

A Letter to Calvert Watkins

On Indo-European and Semitic Cognates

Letter sent to Watkins on November 16, 2008

Calvert Watkins, Professor-in-Residence,
UCLA Department of Classics & Program in Indo-European Studies
&
Professor Emeritus,
Harvard University Departments of Linguistics and the Classics
cwatkins@humnet.ucla.edu

Dear Professor Watkins:

While doing research on the origin of certain words and their cognates in both IE and Semitic I ran across a statement you made in your Internet article at

<http://www.bartleby.com/61/8.html>

(Your email service will need Unicode function to recognize the symbols I include here).

This caused me to write to you. You said:

Of course, the fact that certain languages present similarities among themselves does not necessarily mean they are related. Some similarities may be accidental: the Greek verb "to breathe," "blow," has a root *pneu-*, and in the language of the Klamath of Oregon the verb "to blow" is *pniw-*, but these languages are not remotely related. Other similarities may reflect universal or near-universal features of human language: in the languages of most countries where the bird is known, the *cuckoo* has a name derived from the noise it makes. A vast number of languages around the globe have "baby talk" words like *mama* and *papa*. Finally, languages commonly borrow words and other features from one another, in a whole gamut of ways ranging from casual or chance contact to learned coinages of the kind that English systematically makes from Latin and Greek.

I am familiar with the *mama* and *papa* words. As you say, they are well nigh universal around the globe. In face of this fact I draw certain matters to your attention.

(Since you are well acquainted with IE languages I am uncertain how familiar you are with the Semitic. Please note that while I cite Hebrew evidence I recognize the Semitic language family and Proto-Semitic.)

The Hebrew word for

father = אב = **ab**.

mother = אִמָּה = **ima** or **ama**.

brother = אח = **ach**.

aunt = דּוּדָה = **doda**.

lord = אָדוֹן = **adon**.

???? = אָן = **an**.

If your thesis is correct I would like to know how the baby babble got into Hebrew as their formal words for father and mother. We use *mother* and *father* formal names in English, but use the informal baby words when expressing affection. Thus English differs from Hebrew in the use of these familiar words.

I draw additional evidence to your attention.

My wife had a mother and father who came from Czechoslovakia. Their word for aunt, or anyone serving in a similar familiar role, was Tuta. We see how this word has simple phonetic differences, following well understood linguistic laws, from the Hebrew. This word also is found in many parts of the world, in different

language families, all used for aunts or other persons with similar affectionate designation. Is **doda** (or **tuta**) part of the baby babble?

When we further examine the Hebrew *brother* and *lord* words we see how they also have simple formations. Thus this group of family names has a simplicity that seems highly unusual. In their formations they do not seem to follow the more complex genre of IE family names. I began to wonder if this group of simple expressions really supported your thesis. Should we look for some other cause-and-effect explanation?

Consider additional evidence.

Suppose a child should regard his father with great respect, and call him Lord. But being in close relationship with his father, and being small, he does not use the formal Adon, but instead uses a childish diminutive, Adda. (In fact, all of the Hebrew family names seem like diminutives.)

I put all of this together into a little table that helped me examine this linguistic phenomenon.

Hebrew Word	Childhood Usage	Middle Consonant	English Form
Adon	Adda	D	Daddy
Ab	Abba	B to P	Poppa
Am	Amma	M	Momma
An	Anna	N	Nanna

Well, something unusual is going on here beside baby talk. A general linguistic rule seems to apply. I discovered that the middle consonant from the childhood word, added at the beginning of the word, resulted in the English form of the familiar designation. (I include the Hebrew An going to Nanna for reasons I shall not discuss in this letter.)

If we were to assume that the English form came from Hebrew, (or general IE from Semitic), and in doing so followed that linguistic rule, who created the rule, or how did it evolve with such consistent format? This phenomenon seems more than simple baby babble. Also, given the history of our languages, it does not seem reasonable that the Semitic evolved out of the IE. The mere simplicity of the Semitic formations and later evolution into greater IE complexity point in that direction.

I do not want to make this letter overly long, or place too much theory on such simple evidence, but I do want to impress upon you that some of our assumptions about mere evolutionary causes behind human life on this world seem to be mistaken, and that social events took place in the (very) remote past that escapes all modern scholarship.

