

A contact-based study of the languages and cultures of Pre-Classical Anatolia: the project PALaC

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ABSTRACT

This short paper will offer a preliminary presentation of the methods, aims and early results of the European research project PALaC, Pre-classical Anatolian Languages in Contact, that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 757299).

1. DEFINING “CONTACT”

Labels such as “contact” and “interference” have been used quite frequently in the humanities. Basically, whenever a study is oriented towards the analysis of the diachronic mutation of systems, the development of new features can be explained mechanically or based on the mutual influence of different structures and substructures. The best example of diachronic change that is mechanic and independent from external interference is provided by the field of linguistics, and, more specifically, historical phonology. Indeed, the very possibility of producing a study of the genealogy of languages depends on the fact that, as a consequence of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign,¹ the way languages reassign phonetic values

(re- and de-phonologize) to the elements of phonematic inventories obeys mechanical rules. At a given point, all intervocalic [z]'s in a given Indo-European language will become [r]'s: one can safely call this phenomenon *rhotacism* - say the linguists - and, when it occurs, it will occur in all identical contexts, which allows us to write it as a phonetic law: $VsV > VrV$. This happened, for instance, in classical Latin between the 3rd and the 1st century BCE.

Outside historical phonology, there are, however, very few phenomena in the humanities that can be explained based on internal mechanical change. In the development of all kinds of features in the historical change or evolution of languages, writing systems, cultural habits, religions, social structures, etc., the interference with neighbouring systems always plays a major role. The problem, for historians, linguists and all other types of scholar is, of course, to be able to successfully identify and classify such interferences in an orderly fashion, using categories that may hold water in a rigorous interdisciplinary framework.

A scholar is usually tempted to hypothesize “contact” is at work whenever different systems converge at a given stage. For this to make sense, some conditions need be met. First of all, there

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¹ The very fact that phonetic and phonological change in the diachronic mutation of languages exists mechanically within a single language is a consequence of the arbitrary coupling of *signifiant* and *signifié*, defined as per SAUSSURE (1916). Not many other features of the humanities being arbitrary, it will be shown that the identification of other comparably mechanic changes in human systems is all but a trivial task.

must be a potential medium: trivially, if two systems cannot communicate at all, assuming contact would be futile. An obvious example is represented by the similarities in the practices of cultures that were too far away in space and time to have ever communicated. Serious scientists would rightfully laugh at anyone who tried to suggest that the existence of the *topos* of the “heroic age” in some Mediterranean literatures and in some Pre-Columbian ones was due to “contact”, just as no one takes seriously the attempts to connect the pyramid-like buildings in Egypt, in the Xi’an and in the Yucatán. But in those cases in which contact seems to be a possible explanation, it becomes necessary to make some methodological distinctions that will help us proceed in a rigorous fashion.

If we wanted to look for a definition of contact between systems in the fields studied by the humanities, it is useful, once again, to look for one given by a linguist: the need to embed contact and mechanical change in the same diachronic framework urged the science of language to try and shed light on the complex interplay between internal evolution and interference. Haspelmath (2001, 1462) quite famously provided a definition of an area in which languages are in contact. According to him, we are dealing with such a situation “when a number of geographically contiguous languages share structural features which cannot be due to retention from a common proto-language and which give these languages a profile that makes them stand out among the surrounding languages. There is thus no minimum number of languages that a linguistic area can comprise.”² The key, here, seems to be the presence, within a system, of features that *cannot be retained or have evolved from a*

common stage. Assuming (but this is generally not the case!) that retention and evolution could be safely identified by other disciplines with the same confidence linguists show when they describe the consonant system of - say - Gothic, this definition has certainly quite a few merits. In other words, if an archaeologist wanted to use this approach, she or he would need to exclude that, for instance, the use of a certain style or motif by the Neo-So-and-so culture could have been inherited by a similar use attested for the Pre- and Proto-So-and-so’s. The fact that the degree of accuracy one can attain within the study of languages is obviously higher than the one attainable in other fields of the humanities is one of the reasons why language-contact has been chosen as the engine of the heuristics of the PALaC project.

