Nehring) that the original I-E home is to be sought in the region north of the Black Sea.

A *Scientific American* article by Paul Thieme (1958:63–74) was a handsome, illustrated presentation, widely circulated, of the I-E Baltic homeland theory. His pupil Hanns-Peter Schmidt tells me that Thieme was never an enthusiast for the idea. Thieme's commission from *Scientific American* was simply to write up the standard Baltic homeland position.

Paul Friedrich's *PIE Trees* (1970) mooted the Baltic homeland debate by showing that the beech and salmon, etc. are as much at home on the slopes and in the streams of the northern Caucasus range as they are in the Baltic basin.

In the 1950s Marija Gimbutas updated Schrader's scheme, with somewhat sparse credit. In the mid 1950s she published her view that there was an I-E irruption into Europe ca. 2500 BC, but successive archeological finds revealed more waves of Indo-European migration. Gimbutas later posited three waves of the Kurgan peoples into their present homelands.<sup>6</sup> A redundant feature of waves is that you never get just one, two, or three.

Later Gimbutas focused her work on the pre-IE cultures of "Old Europe" into whose lands the Kurgan peoples had burst (Dexter & Bley-Jones 1997). Her Old Europe is not to be confused with Krahe's. In the lands around the east Mediterranean, Old Europeans, including Semites, vied with Indo-European Kurgan peoples and others. Northern bread-and-butter and beer were displaced by Mediterranean wine and olive oil (Hehn 1976[1870]). The twain met.

Long ago it was clear that Greek lexicon contained a goodly percentage of non-IE words. Meillet attributed loss of the I-E inflexions in Greek to bilingualism with the indigenous non-IE inhabitants, at least some of whom were Semites.

Otto Schrader (1883, 1906–1907) noted the absence of autochthonous I-E terms for ass and camel. But southern I-E languages have words for them, vocabulary that was unknown in the north until borrowed from Mediterranean I-E-ans. *No argumentum e silentio*, Schrader's positive argument is that Mediterranean Indo-Europeans acquired non-IE loanwords south of the Caucasus, to provide the terminology for unfamiliar domesticated animals. Renfrew's idea of an Anatolian I-E Homeland was demolished a century ago (Renfrew 1988; Jasanoff 1988). Then there's palm tree, elephant, tiger, etc. Mediterranean Indo-Europeans share their word for 'lion' with Semites. Saul Levin derives Latin *camēlus* from the same source as *caballus*, source of the Romance words for horse. Now, *caballus* is not a synonym of *equus*, but translates into English as 'nag, plug, pack animal'. This is Saul

<sup>6</sup> This broad brush picture was really more complex. The lesson of Britain is illustrative. The Normans who took England descended from Frenchified Danes who dwelt around Dublin before hitting the beaches of Normandy, with many Bretons in the retinue in 1066. Before them came Vikings, Angles-Saxons-Jutes, Romans, the real Britons—the Welsh. With the advent of Angles, Saxons, etc., many of these Britons were off from Britain to Brittany, replacing Gaulish. How many different "waves", bands of Celts *et al.* landed in Britain in the Bronze Age?

Levin's approach. Adherents of the Nostratic model, it seems, would have to posit a proto-form for Hebrew *gimel* and Spanish *caballo*.

Now back to McGuire, to see just where Saul Levin's work fits in. I revert to McGuire's catch phrase style here:

- The entrance of peoples or bands speaking Indo-European dialects into the Oriental world in the early centuries of the second millennium B.C. and the beginning of a new epoch in Ancient History.
- The possible causes of the Indo-European migrations, the displacements of other peoples, the Hittite sack of Babylon, the Cassite raids and the establishment of Cassite rule in Lower Mesopotamia, Hurrite movements, profound disturbances in Syria and Palestine, the Hyksos' invasion and conquest of Egypt.
- The role of the Indo-European invaders in the introduction of the horse and the horse-drawn war chariot into the Near East.
- The foundation of Indo-European dynasties or states in Asia Minor and Upper Mesopotamia, Eastern Iran, and India in the second millennium B.C.
- The ephemeral character of many of these and the complete absorption of the Indo-European speakers into the earlier populations, the more or less thorough fusion of Indo-European and non-Indo-European elements in those centers or areas where Indo-European minorities maintained their identity and political dominance.
- The problem of Hittite in relation to common Indo-European and to the other Indo-European dialects and of the extent of Indo-European elements in Hittite culture.
- The first Indo-European migrations into the Greek and Italian peninsulas and the chronological and other problems connected with them; the Indo-Iranian group and the early Indo-European civilizations of India.

