**February 2, 1786**

Overcome by the majestic beauty of St Paul’s Cathedral, few visitors pay much attention to the ancient statues of historical grandees that dot the church, in its nave and chapels and aisles.

That’s a pity, because one such statue is very relevant to our story. One of these worthy citizens, frozen in marble in 1799 by renowned sculptor John Bacon, was the man whose work led indirectly to this book being written, almost a quarter of a millennium into the future.

Sir William Jones born 1746 in London, was an early student of languages. A native speaker of English and Welsh, he learned Greek, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew and Persian at an early age while a student at Harrow.

Jones was a linguistic polymath. As a young man he had already learned several European languages and moved on to Latin and Greek. By the end of his life he claimed to know 28 languages, having studied to a high level English, Latin, French, Italian, Greek, Arabic, Persian, and later Sanskrit. Working with a dictionary he could read Spanish, Portuguese, Germa, Norse runes, Hebrew, Bengali, Hindi, and Turkish. He had studied to some degree a further twelve languages – Tibetan, Pali, Pahlavi, Deri, Russian, Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Welsh, Swedish, Dutch, and Chinese.

He graduated from Oxford in 1768, after being made a Fellow of University College. He worked as a translator and tutor to George Spencer, the second Earl Spencer and ancestor of Princess Diana Spencer (whose brother Charles Spencer is the 9th Earl today). Lord Althorp took him on his grand tour of Germany, France and Italy as a companion.

Such was Jones’s renown that in 1768 King Christian VII of Demark hired him to translate a book of Persian poetry into French, published in 1770. Further books on Persian literature followed.

However his academic work and love of oriental literature and culture was not financially rewarding, and with some reluctance he set out to study law from 1770. He continued his academic work alongside this, building on his Oxford studies. He learned Persian to such a degree that he published a groundbreaking study of the language, A Grammar of the Persian Language, in 1771.

He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1772 at age 26 and at age 28 published a commentary on Asiatic poetry. Samuel Johnson called him ‘one of the most enlightened of the sons of men’. [[1]](#endnote-1)

Called to the bar at the Middle Temple in 1774, he was not content with being a linguist and a lawyer. He began to dabble in politics, worked with Benjamin Franklin in London and Paris on the cause of the American revolution (which he supported) but he failed to become an MP.

He mixed with the great and good of the day like Burke, Gibbon and Samuel Johnson, while working as a lawyer and publishing a famous law treatise *Essay on Bailments*, which was much reprinted in the 19th century and is still in law libraries today.

His pamphlet on the defects of the British constitutional system (in light of the successful US war of Independence, of which he was a fervent supporter) was even the subject of a trial for seditious libel in 1784, the outcome of which changed British law on libel (cf. R v Shipley, 1784).

In 1783 he married and moved to India to take up the role of judge on the Supreme Court in Calcutta in Bengal (modern Kolkata), and was knighted that same year.

He combined administering the law with studying Indian literature and culture, and produced a number of books on various aspects of Indian poetry, philosophy, music and botany.

He admired Indian culture and believed that Greek philosophy, as in the works of Pythagoras and Pato, had a common source to Hindu philosophy. This is less surprising when one considers the common source of both their languages, though from an earlier period.

He soon turned to the study of Sanskrit, the classical language of Indian religion and literature.

This was no longer a spoken language in the 18th century, except in religious rituals and the study of ancient texts - but it had been spoken in India from around 1500 BCE to 1300 CE. The language spoken in Jones’s time was Hindi or Bengali, both related to Sanskrit.

Sanskrit was the language of Hindu religious texts and so Jones felt he should understand it in order to better understand the culture of the people with whom he was working. He studied the Vedas, the ancient religious texts with a local Sanskrit scholar.