To further support this suggestion I show that Hebrew displays a relationship among verbs that is highly curious. Adjacent dictionary words seem to display similar verbal functions. I use the numbers from Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance* for convenience of identification. I simplify definitions from Strong and from Brown, Driver, and Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon*. OED means Oxford English Dictionary. For example:

Strong's Number	English Vocalization	Definition From Strong and B-D-B	English Cognate Definition from OED
5106	noo	to forbid, dissuade, restrain, frustrate	no -- proposed reduction from <i>none</i> , in turn derived from OE <i>ne + an</i> , = no (nay) + one.
5110	nood	to nod, waver, move to and fro, flutter Am: shake, be disturbed, agitated	nod -- "Of obscure origin: no equivalent form with the same sense is found in any of the cognate languages. Connection with MHG <i>notten</i> 'to move about, shake' is doubtful."
5120	noot	to quake, dangle, shake	
5127	noos	to flit, vanish to flee, escape Ar: move to and fro	

5128	noo'ah	to waver, quiver, tremble	
5130	noof	to move to and fro wave (the hand) besprinkle	
5132	noots	to flash, to fly away to blossom	
5136	noosh	to be sick, distressed	

Could the English *no* and *nod* similarity to the Hebrew words be an accident? The authors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* could not find the origin of the English *nod* and they go through some mental gyrations to get to the origin of the simple English *no*.

Here are other examples:

2100 zoob = To flow, gush, overflow
2102 zood = To boil up, seethe
2123 zooz = To be abundant, fullness
2107 zook = To shake out, scatter profusely
2109 zoon = To be plump, feed copiously
2111 zoo'ah = To tremble, to shake off
2114 zoor = To turn aside, to refuse friendship, be a stranger

4127 moog To melt, to disappear
4128 mood To shake, stretch
4131 moot To totter, to slip, to fall
4134 mook To become thin, impoverished
4135 mool To curtail, cut-off
4160 moots To press, chaff, to oppress
4167 mooq To corrupt, deride, mock
4171 moor To dispose, alter
4185 moosh To withdraw, remove, depart
4191 mooth To die, murder

Semitic scholars are aware of this similarity of action among adjacent verbs but have no explanation for it (the last I knew).

(As an additional note I give this example: The English word *murder* seems to display a clear linguistic path. Cognates are found in the IE Sanskrit *mur* = "to die," *morti* = "death" and *marta* = "mortal," Greek *mortos*, whence English *mortal*, Latin *morti* = "to die," with *mors* = "death," Lithuanian *murti* = "to die," and Irish *marth* = "dead." Old English used the "t" and "th" forms (*morthor*) which evolved to the modern English "d." Gothic and Old Teutonic had *maurthr* and *murthro*. Should we deny that there seems to be a striking linguistic relationship with the Semitic Hebrew *mooth* that has the "m", "o", and "th" phonemes, but lacking the "r"? I could carry these Semitic-IE cognates into many other words.)

The above examples of phenomena from the Semitic Hebrew, including the proposed baby babble, suggest an origin in a Proto-Semitic language that had an intelligent design. It stretches credulity to believe these phenomena were accidental.

But look at what it means. If there were numerous evolutionary languages across the globe, deriving out of purely natural development, and if the (many common) elements of those languages (including baby talk) were used as a foundation to form the Proto-Semitic words, we would have an explanation for the historic Hebrew evidence.

This leads to a startling suggestion: Proto-Semitic was not an evolutionary language, but one with an intelligent design.

I could carry this suggestion over to the IE language family, but the path is so involved I could not convey it simply in this brief letter. The regular, not haphazard, conjugation and declension system in IE also suggests an intelligent design.

I came to believe that both Proto-Semitic and Proto-IE display intelligent design. Through my studies I came

to recognize that the Proto-IE was created in reaction to events that took place on our world a long, long time ago. Those events were highly disturbing to the people of those very remote days. They wanted to abandon the old Semitic language family. I believe the Proto-Semitic design goes back beyond 30,000 years ago, and that the IE goes back at least 20,000 years.

All of this mental extrapolation on evidence from two language families also requires that there was an extraordinary impact on human evolution that was literally "out of this world."

If we were to accept the old myth and folk tales we might recognize this fact.

Derk Bodde makes the following remarks on Chinese mythology:

The idea that Heaven and Earth were once joined together, thereby permitting free communication between men and the divine powers, but later became separated, is extremely widespread among cultures.

According to Bodde the Chinese believed that:

. . . the Lord on High . . . ordered the shamans Ch'mun and Li to sever communications between Heaven and Earth . . . so that there would be no descending and ascending of spirits and men between the two.

Mircea Eliade, in his *Myth of the Eternal Return*, remarks:

. . . the myths of many people allude to a very distant epoch when men knew neither death nor toil nor suffering and had a bountiful supply of food merely for the taking. In those times the gods descended to earth and mingled with men; for their part, men could easily mount to heaven. As the result of a ritualistic fault, communications between heaven and earth were interrupted and the gods withdrew to the highest heaven. Since then men must work for their food and are no longer immortal.

Eliade may not have it summed up correctly, but you get the point.

As part of the evidence for such influence you might take a look at another paper of mine:

<http://www.egyptorigins.org/somethingstrange.htm>

Ernest Moyer