Indo-Europeans gained vast territories from 3000 to 2000 BC. They also lost ground, especially in Central Asia and in the Near and Middle East. Bronze Age archeology from the 1920s to the 1950s reflected destruction horizons and irruptions of new peoples. The stage for Levin's work was set by William Foxwell Albright:

[I]t seems increasingly probable that a great southward migration of Indo-Aryans and Horites (Hurrians) took place then. There is no trace of these racial elements in Palestine and southern Syria during the nineteenth or eighteenth centuries, yet by the fifteenth century Indo-Aryan and Horite princes and nobles were established almost everywhere. Some sort of mass migration of these peoples southward must have occurred meanwhile... Palestine had become a high road of trade between Africa and Asia. (1949: 85–86)

A half-century later, the picture is updated by Gernot Wilhelm (2000:1243–54):

- *Pre-1600 BC.* Ancestors of the historical Hurrians inhabited the mountainous regions of eastern Anatolia for centuries. Hurrians penetrated the agricultural regions of the lowlands.

- *ca 1550 BC.* Before texts are found in Hurrian language or Hurrian words in texts of other languages, the Mitanni are mentioned in the Egyptian tomb biography of Anemhemet. Inherited dynastic names of the kings of Mitanni are Indo-Aryan, though the language in general use was Hurrian.
- *1550–1500 BC.* Egypt, under the first kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty, expands into Mitanni territory after the reign of Queen Hatshepsut. The source for Mitanni language is in the letters to the pharaohs excavated at Tell-al-Amarna in the 1920s in Middle Egypt (Akhenaten). A Mitanni victory over Hittites is mentioned. A Hittite army is dispatched to re-conquer Mitanni.
- *ca. 1400 BC.* In Hurrian texts, proper names, Indo-Aryan names, are found.
- *1300 BC.* Texts include Mitanni Indo-Aryan words associated with horse breeding and chariot driving. The Mitanni dynasty retained Indo-Aryan throne names into the thirteenth century.
- *1200 BC ...* Documents of Egyptians, Hurrians and Hittites mentioning the Mitanni include archaic Indo-Aryan words for horse breeding and chariot driving, in addition to names of the gods Mitra, Varuna, and the Asvin divine twins.

Gordon Whittaker (1997ff.) has recently turned up stunning evidence of earlier I-E presence in Mesopotamia in Sumerian texts. Invited to the University of California, Los Angeles, he delivered a presentation: “Euphratic: An Indo-European Answer to the Sumerian Question?”

I will be presenting controversial new evidence bearing on the so-called Sumerian Problem, the question as to whether the Sumerians were the first to settle Southern Mesopotamia. Loanwords in the Sumerian language and the phonetic characteristics of the writing system point to a solution of this century-old problem. The language behind not only the sign values of the future cuneiform system but also the majority of identifiable non-Semitic loans in Sumerian is apparently a member of the Indo-European family, indeed the earliest known representative by over a millennium and a half. This was the language of the Euphrateans.

In the 1950s I had read that the IE word for cow was borrowed from Sumerian *gud* and that IE words for red and ore were borrowings of Sumerian *urud* ‘copper’. That was exciting. Whittaker (2001) shows the borrowing to be the other way around—from IE to Sumerian, via Euphratic. “IE \**gwou-s* (final [Sumerian] *d/r* < IE *s* is regular),” and:

The Sumerian language possesses loanwords indicating that an early Indo-European language, with affinities to west I-E languages [Celtic, Italic, Germanic] was spoken in south Mesopotamian in the 4th millennium B.C. (2001:15)

Whittaker describes a Sumerian logogram based on the image of a fish having a phonetic reading *peš*. This he compared with the familiar Latin *piscis* ‘fish’. A pictogram featuring a milk pitcher serves as a logogram for *ga* ‘milk’. Compare Greek *galakt* and Latin *lact-* ‘milk’.

