

Linguistic clues to Iroquoian prehistory

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Abstract

© 2017 by The University of New Mexico. All rights reserved. This paper employs a quantitative analysis of lexical data to generate a tree describing the historical relationships among Iroquoian languages. An alternative to glottochronology is used to estimate the timing of branching events within the tree. We estimate the homeland of the language family using lexical and geographic distance measures and then compare this estimate with homeland determinations in the literature. Our results suggest that Proto-Iroquoian dates to around 2624 bc, and that the Finger Lakes region of west-central New York is the most likely homeland. The results also revealed a strong relationship between linguistic dissimilarity and geographic distance, likely reflecting the isolating effects of spatial separation on the magnitude of linguistic exchange. The timing of language divergences seems to coincide with important events observable in the archaeological record, including the first evidence for the use of corn in New York and Ontario. The development of important Iroquoian cultural attributes such as the longhouse, matrilineal residence, and the intensification of agriculture all coincide with a period which saw most of the internal language divergences.

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Keywords

Archaeology, ASJP, Iroquoian, Language, Linguistics

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