A further reason for learning Sanskrit was to learn about the ancient laws of Hindu society, so he could interpret them correctly in his legal judgments. He worked with local legal experts but realised he was getting only second-hand interpretations of Hindu law – and he wanted to be able to read the original texts. At the time he wrote to a colleague:

*‘’ To commence without loss of time study of the Sanscrit. His reflection had before suggested the knowledge of this ancient tongue would be of the greatest utility enabling him to discharge with confidence and satisfaction to himself the duties of a judge….*

*As a lawyer he knew the value and importance of original documents and records… and as a stronger man of science he disdained the idea of amusing the learned world with secondary information when they had the means of access to the original sources’’[[2]](#endnote-2)*

He had a prodigious memory (he learned Shakespeare’s ‘Tempest’ by heart at 12, and wrote out a copy from memory as he didn’t have long-term access to the book), and was very disciplined – he rose at dawn to spend an hour on Sanskrit grammar before starting his day as a judge.

He continued to deepen his knowledge of Sanskrit and translated many works of poetry, literature, laws and philosophy into English – translations made for the first time.

He developed what became known as the Jonesian system for the transliteration of Indian languages, so that Indian texts could be read in Latin script without a knowledge of the Indian alphabet. This system became the international standard and is still in use today in a modified and updated form as the Hunterian transliteration system.

**The Society**

In 1784 he founded a new society in Calcutta, the Asiatic Society, to promote the study of Indian language, culture and literature – as yet a fairly unresearched topic in the West.

He became its first President, and held the position for the rest of his life, organising the meetings and writing a lot of the papers published by the society.

He and the society members studied Indian culture, published essays, gave speeches, and translated Indian works. Jones published many translations, which were praised by no less a poet than Goethe, who used them to learn about Indian literature.

**February 2, 1786 - The Speech**

You are reading this book because of the speech Sir William Jones gave on February 2, 1786 in Calcutta at the third annual meeting of his Asiatic Society.

In this speech on the history and culture of the Hindus he spoke about the Sanskrit language, and described his discovery, in these words that would be quoted across the world for the next 250 years:

*‘’ The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family.’’ [[3]](#endnote-3)*

In this, the ‘philologer speech’, he outlined his theory that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek had a common root, a common parent language, and they might also be related to other language groups such as Celtic languages, Germanic languages and Persian.

This speech, and the further development of his theory through subsequent essays, had a huge impact on the academic world. Linguists were immediately captured by the theory and across Europe scholars turned their attention to the study of the links between Indo-European languages and later the theoretical reconstruction of the original Indo-European language.

**The Impact**

Modern scholars consider his insights to have been ground-breaking, creating a new field of science:

‘’Jones’s brilliant suggestion put linguistic scholars on the right track of conceiving human speech to be groupable in families members of which were derived from a common archetype…….’’ [[4]](#endnote-4).

Jones’s theory led to the development of modern comparative philology or comparative linguistics and the study of the Indo-European languages, including the parent language itself which had died out. As a result ‘’in this sense Sir William Jones was the first modern linguist.’’[[5]](#endnote-5)

But the impact of such a discovery went further than just illuminating linguistic history. His theory of ancient languages challenged the accepted (even by him) religious teachings of the time:

''his theory is one of the most important in the history of ideas, and ultimately marked the end of the conception that God gave Hebrew to Adam as a direct gift of the first language, initiating the separation of religion from linguistics, which could then move toward science''[[6]](#endnote-6)

That view, that ''his theory is one of the most important in the history of ideas’’, also meant that he had an impact beyond language and linguistic study. The settled view in Western society was that India was primitive and under-developed, and lacked culture. Jones’s work meaking Indian literature, poetry and philosophy available to Western scholars started to change that view. And his theory that Sanskrit, the Indian language, came from the same common parent as Latin and Greek, possibly through migrations of people who settled northern India, revolutionised the understanding of Indian history and its place in world history. The theory of migrations will be the subject of later chapter.

**Cognate examples**

How did his theory arise? Through his study of Sanskrit, he noticed many similarities of vocabulary with the Latin and Greek languages he had already learned. He made a note of what we now call cognates, words that are ‘cousins’ to words in other language, derived from a common parent (however distant that parentage may be).

He noticed that the most common and frequently used words in one language – numbers, family relationships, parts of the body – seemed to be very similar across a number of languages.

**Linnaeus**

These similarities suggested that the languages were related to each other in some way. But how?

Jones was fascinated by botany through his whole life and used his free time in India to observe and catalogue new plants. He was therefore familiar with, and influenced by the classification system devised by the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus in 1735 and revised through the 1750s.