As a phonetic sign it reads as the Sumerian modal prefix *ga-* 'let me'. A few more brief samples of Whittaker's readings:

- A phonetic sign read as *lik* is the sign for hound/wolf and point to kinship with the I-E word for 'wolf'.
- Sumerian 'ewe' is written in Early Sumerian at Ebla as *Ū-wi*. Compare I-E *\*h<sub>3</sub>owi-s* 'sheep'; Latin *ovis* 'sheep' and English *ewe*.
- Sumerian 'bird' is *bu* < I-E *\*h<sub>2</sub>aw-i-* [cf. Latin *avis*].

Whittaker's work contains many, many such important etymologies. Further, he says:

Of culture elements eventually reaching Mesopotamia from the Caucasus region, especially noteworthy is the lack with the Euphrates folk of ca. 4000 B.C. of the domesticated horse. This indicates that they had split off from proto-IE around just before 4000 B.C. In regard to the dog sign (as the related Sumerian loan word for 'bitch'), Euphrates people (as also the Sumerians), it seems, unlike all later Indo-Europeans, did not know the dog. This also speaks for the high antiquity of Euphratic. The biblical Hebrews had little to do with the dog and the horse.

The Semitic societies that Saul Levin works with are found higher up in the stratigraphy than Whittaker's Euphrateans. Northern Semites were in contact with peoples ancestral to Hellenic and Indo-Iranian, as in the periods covered by Albright or Wilhelm. The earliest known evidence for Indic language is not from India, but Mesopotamia—"between the Rivers" to the Greeks, Doab "Two Waters" to the Indians. Gernot Wilhelm (1995) anticipates that texts written in the Harappan script will be found to contain Indo-Aryan words.

Saul Levin's first big book, *The Indo-European and Semitic Languages* (1971), was reviewed by Joseph Malone (1973). For him Levin's work showed homologies, but Malone discounted them as statistical flukes, if without demonstration. Levin's second big book, *Semitic & Indo-European: The Principal Etymologies* (1995) got a comprehending review from Yaron Matras (1999):

The more scholars know about linguistic history, the more they appear to be challenged by, and so attracted to the mysteries of prehistorical linguistics. Saul Levin is a recognized authority on several of the ancient languages of western Eurasia, and his present study continues his work on the relations between the Indo-European and Semitic languages.

Saul Levin doesn't conceal that his phonetic correspondences are less tidy than the neat tabulations of Grimm and Verner and Grassmann. Matras puts it so: "With the origin of suspected cognates going so far back in time, it would be unfair to expect a neatly formed series of sound shifts, but an inventory of the recurring patterns would have been helpful."

Africanists at the 3ICHL in Hamburg, however, said they would be delighted to get results as good as Levin's. Yet, even in Europe, in shallow time depths, things can be messy. Compare:

- *mlečanski* 'Venetian' (Serbian)
- veneziano* (Italian)
- *albanese* (Italian)
- Arnaut* (noun, Serbian, Turkish)
- Αρβανίτες* (noun plural, Greek)
- *veringer* 'Varangians' (Norse)
- Varyagi* (Old Russian)
- warank* (Arabic)
- *němci* (Old Russian)
- namdzh-in* (Arabic, plural)
- nemidzoi ~ nemintzi* (Greek, plural)
- *patlidžan* (Serbian, Armenian...)
- patlican* (Turkish)
- melanzana* (Italian)
- aubergine* (French)
- berenjena* (Spanish)
- (al) ba'dingian* (Arabic)
- vatīn-gana* (Sanskrit '[the plant that] cures the wind' —fartless, unlike other legumes.)