Before outlining the aims and methodologies of PALaC, however, there are a few more observations to be made as regards the way Haspelmath (2001, 1462) proposed to identify areal contacts in the field of linguistics. Also in this case, the observations will be relevant for the study of all types of interference, in the general field of the diachronic analysis of the systems studied by the humanities, and not only on languages. In his definition, the prominent scholar clearly states that the languages (we will say: the systems) need to be geographically contiguous (we will say: need to be able to communicate with each other). That this is an obvious requirement has already been shown. The problem, however, is that following Haspelmath’s definition system-intercommunicability and the impossibility for given features to have evolved system-internally would appear to represent a sufficient condition. This is a dangerous mistake: the condition is not sufficient, but merely necessary, and this fallacy is shared by many scholars, especially in the study of antiquity, and yields heavy consequences in quite a few pieces of scholarly work.

What should not be neglected is the role played by the distinction between monogenetic

² THOMASON (2001, 2) prefers a merely geo-historical definition: “language contact is the use of more than one language in the same place at the same time”. This definition is powerful but based on the identification of a condition rather than on the perspective of the scholar who deals with a corpus and needs to determine the causes of given patterns.

similar features and polygenetic ones.³ A monogenetic feature is one that is highly unlikely to have emerged independently in different systems as a pure innovation. That the Hurrian culture and the Hittite culture, and specifically these two among the other ones that made use of the Cuneiform script in the Ancient Near East, used the sign PI to write the syllable /wa/,⁴ and the sign BI to write /pi/, cannot be accidental. A polygenetic feature, on the other hand, is a feature that is so trivial that it could easily be introduced independently by different cultures. The fact that quite a few writing systems in the world developed the phonetic values of the syllabaries starting from logograms and using the acrophonic principle is a polygenetic trait. It does not take contact or diffusion to explain why each civilization followed a similar process, because the process is, simply, a trivial one.⁵ This is particularly important, because in cases in which the systems are intercommunicating and contact is possible the presence of shared *polygenetic* traits is no proof that interference actually took place. Therefore, this distinction should be added to the conditions scholars need to observe when studying and classifying the change and diffusion of innovation in any field of the humanities.

3 The two terms are typical of the natural sciences, but they can be used in the study of every innovation in a collection of systems. For instance, in philology a monogenetic error in a group of manuscripts indicates that there must be a common forefather in which the change was introduced, while a polygenetic one does not.

4 It should be added that for independent reasons there are good reasons to hypothesize that the introduction of Cuneiform in the Hittite and Hurrian worlds from the Syro-Mesopotamia happened in a similar fashion and possibly at a similar time (cf. GAMKRELIDZE 1961; WILHELM 2010, 257; on the origin of the Hittite scribal praxis cf. also POPKO 2007; VAN DEN HOUT 2009; ARCHI 2010 with references to previous scholarship).

5 Unsurprisingly, acrophony was indeed at work in the development of syllabic values even in writing systems like the Maya hieroglyphs, which certainly were not influenced by the application of the principle in the Mediterranean world. On Maya acrophony, see MACRI and LOOPER 2003, 38ff.; DE VOOGT and FINKEL 2010, 55ff.

2. THE PROJECT PALaC

The project PALaC, that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 757299), is a five-year interdisciplinary research programme, that aims at exploiting the diagnostic features typical of language contact in order to provide a general description of the linguistic and cultural area of Pre-Classical Anatolia. Put simply, since it is easier to examine contact phenomena in disciplines and frameworks that are more rigorous in assessing objective evidence, language contact will be used as a source for describing one of the most complex and intriguing cultural and linguistic areas of the past: Pre-Classical Anatolia, from the Old Assyrian age to the ca. 4th century BCE.

The methodology employed by PALaC is based on three main steps. Firstly, the corpora of texts from Pre-Classical Anatolia (and some neighbouring areas) are analyzed in order to identify possible patterns that indicate that language contact was at work. Secondly, the patterns are contextualized in the historical and geographical scenario of reference to evaluate the credibility of the paths of interference. Finally, the resulting hypotheses will be analyzed from the historical point of view and interpreted in the general framework of cultural contact.