Linnaeus had created a system of classification based on family trees, where a family of plants or animals is divided into first *genus* and then *species* and *subspecies*.

Perhaps influenced by his knowledge of the hierarchical classification of Linnaeus in botany, he suggested that these languages had a common source from which they had developed over time, and that common source had given rise to other members of a hierarchical tree – and in turn would give rise to further members lower down that tree.

It seemed therefore natural to suggest a language family would have a similar hierarchical relationship – though these are usually described as ‘parent’ and ‘child’ or ‘daughter’ languages using family terms rather than ‘genus’ terms.

Using the family tree metaphor from Linnaeus, Jones started to use the familial relationship words to describe parent languages, sister and cousin languages (that are related through a common parent or grandparent), and child or daughter languages (that derive directly from the parent).

He was influenced by Linnaeus to think of genetic relationships between different languages - which could die and even become extinct (like organisms) or give rise to a new generation of languages.

Jones was thus the first to consider that languages could change and evolve – he described the concept of linguistic evolution long before Darwin’s theories of evolution.

**Language Families**

Jones’s study of Sanskrit led him to see the similarities - the cognates - with Persian, Latin and Greek. He saw these as evidence of a language family - the first person to use the concept of kinship as a way of describing the relationship between languages. He was the first to use terms such as 'sister' to relate Sanskrit and Latin

In so doing laid out the framework for the study of the Indo-European language family that would spur on scores of 19th century linguists to analyse and re-construct scientifically the ancient forms of the language. (Bopp, Verner, Grimm etc)

This earlier unrecorded language is called a ‘proto-language’, though this was not a term Jones used. This common source language might be unattested, not available in any written form, but it could be reconstructed on the basis on analysis of the daughter languages which kept or didn’t keep its words and features.

He also didn't use the term Indo-European (which was not coined until 1813 by Thomas Young), but looked at the range of languages in Europe and India and saw the connections.

And he did not try to reconstruct the original Proto-Indo-European language, but understood that it ceased to exist after splitting into the different family groups.

Jones moved away from observing random cognate similarities to build a theory of genetic and familial relationships over time, which gave us the concepts of language families and language change over time. These concepts seem so commonsensical as to obscure how groundbreaking and original they were at the time.

He insisted on avoiding the random similarities observed (eg via folk etymology - where words are coincidentally similar). He tried to be more scientific, looking at word derivations and the use of inflections (from grammatical cases) in different languages.

He identified the families of IE as Germanic, Slavic, Hellenic, Romance, Iranian and further identified the subfamilies of IE, noting for example the Indic family of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Bengali, Hindustani and even Romany, and also the Hellenic family of Doric, Aeolic, Attic languages, and the Germanic subfamilies of English Dutch Swedish and Gothic. He understood that Lappish, Finnish and Hungarian belonged to their own family, Finno-Ugric, and suggested Turkish was related to Mongolian.

In this analysis he was way ahead of his time – no-one had suggested such detailed familial links.

**Breaking with Biblical history**

When Jones suggested there was a common parent to the languages like Latin Greek and Sanskrit (& others) he specifically did not propose a link back to the ancient Hebrew of the biblical story of Creation.

He was clear-eyed about Hebrew and realised that it could not have been in the same language family as Latin and Greek, and was positioned with close relative Arabic in a Semitic language family. This was not only groundbreaking but close to religious heresy at that time.

Although this seems uncontroversial today, at the time he was writing people still believed the chronology of Archbishop Ussher. He had calculated that the world began in 4004 BC and the Great Flood happened in 2349 BC. And obviously everyone originally spoke the same language (assumed to be Hebrew) until the creation of Tower of Babel split the original language of all humankind into multiple tongues.

Jones did not suggest that this new ‘parent language’ he referred to was in fact the same as the common language spoken before the Tower of Babel, and thus he was explicitly rejecting the widely believed religious tenets of his time.

He could see that Hebrew was very different from his common language family, and assigned it to a different group – the Semitic languages. That in itself broke the link to the religious history of languages, as Hebrew had been assumed to be the root of all languages including European languages..