Wouldn't Nostraticists have to derive these words from their proto-language after loading everything into the hopper, ignoring flux and reflux of peoples, languages, and cultures? A similar mechanist procedure vitiates "Generative Phonology" (Maher 1969).<sup>7</sup>

Nostratic is written up as science in the popular press, even though Indo-Europeanists have shown that the Nostraticists haven't done their homework, for example Eric P. Hamp (in Salmons & Joseph 1998). Saul Levin, too, finds that Nostratic fails the test.<sup>8</sup> It's the approach dubbed by V. G. Childe (1958) as "postage stamp archaeology," picking out shredded bits and pieces and throwing out the envelope and enclosed letter.

It was not isolated words that were transferred in the exchanges, stock-raising and trading. Levin goes well beyond Pott's recognition of the cognate words for bull in Semitic and Indo-European. Levin has found whole-phrase cognates, not single words, for 'horn(s) of the bull':

<sup>7</sup> In a talk to the Ethno-Linguistic Seminar at Indiana University in 1963 or 1964, Fred Householder told us that he had picked up a pre-print copy of something new in Cambridge MA: "Chomsky and Halle are writing a book on the pronunciation of Greek and Latin words in English." It appeared in 1968 with impressive typography, juvenile linguistic ideas, and inept title as *The Sound Pattern of English*.

<sup>8</sup> Nostratic postulations about the IE 'dog' and the source of Germanic "wife" are untenable. Osthoff (1901) solved the dog problem over a hundred years ago.

- Arabic *qarnu šawrī*
- Latin *cornū taurī*
- Greek *kéras taúrou*
- Hebrew *qéren šowr.*

On these words Whittaker (1997) and Levin propose opposite directions of borrowing between I-E to Semitic. Either way, the contact is between Semites and Indo-Europeans, and Nostratic is repudiated by both.

Vittore Pisani (1973) wrote a respectful review of *The Indo-European and Semitic Languages: An Exploration of Structural Similarities Related to Accent, Chiefly in Greek, Sanskrit, and Hebrew* (1971). Pisani took note of the compelling geography, especially the little matter of the Caucasus range, rich in minerals. At first it seems a barrier between Hamito-Semitic peoples to the south and Indo-European to the north, and beyond to Finno-Ugric, Turkic, Altaic, and more. Italians are prepared for this by the presence of the Alps, which are not only barrier but also bridge between north and south. In clear weather, from Verona and Venice, snow-capped peaks loom gigantic. Here runs one of the Amber Roads, from the Baltic up Oder and Vistula, over to the Inn, up again over the Brenner Pass, then down Adige and Pò to the Adriatic and Mediterranean, to the Near East—to Palestine and Egypt. Baltic amber is known in Egypt. Egyptian faïence beads are found in Scandinavian graves. The trading and bargaining and transport required polyglot bargaining.

To the west, Morocco and Gibraltar form the Pillars of Hercules, holding up the sky, the gate to Atlas's ocean. Italian maps after Columbus revealed the coasts of America and Africa/Europe facing each other like the pieces of a big jigsaw puzzle. Though cartographers had not seldom theorized about the fit of the coasts, geology courses when I was an undergraduate dismissed it all as a joke of nature.<sup>9</sup> The pattern was seldom missed by grade schoolers.<sup>10</sup> Saul Levin's work and fate can well be compared to Alfred Wegener's. When astronomer-turned-meteorologist Wegener proposed to explain the congruence of continental profiles as the result of continents "drifting" over the earth's crust, he was dismissed as not a proper geologist, just a meteorologist. Astronomers, weathermen and geologists, however, share the map room, where atmosphere meets lithosphere.

Levin's sigla are a logical extension of, and vast improvement on, Schleicher's asterisk for reconstructions (Levin 2002:vii):

- methodically reconstructed for a prehistoric or other unattested stage
- √ definitely known from actual texts or from current usage
- † doubtless available for use in the language, but apparently—through mere accident—unattested in the corpus
- § probably to be found somewhere in the corpus, but not accessible to me
- ? merely hypothetical; with no standing as evidence for comparative grammar

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the Darwin Centenary in 1959 good scholars were deriding Catastrophism in the extinction of species. Now we have the explanation involving asteroid impact.

