

# Acceptable words

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## Indo-European Language and Society

Emile Benveniste

(Faber, £9.00)

Of all aspects of language study, the origins and history of language probably has the most popular appeal. But for every ounce of fact there is a pound of speculation. At the popular level, "folk" etymologies abound (eg assuming that *slow-worm* comes from *slow*, when in fact there is no historical connection between the words); and this is paralleled at the academic level by two centuries of controversy among philologists.

This translation from the French of Benveniste's 1969 collection of lectures, papers and reflections on aspects of Indo-European is very welcome. It is a superb account of the practical and theoretical problems arising in comparative historical linguistics, and how to solve them, and it bridges perfectly the yawning gap between popular fascination and academic specialism. In my opinion no one has ever matched the range and depth of this scholar's knowledge of Indo-European languages, or his familiarity with the philological literature, or been able to present such matters with such lucidity of expression. Strong praise, perhaps; but when one is faced with the cream of a lifetime of scholarship, put over with objectivity and humility, what else can a youthful reviewer say?

Nineteenth-century comparative philology made it very clear that many of the languages of Europe and Southern Asia were related, and could be traced to a common ancestor-language, which was called Indo-European (IE). It was moreover soon felt that to study the form of this language was simultaneously to study the history of the culture of the IE peoples. As Benveniste says (p.445): "The problem is, through an analysis of the lexicon, to reach back to the realities of the Indo-European world."

The point is, of course, that it is almost solely through the study of language that we can do this: the stages of migration of these peoples, their settlements and institutions are otherwise largely unknown.

This book is different from the earlier work in certain crucial respects. It is an attempt to apply the methods of modern comparative linguistics to the study of IE vocabulary. Its data are those of the standard etymological dictionaries and monographs, but it gets away from the traditional approach to word-history, which tended to examine words in isolation from the rest of the lexicon, and insists on a structural semantic approach. "In language, there are only oppositions," said De Saussure. In the structural approach to lexis, it is the oppositions, or relationships between words that are studied. A particular "semantic field" (such as colour, or kinship) is studied, and the way in which the various words within it define each other is established. The aim is to discover the system, or organisation in the vocabulary; accordingly, Benveniste's aim is to study "the formation and organisation of the vocabulary of institutions" (p.11).

"Institutions" is here given a very broad sense. Six general areas are taken, and subjected to detailed structural analysis: Economy, Kinship, Social Status, Royalty and its Privileges, Law, and Religion. Altogether, 54 separate notions are analysed. For example, under Religion, we have analyses of the notions of the sacred, the libation, the sacrifice, the vow, prayer and supplication, the Latin vocabulary of signs and omens, and religion and superstition. Benveniste usually begins with a particular IE language, selects a theme, collects the lexis that might be relevant to it, and examines its interrelationships in sound, grammatical structure, and sense. In this way, hypotheses are always well-grounded in the established facts of the various languages, and the correspondences, as well as the differences, between lexical items within and between the languages are made clear. The method also provides a good balance between providing information about the history of individual words and about general tendencies governing individual developments.

This book admirably succeeds in its aims. It makes one very aware of the cultural distinctiveness of the institutions it examines, and throws light on the foundations of their modern counterparts. It warns us of the dangers involved in comparative historical work—especially the dangers of relying on simplified translations, and of allowing our own language to colour the analysis of others—a point well illustrated by his discussion of the sense of *pray* and *supplicate* (p.503), which have blurred in modern English. And the book is beautifully organised and presented. Each chapter is preceded by a succinct summary of its contents by Jean Lallot, who also provides a table of IE languages and various indexes—of subjects, of words (classified according to languages), and of passages quoted (classified according to authors). It is therefore extremely easy to find one's way about

