

# WEST, EAST, AND SOUTH SLAVIC AS DIFFERENT TYPES OF LANGUAGE SPREAD

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# West, East, and South Slavic as different types of language spread

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# 1. The problem of the Slavic spread

- Proto-Slavic: originally the language of a small (South Baltic) ethnic group unknown to ancient authors
- in the second half of the first millennium CE, it quickly expanded its speech area over Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe
- the historian Peter Heather (2010: 386): “the rise of Slavic Europe is one of the biggest stories of the entire first millennium. Where did it come from and what role did migration play in its creation?”
- there was no such political unit in the east of Europe as the Roman Empire in the west, which was responsible for the approximately simultaneous spread of the Romance language group

## 2. Slavic migrations?

- migration used to be the main explanation for all language spreads (except Romance), but it has largely been abandoned as the default model
- there are no historical sources on Slavic migrations except for the Byzantine area, there mixed with the Avar raids
- the archaeological record has traditionally been interpreted in the migration framework, but it cannot prove the migrations
- why would the small Proto-Slavic population have started to quickly reproduce and expand at this particular time?
- however, for many it is still the most likely historical explanation (Timberlake 2013, Greenberg 2016)
- perhaps not bigger groups migrating longer distances, but waves on advance: the accumulation of short local migrations of individual families

### 3. Avars, the Slavic lingua franca, and language shift?

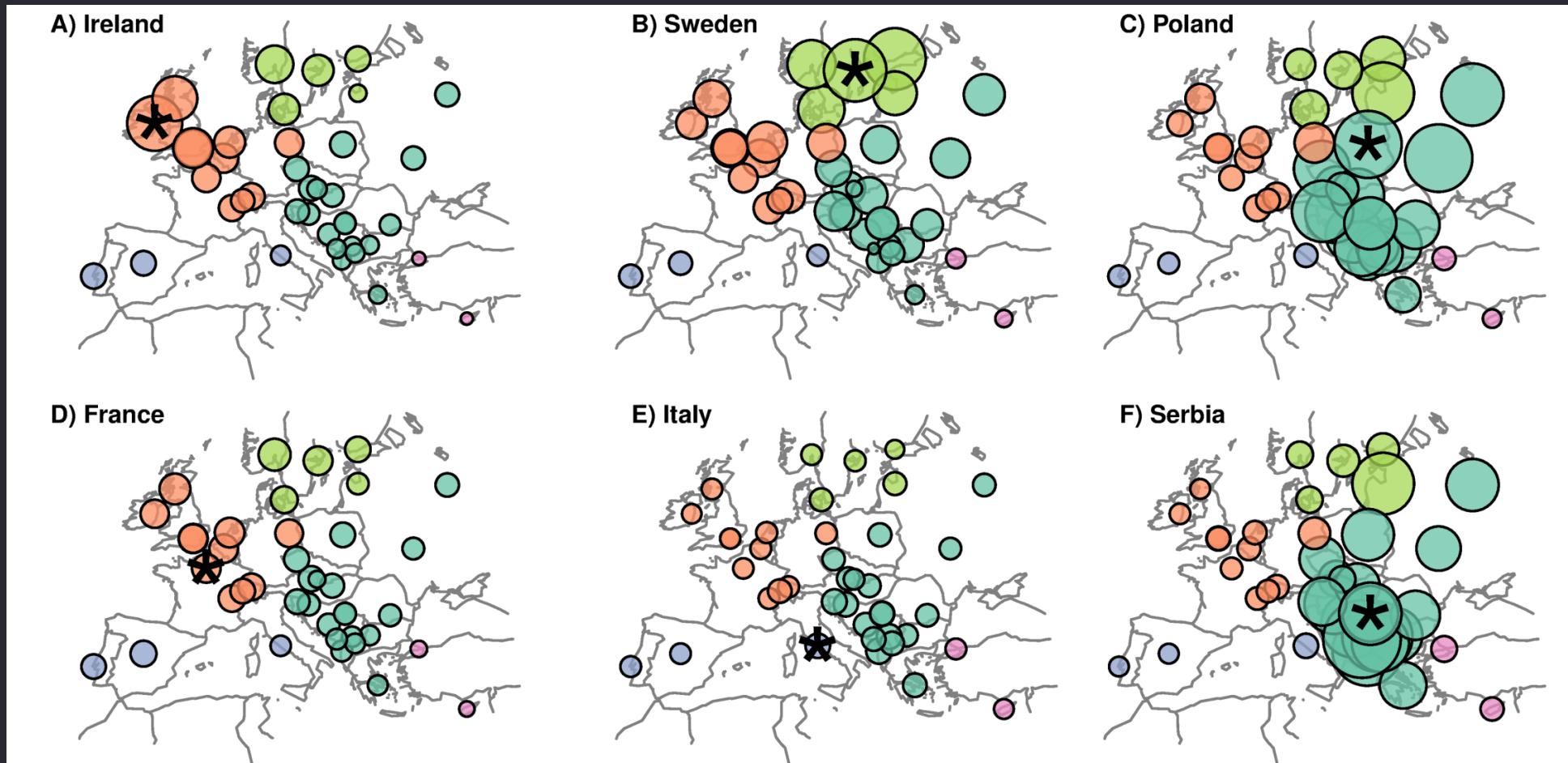
- the Avar Khaganate (567–822) may have used Proto-Slavic as a lingua franca
- this would explain language shift to Slavic, as well as the relative uniformity of late Common Slavic till the end of the first millennium (Pritsak, Nichols, Holzer, Curta)
- this model is compatible with Byzantine sources in the South...
- ...but it does *not* explain the Slavic spread North of the Carpathians and the Alps: no Avar influence in large areas between the Elbe and Lake Ilmen!
- there is no direct evidence for the model because we know very little about the linguistic situation of the Avar Khaganate
- Proto-Slavic remained morphologically and accentologically as complex as the (remaining) Baltic languages, which does *not* fit the picture of a large-scale language shift to a lingua franca (Nuorluoto p.c.; Greenberg)