<sup>10</sup> In my school days, we made multi-colored maps of the continents by applying on the sketch of the respective land masses a paste of flower, salt and water, tinted with water-color inks.

- ?? cited by me for the sole purpose of discreditation.

Levin's practice of citing data in original scripts has been tarred as "showing off." Lord help the critics if Saul were dealing with Georgian, Armenian, Thai, Hindi, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. Scholars of Hebrew and Irish would defend Levin's practice: "Anyone who is familiar with Irish in the Irish character will find not only difficulty but annoyance in reading it in Roman type. The language loses much of its individuality, just as Greek does in Roman type" (Lynam 1969[1924]). An example from Spanish would not be exotic: the spelling *canyon* may help the gringo approximate Spanish sounds, but obliterates the phonological principle that Spanish distinguishes palatalized and non-palatalized consonants, as in *ano and año*. Matras (1999) lets himself be bothered only by inadequate computer fonts. Otherwise, he gives high marks for Levin's practice: "both author and publisher deserve special recognition for an impressive display of fonts and diacritics."<sup>11</sup>

Sapir taught that it is possible to prove two languages are related, but impossible to prove that any two languages are unrelated (1921, ch. 9).<sup>12</sup> Gyula Décsy (1991) has made the hard-to-disprove point, may Karl Popper rest in peace, that all languages are related, some closer, some more distantly. Saul Levin doesn't oppose the idea of an Afro-Asiatic family tree but finds there's little if any evidence for it. His considered, not assumed, position is that features attributed to a proto-AA language are diffusions across landscapes populated by many "unrelated" peoples, if any human societies at all are unrelated to each other.

If you have attended any of Saul Levin's talks you will know he answers questions and challenges eruditely and calmly, never paying back in kind the scurrility of some of the attacks on him. Levin's books have been both praised and damned. Sidwell (1997) likens Levin's method to the yokel etymology linking Amerind *Potomac* and Greek *potamós* as cognates.<sup>13</sup> The yokel here is not Saul Levin.

Levin's harshest critics opine that he is isolated. Trask wrote on Linguist List: "A linguist called Saul Levin has published at least two books arguing for a link between Semitic and Indo-European, but he hasn't convinced anybody."

Robert Hetzron argued: "What Levin seems not to know is that Hebrew, which had cases, always generalized the oblique cases (just like the Romance languages with the Latin accusative" (1977). I heard this shaggy dogma in Comparative-Historical Linguistics 101 in 1955. In 1972 I asked seasoned old Henry Kahane about his position on the matter. He said

<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and '60s I relished the transliterations of the name of one *Nikita Sergeievich ~ Hukuma Cepreebuv ... Khrushchev~Χρουνττζεβ~Chruszczew~Chrouchtchev~Chruschtschew*, all monstrosities in comparison with *Xpυυέβ*.

<sup>12</sup> "We can only say, with reasonable certainty, that such and such languages are descended from a common source, but we cannot say that such and such other languages are not genetically related. All we can do is to say that the evidence for relationship is not cumulative enough to make the inference of common origin absolutely necessary."

<sup>13</sup> Bloomfield's *Potomac/potamos* bit was a joke. The American river in any case took its name from some market place on that stream, while Greek *potamós*, any Hellenist would know, was in origin a motivated word, descriptive of a cascading torrent, expectable in mountainous Greece. Morphologically it represents a suffixation of \**pet-* ~ *pot-* ~ *pt-* 'fall'.

it was good enough for him and seemed to work well enough for the history of Greek. This is an example of what Tenney Frank (quoted in McGuire's lectures) called the "fallacy of the shortcut to knowledge." Saves homework—and thinking.