In doing this he was putting forward the historical study of language as a new science – linguistics – rather than an aspect of the study of religious history.

**Jones was not the first**

Jones has been rightly credited with founding the field of comparative linguistics, but scholars have also pointed out that he was not the first person to make the observations about languages being related. Lorenzen gives a very detailed account of earlier scholars commenting on language similarities, though they were hidebound by a focus on biblical history which they could not gainsay.

*‘’ the various early European linguists who commented on the similarities among European languages shared a belief in the derivation of these languages from those spoken by the groups of people descended from the three sons of Noah — Japheth, Shem, and Ham — and associated the (yet to be so-named) family of Indo-European languages with one of these three families of people. Almost all these scholars, except Jones, associated the ancestral Indo-European with Noah’s son Japheth. Jones preferred to associate it with the descendants of Ham. [[7]](#endnote-7)*

Josef Eskhult, claims that a Dutch scholar Marcus Boxhorn (1612-1653) “was the first to propose the theory that German, Latin, Greek, and Persian derive from a common source, which he designates as Scythian”[[8]](#endnote-8).

A modern biographer, Mukherjee, suggests Jones was “well aware of these developments” because of the same 1779 letter mentioned above. Jones wrote “Many learned investigators of antiquity are fully persuaded that a very old and almost primaeval language was in use among these northern nations [of Europe and Asia] from which not only the Celtic dialects but even the Greek and Latin are derived” [[9]](#endnote-9)

Metcalf notes that in 1686 a Swedish scholar, Andreas Jäger, gave a public lecture in Latin in Wittenberg in Germany. In this lecture (republished in 1774 and thus perhaps known to Jones) he suggested that there had been ‘’an ancient language that once was found in the region of the Caucasus mountains and then spread to Persia and Europe, becoming the ancestor of Persian, Greek, Latin and Romance languages, Slavonic, Celtic, Gothic, and other Germanic tongues. ‘’[[10]](#endnote-10)

Jäger’s theory (summarised by Metcalf [[11]](#endnote-11)) also suggested that the ancient language (which he referred to as ‘Scythian’ had been a parental language and its follow-on languages were described as ‘daughter’ languages. Like James Parsons later he thought this ancient language had something to do with the story of Noah’s son Japhet.

In 1767, an English doctor James Parsons published *Remains of Japhet: Being Historical Enquiries into the Affinity and Origin of the European Languages*. This lengthy treatise used a list of words from different languages to suggest there was a common source to at least some languages. He studied 1000 words of Irish and Welsh in detail and suggested they had developed from a common language – but still biblical in nature, from ‘the house of Japhet’.

His theory was that many of the languages of Europe, Iran and India were related, developing from some early common parent. [[12]](#endnote-12)

**Legacy**

It is clear therefore that Jones was not the first with this insight into language families. He was the first to make the connections so clearly, to separate language history from religious views of history, and to spread the concept more widely – especially through his wider work on Sanskrit and Indian culture.

Earlier scholars had found cognates between languages but were hamstrung by their Biblical ideas, and felt that these just showed the languages relationship back to the original Hebrew.

He was the first to break with these religious restrictions. Thus his contribution is essential, and is rightly credited with the foundation of modern comparative linguistics and our sense of the deeper commonality of western and eastern languages, history and culture.

Jones died not long after his groundbreaking work, in 1794, but left an enduring legacy in the study of the Indo-European language family – and in the 21st century, the archaeological and genetic study of the people who spoke that ancient language.

He had an influence beyond language, because in linking Sanskrit to European history, and writing about the glory of early Indian literature, astronomy, philosophy and civilisation, he changed the way that Europeans thought of India and its history and culture.

References (to come)

1. Franklin in Sebeok [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ref Jones life r [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ref ELIOHS* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Chatterji p32 in Sebeok [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Chatterji p57 in Sebeok [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cannon p49 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *ref Lorenzen)* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Eskhult 2012: 291-9) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mukherjee Jones 1970: vol. 1: 285). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. (Lorenzen p166). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Metcalf 1974: 233-240 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (cf summary Mallory (1989: 9-11)). Cf (Parsons 1767: xvii-xix). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)