

Glossogenetics: defining some principles

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There is a serious danger that incautiously proposed equivalences between specific languages and language families on the one hand and particular mtDNA or Y-chromosome haplotypes on the other may give rise to supposititious correlations which in reality are erroneous. The literature already offers many examples.

Some principles for glossogenetics - (the study of early languages aided by the methods of molecular genetics) - are suggested. It is stressed that historical demography and the understanding of social structure are necessary mediating considerations when linguistic and genetic data are compared. The genetic signal that survives most strongly is often that arising from initial colonisation. But the initial language distribution is, in many cases, transformed by language replacement.

Chronology represents a key problem, since genetic/linguistic correlations cannot work unless there is synchronicity. Neither molecular genetics nor historical linguistics is very good at estimating time depth, and this lies at the root of many doubtful proposals.

Nonetheless the juxtaposition of linguistic and genetic data regularly throws up interesting considerations. However the 'new synthesis' still seems some way from emerging!