"Sometimes [Levin] even chooses a case form from the declension because this seems to better serve his purpose" (Gonzalo Rubio 1998:656–57). The trouble with Rubio's position is that this is precisely what happens in all language contact:

"O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!" Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen in her brother's Latin Grammar, "A mouse—of a mouse—to a mouse—a mouse—O mouse!" ([Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*])

Alice is backed up by Nanook of the North. English borrowed Eskimo words *igloo* (singular), *mukluk* (dual), and (plural) *Inuit*. Eskimos will grin at the Anglo's unwitting use of their number suffixes. We pluralize already dual *mukluk* as *muklukuks*. Had the invaders picked up the word for house where two or more of them happened to be found together, English might now have \**iglook* or \**iglout*. And if the intrepid explorers had encountered a lot of Eskimo products and structures, we might have *muklut* and *iglut*. Had they encountered a solitary Eskimo, I suppose we'd say *Inoo*.

Nanook demolishes the "theory" enunciated by Rüdiger Schmitt prescribing that words are [always?] adopted in a definite "Leitform". He and Hetzron and Rubio haven't shown us how they ascertain this form. Schmitt insists that borrowing between inflexional languages in contact cannot involve words in just any old case form (1996:203–5).

The facts don't cooperate. For example scores of toponyms, e.g., *München*, *Bayern*, *Preussen*, *Hessen*, *Göttingen*, *Tübingen*, etc. are originally locational forms ("instrumental case").<sup>14</sup> Schmitt upbraids Levin also for allegedly implying (where?) that loanword selection is based on protagonists' knowledge of whole inflexional paradigms. Lewis Carroll's Alice shows Schmitt's idea to be a joke.

Regarding reviews, I quote again Martin R. P. McGuire:

Unfortunately... the quality of book reviews in most scholarly journals is very uneven. Many reviews are superficial, and, what is worse, many show an inexcusable

<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of Slavic place names in Austria are old Slovene locative case forms in *-jah*, e.g. *Ferlach* < *borovljah* 'in/among people of the fir wood'. In Italy, many city names are from Latin locational forms (nominally genitive or ablative case): *Pozzuoli* < *Puteolis*, *Pompeii* < *Pompeiiis*, *Napoli* < *Nea-Poli*, *Udine* < *Udinae* (nominative *Udina*), *Firenze* < *Florentiae* (nominative *Florentia*). Polish and Czech selected for the name of countries what was once only the accusative case of the names of their inhabitants, answering "whither?" : *Wlochy*, *Vlachy*, as against "Italians' *Wlosi*, *Vlasi*, old nominatives/agentives. More of the same: in Ireland the English forms *Erin* and *Tara* reveal that the Sassanach picked these up in locational syntagma, not the nominative dictionary form.

lack of judgment and ordinary common sense in balancing the good and the bad in the final verdict. (McGuire 1955:197)

A certain sclerosis in establishment linguistics is reflected in the lack of mention of Saul Levin's work in e.g. Mallory and Adams' *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Studies* (1997). EIEC also omits Sadoszky. EIEC was published at around the same time as Whittaker's work began to appear.

I-E scholars often ignore Indo-European affinities with non I-E languages. The mindset has been called "Indo-Euro-Centrism" by Décsy (1991):

In 1960 I met the famous Polish linguist Kurylowicz... in a scholarly discussion meeting. He addressed us about complicated internal problems of the Indo-European phonology. I made some remarks on his views, quoting data from the Uralic languages. Before dealing with my remarks he asked somewhat indignantly and without any trace of humor: "Uralic languages? What are they?" Apparently: *Extra Indo-Europam non est vita, si est vita, non est ita...*

Another Uralic neighbor is Anttila:

I was bothered by the indeterminacy about the northern boundary of (Proto) Indo-European in the standard literature, and... there is much further knowledge for it, both material and chronological. It is the Indo-European side that refuses to peek through the fence, and then some of the Finno-Ugrists also go with them, because the former are supposed to know their Indo-European better... There is an incredibly rich array of Indo-European loans of all ages and of various geographic distributions in Uralic, and with stringent philology they can be used for productive historical inferences... The best results come... combining archaeology and loanword studies... (2000:513-14)

On the eastern front, I-E-speaking peoples reached what later became western Han China. There I-E loanwords (wheel, hub, belt) are known. The Silk Road is older than Marco Polo. Blue-eyed Tarim mummies are buried on the Altai, where Tokharian was once spoken, while today the landscape is home to phenotypically East Asian peoples, who may have intermarried with the Europoids that preceded them there (Barber 1999, Mallory & Mair 2000).