## 4. Genetic evidence for migrations

- human genetics shows that *some sort of demographic expansion really took place in East Europe at the time of the Slavic spread*
- Ralph & Coop (2013): ...there are especially high numbers of common ancestors shared between many eastern populations that date roughly to the migration period (which includes the Slavic and Hunnic expansions in that region)” – “...even geographically distant individuals in these eastern populations share about as many common ancestors as do two Irish or two French-speaking Swiss.”
- *however*, the genetic trace of this demographic event does not coincide with the Slavic linguistic boundaries but extends over the whole of Eastern Europe
- and the various Slavic populations also have a *local ancestry* as part of their genetic inheritance (Kushniarevich & al. 2015)

Ralph P, Coop G (2013) The Geography of Recent Genetic Ancestry across Europe. PLoS Biol 11(5): e1001555. doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.1001555:

### Figure 3: *Geographic decay of recent relatedness*



## 5. Cold and plague

- circumstances outside political and military history should be given more consideration when seeking reasons for demographic changes
- the Late Antique Little Ice Age (536–660 CE; Büntgen & al. 2016): probably the coldest period of the Common Era
- crop failure could have triggered migrations to new areas
- the outbreak of Justinian's plague from 541 CE on:  
the first attack of the bubonic plague in Europe;  
25 to 50 million deaths in the Byzantine Empire during the next two centuries
- the Empire was significantly weakened and was not able to resist the migration of barbarians from the north
- crop failure as a pushing force, depopulated agricultural areas as a pulling force for the Slav agriculturalists



## 6. Expansion to the northwest

- archaeologists think they can follow the expansion of the Slavs from north of the Carpathians to the Elbe and the Pomeranian shore until the end of the sixth century
- e.g. in Bohemia, the local Germanic population was directly Slavicized
- however, east of the Elbe and Saale, the land had been only sparsely populated for decades, even for a century before the arrival of the Slavs: this phenomenon is known as the “Germanic collapse” (Barford, Fried, Heather)
- a clear hiatus between the Germanic and Slavic populations in most of the West Slavic area: this is why there is no linguistic substratum in West Slavic, the Germanic / German elements are due to the secondary German expansion to the east
- *West Slavic – language spread due to migration*
- this can also be seen in the clear genetic boundary between the Poles and Germans (Kushniarevich & al. 2015, 10): the only place where the Slavic linguistic boundary has a human genetic counterpart

## 7. Expansion to the northeast

- in the northern East Slavic area, the traditional migration explanation has gradually given way to language shift models (Tvauri 2007)
- linguistically, a Baltic substrate is difficult to show (except for placenames), but a Finno-Ugric substrate is clearly visible in Russian (Kiparsky 1969, Saarikivi 2006) and especially in Old Novgorodian as attested in the birch bark documents (Dombrowski 2010)
- without any migrations, Slavic would of course not have arrived to this area, but after the introduction of Christianity and Cyrillic literacy linked with it, the spread of East Slavic was a typical case of *shift to a prestige language*
- however, in more southern East Slavic areas, north of the Black Sea, the migration model may again be as valid as in most West Slavic areas

## 8. Expansion to the south

- the Avar-Slavic symbiosis supported Slavic spread into a densely populated area characterized by linguistic diversity: substratal and adstratal influences, language shifts to and from Slavic over the centuries
- the Byzantine social and economic structure had been weakened by Justinian's plague
- the Slavs settled as agriculturalists; the nomadic Avars withdrew
- Slavic did not initially spread as a prestige language of a higher culture but as a language of strong local and tribal networks which replaced the collapsed imperial structures – not unlike Anglo-Saxon in England (Higham & Ryan 2013: 111) at about the same time
- but notice that this is not a lingua franca explanation because Slavic was still an ethnic language (though open for new individuals to join – Nichols)

## 9. The uniformity of late Common Slavic as a founder effect

- the remarkable uniformity of Slavic up to the jer shift was not due to any lingua franca function
- it is best explained as a founder effect: Proto-Slavic was originally a small Baltic dialect with little internal variation
- owing to this bottleneck, it took time for the individual Slavic languages to develop into different directions
- compare this to the small dialectal variation of Russian in the large eastern areas into which it spread only after the 15th century

## 10. Migrations and language shifts: a complex picture

- there need not, and probably does not, exist a single major explanation for the Slavic spread
- West, East, and South Slavic areas and their parts exhibit different scenarios: migrations and language shifts in different proportions, and different driving forces for those language shifts to and from Slavic
- the Avars are only part of the story, and only south of the Alps and Carpathians
- the spread of Proto-Slavic was first linked with a demographic spread, but after the expansion period, there have been so much language shifts and interchange of genes between the Slavs and the Balts, Finnic peoples, Romanians, Hungarians, Albanians, Greeks and others that the present-day linguistic boundaries generally do not coincide with any genetic boundaries (with the possible exception of the Polish/German boundary)

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