As of November 2018, PALaC currently employs three researchers: the PI, Federico Giusfredi, mainly responsible for the study of the Bronze age documents and for the historical interpretation of the data; Stella Merlin, responsible for the study of the Aegean interface as well as for the definition of the scientific metalanguage of the project; and Valerio Pisaniello, mainly responsible for the research on the Iron Age corpora of Syro-Anatolia. Paola Cotticelli-Kurras (Verona), Alfredo Rizza (Verona), Velizar Sadovski (Vienna) and Ilya Yakubovich (Marburg/Moscow) act as external advisors, while a cooperation for the analysis of

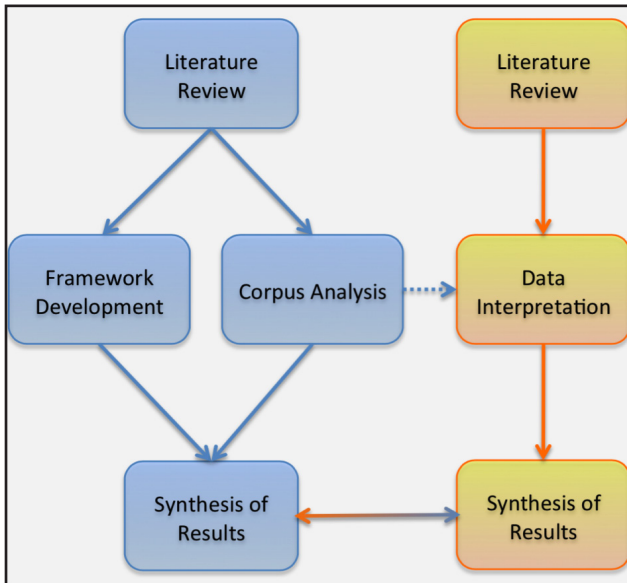


Fig. 1. A simplified scheme of the PALaC workflow: in blue, the linguistic work-packages, in yellow the cultural historical ones.

the Anatolian theonyms has been started with Michele Cammarosano (Würzburg, project *Hittite Divine Names*⁶).

During the first months of the project, that started in February 2018, data was collected and analyzed, but a number of initial presentations and publications were made, including methodological surveys on both cultural and linguistic contact (Cotticelli-Kurras - Giusfredi, 2018), works on Wanderwörter and loans (Giusfredi 2018a), on the methodologies for the assessment of bilingual documents (Giusfredi 2018b), on morphological adaptations in bilingual areas (Merlin - Pisaniello, forthcoming) as well as on proper cases of grammatical interference between languages in multi-ethnic and multicultural settings (Giusfredi - Pisaniello, forthcoming). Further information and Open Access resources can be found at the project website: <http://ercpalac.info>.

6 Cf. the project website: <https://cuneiform.neocities.org/HDN/start.html>

3. THE HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF PRE-CLASSICAL ANATOLIA

The reasons why Pre-Classical Anatolia represents an ideal field to apply the methodologies of contact linguistics as a tool to deal with an ancient historical object of study are many.

A first, obvious one is its geographical position. Anatolia is the peninsular part of modern Turkey, and it is located as a bridge connecting what the modern media call the “Middle East” to the Eastern areas of the Mediterranean. In antiquity, this peculiar geographical collocation has proven to be extremely significant, and Anatolia has always been a challenge for the bipartite model represented by the historiographic construct that we may label “the boundary between the West and the East”. Of course, no real boundaries exist in history: they dwell in the world of the historian, who needs to categorize reality based on local and temporal periodizations. It is by no means a coincidence that the very father of the East/West dichotomy, Herodotus, “philobarbaros” for the Greeks,⁷ but definitely too Greek for the tastes of the tyrant Lygdamis, was a native of Halicarnassus, in Caria. While the East/West dichotomy is a simplification of a multifaceted reality, it is a fact that the position of Anatolia made it a bridge connecting many different peoples and cultures, and not just a metaphorical one.

Already in the Middle Bronze ages (which, in the Middle Chronology, range from the age of the III dynasty of Ur in Mesopotamia to the end of Hammurapi’s dynasty in Babylon)⁸, starting in the XX century BCE Old Assyrian traders established permanent bases in Cappadocia,

7 More precisely, for the much later Plutarch, who, irritated by the sympathy Herodotus expressed for Near Eastern and Egyptian peoples, uses the attribute φιλοβάρβαρος to describe him in his *De Herodoti Malignitate* 12.

8 The Middle Chronology is one of the possible chronologies proposed to date the events of the Ancient Near Eastern History, and it is the one conventionally employed by most scholars and handbooks. Cf. LIVERANI 1989, Chapter 1; more recently VAN DE MIEROOP 2007, 4.



