



BECAME FRIENDS

European harmony as an ideal worth the expending of political effort. You can't help thinking, seeing other Europeans making things work to their mutual benefit, that we are about to start missing out massively.

Like us, the Danes are relatively reluctant Europeans. They are in the Schengen Area – staying outside probably not realistic for a country of this size – but not in the euro (although the currency is pegged to it).

Unlike us, though, they seem to have understood that, whatever you think of it, being in the EU is better than being outside.

In this, we have truly isolated ourselves – and not even the most unhinged Brexiteer would claim today that our folly is going to inspire a Europe-wide revolution. Our options – selling the NHS to US health companies in exchange for chlorinated chicken, or enjoying Jezza's socialism in one country – are not attractive to our erstwhile European partners.

Fanø is flat. Its seaward side is flat, white sand which darkens with the rising tide. The sea is remarkably shallow here. You can walk a mile out at low tide, and even when that part of the sand is covered at high water, it will be less than two metres deep.

The weather can change treacherously quickly, though – mist suddenly making it impossible to find your way. Tourists walking out to watch

seals on the distant sandbanks are warned against heading out alone.

At least there are no cliff edges to fall over.

In the summer sunshine, the island thronged with tourists, it's hard to picture the day when the body of the unknown sailor was washed up on the beach.

A century after his death, he lies a long way from home: remembered, even anonymously; respected.

There aren't many Brits who make it to Fanø, so I always pass by his grave when, as now, I visit on holiday. As a BBC correspondent, I reported on war in Chechnya, Gaza, Iraq, and Georgia. The fact that I was lucky enough never to have to fight makes me respectful of those who did. The point of remembering wars, I believe, is not to glorify the killing but to value the peace which followed.

Brexiteers raving about past military glory would probably not agree with me, but I think the sailor, and the Germans who lie next to him, might. As hardcore Brexiteers celebrate us "breaking free", saner heads might wonder if 2016 will come to be seen as a disaster for the UK as 1864 was for Denmark.

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German troops, carrying rifles and wearing overcoats, march into the Danish city of Aalborg on the first day of German occupation. Photo: © Corbis via Getty Images

EUREKA MOMENT IN STUDY OF LANGUAGE

PETER TRUDGILL on a remarkable discovery which transformed the way we think about languages



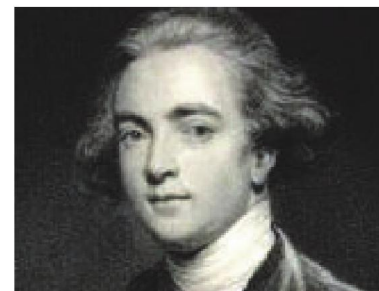
About 230 years ago, Sir William Jones made an amazing intellectual breakthrough. Jones had been born in London of a Welsh father and an English mother, and some reports suggest that he grew up bilingual in Welsh and English, though this seems unlikely since his father – who really was a native Welsh speaker from Anglesey – died when William was three.

Whatever the truth of the matter, William actually was a very gifted learner of languages, and by an early age he had mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. At one stage, he even translated Persian into French; and he wrote a grammar of the Persian language.

In his mid twenties, Jones started studying law; and in 1783, he arrived in Calcutta to take up an appointment as a judge. Once in India, he began to learn Sanskrit, the classical language of northern India – and it seems that he was one of the very first British people to do so.

Jones was very surprised by what his studies revealed. Sanskrit had ceased to be a living language more than 2,000 years before, but in its heyday it had been spoken in the northwest of the Indian sub-continent. How did it come about, then – as Jones now discovered – that the ancient Sanskrit language was in many respects so very similar to Ancient Greek and to Latin? Could it just be a coincidence that the Latin word *pater*, Greek *patēr* and Sanskrit *pitár* all meant 'father'; and that Latin *frater*, Ancient Greek *phrater* and Sanskrit *bhratar* all meant 'brother'? Latin *mater* ('mother') also corresponded to Greek *meter* and Sanskrit *matár*.

On the face of it, it seemed unlikely that there could be a connection between these languages. The homeland of Sanskrit was about 2,800 miles from Athens and 3,500 miles from Rome. And yet the similarities between the three ancient languages were undeniable,



The great linguist, Sir William Jones

Photo: Contributed

especially in their grammars. Latin *est* ('it is') was *asti* in Sanskrit; *sumus* ('we are') was *smas*; and *sunt* ('they are') was *santi*.

Jones came up with an explanation for these correspondences. In a famous lecture, he argued that there was "a stronger affinity" between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek "than could possibly have been produced by accident". A few others had noticed this before him, but Jones' breakthrough consisted in his insight that this affinity between the languages was so strong that no linguist could examine the three languages "without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists".

Which no longer exists – that was his major new idea. Jones suggested that there had been an earlier parent language which had given rise to these ancient languages – as well as to the Persian, Celtic, and Germanic languages – which had since disappeared.

Previously, scholars had misguidedly wondered which of the world's existing languages might have been the 'first' – Hebrew was often mentioned. But Jones argued that the only way to explain these linguistic affinities over such a large geographical area was through positing that there had once been a language which had gradually evolved into Latin, Greek and Sanskrit – and Persian, Celtic, and Germanic – just as Latin had later changed into the Romance languages Italian, Spanish, Rumanian and French, and Sanskrit itself had morphed into the vernacular North Indian languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali.

From Icelandic and Irish in the west, to Tajik and Bengali in the east, and from Russian and Norwegian in the Arctic north, to the language of the Maldiv Islands in the Indian Ocean in the south, most European languages, and many of those of west and south Asia, have developed over the centuries out of that same single source, which went out of existence 5,000 years ago. Today we call that source language "Indo-European".

Sir William Jones died in 1794, aged only 41. But he revolutionised our way of thinking about language history.

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THE ROHINGYA

It is perhaps surprising to learn that the language of the unfortunate Rohingya people of Burma is distantly related to Welsh and English. Rohingya is very similar to Chittagonian, which is a sub-variety of Bengali spoken in southeast Bangladesh. So the Rohingya language descended from ancient Sanskrit and is, like Welsh and English, an Indo-European language.