The IE homeland debate is not just about prehistory. In our day feminist and Wiccan groups have eagerly adopted Gimbutas's late views. Elst (1999), Erdosy (1995) and Frawley (1994) contend about the Indo-Aryan conquest of India. Nationalist Hindus, Greeks and Serbs sometimes see the Indo-European theory as resurgent imperialism by British and German scholarship.<sup>15</sup>

Gyarmathy clarified the spread of Ob-Ugric peoples from the watershed of the Ob river south and west to the Black Sea shores, where they and Turkic peoples lived together

<sup>15</sup> Belgrade Byzantologist Radivoje Radić (2002) lampoons the "Romantics" in his book "The Serbs Before and After Adam".

long before the Magyar Landnahme in Pannonia. Other Ob-Ugrians went north. Otto Sadovszky (1984, 1996, 2002) has collected massive evidence of Ob-Ugric peoples migrating the Ob downstream to the shores of the Arctic Ocean, hunting the salmon, thence over the Bering Straits and planting the language family known now as Penutian along the Pacific coast of North America. They stopped at Monterey (California) because the salmon do not run farther south than that. Voguls still live in the old homeland in the Ob basin.

When I first encountered Sadovszky's work, at the Hamburg 31CHL conference, my disposition—from indoctrination—was skeptical. But when I sat down in his study and he showed me data from American Indian languages of the Pacific coast, I was surprised to find I could supply Hungarian cognates myself. One dismissive reviewer holds that Sadovszky “does not have 30,000 cognates; it's only 10,000.” (Raimo Anttila p.c.)

On Ob-Ugrians in California, Sadovszky quotes S.A. Barrett (University of California, Berkeley); he recorded salient features of a ceremony, from May 5 to May 8, 1906, in the wake of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

A few days after the [San Francisco] earthquake, the great shaman, Salvador, suddenly went into a trance, and on his awakening announced that he had journeyed to *bole Wilak*, ‘ghost world’...The earthquake was felt so strongly by the Cortina Valley Indians, that during the ceremony it was the main topic of conversation. Almost all saw the immense column of smoke rising toward the sky. Some could even discern at night the huge flames consuming the city.

In the mind of the Patwin Indians, the world was near an end. All that they felt and saw was the part of the final cataclysm, fitting so well into their religious philosophy. The Patwin believe that the world (*wilak*) had been created in four phases and stretched out four times, in order to accommodate all the people. In case the earth becomes overpopulated, a fifth expansion will be necessary, but that will bring down the mountains and destroy this world, this *wilak*.

Sadovszky:

Any speaker of Hungarian is struck by the similarity of this word, *wilak*, to Hungarian, *világ*, ‘world’; the ‘end of the world’ in Hungarian is *világ vége*; and ‘spirit world’ = *szellem világ*.

The first and natural reaction is that it must be a fortuitous coincidence. On closer inspection, however, the genetic relationship between the two words becomes quite apparent. ... Hungarian *világ* ... means ‘light, world, season, blooming’; and [is] related to *villám* ‘lightning’, and perhaps to *virúl* ‘to bloom’ and *virág* ‘flower’, since we have a *világ* form (in [Hungarian] dialects) for ‘flower’. All these words have close cognates in Patwin and Miwokan and other Penutian languages, which clearly indicates a genetic relationship between Hungarian *világ* and Patwin *wilak*.

Finally, back to Hamburg 1977. Saul Levin's paper on contact of Indo-Europeans and Semites was enthusiastically received by the 31CHL audience. As the time allotted for questions ran out, several of us gathered round Saul after the plenum to continue discussion. One scholar state unequivocally evaluated Saul Levin's comparative studies on the present state of Semitic and Indo-European studies as on a par with the work of Bopp and Rask and Grimm for Indo-European in the 1830s. That verdict on Saul Levin's legacy was spoken by Yakov Malkiel.



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