Fig. 2. Michele Cammarosano's excellent map of the Hittite world, offering a very clear picture of the geographical and historical collocation of Pre-Classical Anatolia (reproduced with the permission of the author).

adding the Semitic element to a multi-ethnic world that already features the complex cultural and linguistic co-existence of the non-Indo-European Hattian element and the Indo-European Hittite and Luwian ones.⁹ Later on, during the Late Bronze ages, the Hittite Kingdom became part, on the one hand, of the political and cultural *koinè* of the Ancient Near East, culminating in the net of international relationship typical of the Amarna age and of the XV to XIII centuries BCE; on the other hand, contacts with the Luwian kingdoms of the Western coasts triggered interactions with the Mycenaean and Greek world. Nor did the Anatolian cultures of the Iron Age ever cease to play a role in a complex network of intercultural

and linguistic exchanges: the interactions of the Luvic (Luwian, Lycian, to mention just the two main ones) and Lydian cultures with both the Semitic world of Mesopotamia and Syria and the Greek Aegean interface area are well documented in the historical sources and by the presence of bi- and multilingual corpora.

A second reason that makes Anatolia an ideal candidate for the researches of a project like PALaC is the long duration of the documentary history of the region, that covers the whole Pre-Classical period, ranging from the Middle Bronze age to the Persian era and to the Macedonian conquests of the IV century BCE. This guarantees a large number of epigraphic materials to be analyzed, with several different languages and writing systems.

9 For an overview on the Old Assyrian Age, cf. BRYCE (2005, 21ff.); also GOEDEGEBUURE (2008), for an assessment of the ethnic and linguistic dimensions of the problem.

4. WORDS, GRAMMARS AND SCRIPTS

An obvious obstacle to the analysis of language interference for languages of the past is the fact that the documents are only available in written form, and no elicitation is possible. While this makes part of the conclusions one may reach admittedly speculative, the large number of documents and the possibility of comparing patterns of interference with similar ones that have been identified by scholars studying modern contact scenarios, provides us with an invaluable asset. Furthermore, the historical validation of the data and the comparison with information deriving from history, historical geography and archaeology reduces the amount of uncertainty that a project would face if it relied entirely on linguistic methods.

Furthermore, the peculiarities of an object of study that consists in the multivariate collection of several documentary corpora presents an opportunity for highlighting different aspects of cultural interference that all emerge in written documents but need to be carefully distinguished from each other. Beside proper language interference, that may regard the lexical level - with loans, *Wanderwörter* and loan translations¹⁰ - or the structural, morphosyntactic ones - with the grammars of different languages interacting with each other and changes being produced -, some types of documentary interference exist that would only mistakenly be categorized as “linguistic”. I wish to refer, for instance, to the exchange of *topoi* and phraseologies in literary and historical compositions, that are frequently

quoted in works on “language contact”¹¹ but are, in fact, an instance of cultural contact, as they do not alter the systematic levels of languages. If, for instance, the use of the sequence *ἐν δέ* in specific positions of the lines indicates that the Homeric poets imitated the use of *anda* in some Hittite compositions (Bachvarova 2009, 29), this by no means implies that such an unusual calque (and, in our opinion, only partly convincing) influenced the use of Greek outside of the poetic praxis: it takes decades or centuries of intense intercultural relationship at the lower diaphasic levels for languages to produce real changes on each other, while for a poetic structure to be imitated occasional contact may be enough.

There are also cases in which the interference regards not the languages, but rather the writing systems, which may influence each other on the graphemic or visual levels. This type of phenomena is well represented in the biliterate Late Hittite culture, which made use of both the Cuneiform script and the Anatolian Hieroglyphic one. When the expected order of modifiers and nouns in Cuneiform Hittite is inverted for logograms, this depended on the Sumerian scribal praxis, from which the script was inherited, but when this happened in Hieroglyphic Luwian, the only possible explanation is an influence in the use of logograms by the Cuneiform writing system (Rieken - Yakubovich, forthcoming).

All of these distinctions can and will be made when dealing with a large number of corpora produced in an area and in a long historical phase that saw the interaction of dozens of different cultures and civilizations.

10 A *Wanderwort* is merely a highly successful areal loanword for which it was so far impossible to identify the language of origin. It usually refers to important elements of the natural world or to scientific or cultural innovation. As such, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance that such words have for a study of cultural areas in the ancient world. For a theoretical discussion and a case study cf. GIUSFREDI 2017; for a more pessimistic attitude towards the importance of this kind of evidence, cf., however, ORESHKO 2018.

11 Most of the phenomena highlighted by C. Watkins’s 1995 book on the Indo-European culture are, in fact, examples of common inheritance or of areal diffusion of cultural constructs rather than cases of “language contact” proper. While the distinction was clear to Watkins, who in a later work denied the existence of areal features in the Aegean/Anatolian *linguistic* area (WATKINS 2001, 62), cases of confusion of the different levels definitely exist in literature.

5. METALINGUISTIC ISSUES

The limits that depend on our historical knowledge of the past and on the type of sources available with corpus languages are not the only ones PALaC has to deal with. As already observed, the study of language contact in ancient linguistic communities faces some limitations that depend not only on the data, but also on the metalanguage at our disposal. This happens because the terminology of contact linguistics has been developed for describing phenomena such as mixed languages, pidgins, creoles and other modern linguistic contexts, for which real speakers are available; therefore, it is unsuitable for describing ancient societies, where both the languages and the contexts are only indirectly accessible. So, one of the tasks of the PALaC project is the very definition of a metalinguistic framework of reference.

Furthermore, the metalanguage involved in the PALaC research turns out to also be a product of language contact. The Western linguistic tradition has developed, mostly during the last decades, an in-depth discussion on the forms of interference, seen as the visible expression of the main process generally labelled as language contact. The first systematic survey of the linguistic phenomena involved when two or more languages to some extent overlap was the classical study of U. Weinreich 1953. Since then, research on language contact both as a theoretical framework linguistic phenomenon in different (groups of) languages has greatly increased and has produced many important works. To give just a few examples, we will mention Gusmani 1986, Thomason & Kaufmann 1988, Thomason 2001, Haspelmath 2001, Dixon 2001, and Matras 2009. An example of the issues that emerge when dealing with inconsistent metalinguistic labels can be offered by the label “linguistic area”. Not only the concept presents issues also on a theoretical level (see Cotticelli and Giusfredi 2018), but it is often found in the academic literature written in English by

non-native scholars, employed to translate the terminology of the “national” metalinguistic traditions: for example, for an Italian scholar, the distinction between area *linguistica* and *lega linguistica* (literally ‘language league’ mostly applied to the Balkans) is clearly defined, but both can be translated as *linguistic area* in English, as does the *Sprachbund* of the German tradition.¹²

Therefore, the essential concepts, as well as the lexemes related to them, need to be defined on a theoretical level and then need to undergo further terminological verification and disambiguation. Hence, the definition of a scientific metalanguage will be not just a tool for studying the Pre-Classical Anatolian cultural and linguistic contact, but also one of the heuristic outputs of the PALaC research, which will take the form of an online lexicon of language contact in antiquity, drawn up in English, but reporting for each entry the translation in other languages terminologically relevant in the development of a given notion.

6. SUMMARY

Any study that deals with the diachronic change of a historical object, be it a civilization, a language, a writing system, a painting style or a literary genre, will need to be able to integrate the two co-existing models of mechanical internal evolution and mutation induced by contact. In order for a theory of contact to be credible and successful, it is necessary that three requirements are met: the two or more systems involved must be potentially intercommunicating, they need to share features that cannot derive from a common previous stage and at least some of these features must be non-trivial, so that they can be considered to correspond to monogenetic traits.

¹² It is also worth remembering that the German term *Sprachbund* was coined in 1928 by one of the most brilliant scholars of the last century, N. S. Trubeckoj, as a German calque (or loan translation) of the Russian term *языковой союз* (*jazykovej sojuz*) ‘language union’.

The goal of the European project PALaC is to carry out a general analysis of the different traces of contact between the languages represented in the corpora from Pre-Classical Anatolia (ca. XVIII to IV century BCE), to interpret the data with a rigorous metalanguage and in a productive fashion and, finally, to contextualize them and interpret them within the framework of the cultural and historical geography of the Ancient Anatolian and Ancient Near Eastern worlds.

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