

## SOME UNSOLVED RIDDLES OF LITHUANIAN LINGUISTICS

ANTANAS KLIMAS

The University of Rochester

It is generally assumed that scientific, scholarly linguistics, as we know it today, started only about two hundred years ago. More precisely, it started with the famous lecture by Sir William Jones which he gave in Calcutta in 1786.<sup>1</sup> This is not a very long period of intensive investigation of languages, both from the diachronic as well as from the synchronic point of view.<sup>2</sup>

Baltic languages, particularly Lithuanian, were brought into the field rather early: in the first decades of the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> We do know quite a lot concerning the development, say, of Modern Lithuanian, all the way from the proto-language which is known as Proto-Indo-European, to the very last quarter of the 20th century. However, in these 5000 years, or thereabouts, so many changes, so many shifts have taken place in this long developmental history of any language that there are certain questions that linguists have not been able to answer satisfactorily. And that comprises all the basic levels of language development: the changes in its sound system (historical phonology), in its form system (historical morphology), in its lexicon, or vocabulary (historical lexicology), as well as in its sentence structure (historical syntax). Of course, as every linguistics student knows, all these levels are closely interrelated, and a change in one usually leads to some changes in some other areas, often in all four we have arbitrarily outlined above.<sup>4</sup>

Before we begin to discuss some unsolved riddles of Lithuanian linguistics, let us, briefly, ask ourselves a question: Why do languages change? Linguistics as a discipline does not have a single answer to this all-pervading question. What linguists know is the simple fact (or is it simple?) that all languages do change in the course of time, or through time. Some languages have changed more rapidly than others, some languages have changed more at certain time periods, less at other periods of time, but there are no languages spoken or extinct which have not changed. Speaking in very general terms, one could probably say that, since language (and we have here, primarily, the spoken language, speech, in mind) is a social phenomenon, language is bound to change since no society is permanently static. Whenever certain changes occur in society, they are mostly reflected in its language, since language is a phenomenon of social communication.<sup>5</sup>

Lithuanian is, without any doubt, the most conservative, the most archaic of all the living Indo-European languages. In practical terms, it means that Lithuanian has changed less than any of the spoken Indo-European languages today. This is an interesting question, and there are several answers possible. Scholars talk about Lithuanian separating rather late from the proto-language, of having, generally, a very archaic character, of not having mixed with other languages, of not allowing any foreign influences, etc. All of these assumptions are most probably true. What we cannot do, however, is, using the Anglo-Saxon term, prove them beyond any reasonable doubt. Lithuanian is particularly conservative, or archaic, in its morphological, lexical, and syntactic structure. It is somewhat less archaic in its phonological structure, but it is still, comparatively speaking, even in its phonology, more archaic than any modern spoken Indo-European language. This being the case, many sounds, and forms, and individual words of Lithuanian can be rather easily explained, using the comparative method that has been worked out in the last two hundred years. This way, for example, we can easily explain the regular development of most of the ancient inherited Lithuanian words, such as the parts of the human body, its main functions, the family relationship terms, the basic verbs for the basic human behavior, all the numerals, many personal pronouns, some basic objects of the physical world, etc. We can explain the development of most of the case endings in the Lithuanian nominal system, the basic endings of many thematic and athematic verbs,<sup>6</sup> and many other types of development. However, as in any language, there are certain mysteries, if you will, left that have been puzzling linguists for the last two hundred years or so, and nobody has succeeded in solving them to everybody's satisfaction. This does not leave historical linguistics in jeopardy, as some pessimists seem to think. It only leaves certain "gaps" in our knowledge the explanation for which will one day be found, I believe.

Whenever one is faced with this kind of phenomenon, one has several choices: a) one can simply admit that we do not know; b) one can try some explanations using the accepted methods; c) one can say it is some sporadic linguistic change which defies our methods and our knowledge. The first way is usually chosen by the authors of the etymological dictionaries in which case they simply state: "Origin unknown".

Let me give here a few examples. For a long time, it was generally accepted that such Lithuanian words as **ranka** 'hand,' **galva** 'head,' **ragas** 'horn' were borrowed from Slavic, most probably from ancient Proto-Slavic. However, now everybody admits that these words, and many others could not have been borrowed from Slavic into Baltic. They are ancient, genuine Baltic/Lithuanian words which, at a very early time, were borrowed from Baltic into Proto-Slavic, or Common Slavic.<sup>7</sup> When the late Professor Ernst Fraenkel wrote his famous Etymological Dictionary of Lithuanian<sup>8</sup> in the fifties of this century, many words were not clear to him. Since then, many of these words have been clarified, such as **trumpas** 'short,' **žeberklas** 'fish spear, harpoon, hook,' to mention but two.<sup>9</sup>

However, there still remain some puzzles, some unsolved problems in all areas. In this article we shall mention only four such cases. One will be, generally speaking, in phonology, one in morphology, one in etymology, and one in onomastics, although the latter case could also be dealt with under the general rubric of etymology.

## 1. Case No. 1: Lith. **lizdas** 'nest.'

Nobody doubts that Lith. **lizdas** 'nest' is a direct descendant of the basic reconstructed Proto-Indo-European form **\*nisdos**, or **\*nizdos**. The mystery herein lies in the fact that only the Baltic languages have the initial l here, instead of the expected initial 'n.' The Proto-Indo-European form **\*nisdos** (**\*nizdos**) itself is quite clear: it is a very old Indo-European compound, composed of the prefix (originally, a particle) **\*ni-** 'down; nether/' and the zero grade<sup>10</sup> form derived from the root **\*sed-/\*sod-/\*sd-** 'to sit; to sit down'. Thus: **ni** 'down' + **sd-** 'sat' = "the place for sitting down (of birds)." From this **\*nisdos** (perhaps pronounced, because of the assimilation to the following voiced 'd' — as **\*nizdos**), we now have: Latin **nidus**; Old Irish (Celtic) **net** (Mod. Irish **nead**); Sanskrit **nidá** 'resting place;'; Old English, Middle English, Modern English **nest**; Old High German, Middle High German, Modern German **nest** (Nest); Welsh (Celtic) **nyth**; Old Church Slavic **gnězdo** (from an older **\*nězdo**). One can readily see that all the languages listed above have the initial 'n,' but in all three Baltic languages we have:

Lithuanian **lizdas**

Latvian **li(g)zds, li(g)zda, lizgs**

Old Prussian **liscis/liskis/'Lager'**.

Thus, we have this unusual, unique "discrepancy:" **n-l**. This is very unusual because it is the only such case we know in all of Indo-European linguistics. In other words, if the development here had been regular, we would expect Lithuanian **\*nizdas**, Latvian **\*nizgs**, Old Prussian **\*niskis**, or **\*nizgis**.

In reference to what we have said in the initial remarks, we could leave this problem in the realm of unsolved/un-solvable problems. All sciences, social sciences, and humanities abound in similar unsolved problems. However, linguists have been tempted to propose some kind of solution. The one most frequently mentioned<sup>11</sup> has been proposed by the famous Latvian linguist, Janis Endzelins in which he assumes the "crossing," or some kind of contamination of two Proto-Indo-European roots, **\*nisdos** and **\*leig'h-/\*loig'h-** which meant "to lay down; to lie". Ernst Fraenkel in his Etymological Dictionary of Lithuanian<sup>12</sup> mentions one more possibility, namely the type of the original root (Proto-Indo-European **\*lend-/\*lond-/\*lnd-}** that came down as Lithuanian (infinitive here) **lijsti**, Latvian **list** "to creep into; to creep into some hole/opening." Among other things, this latter root is related with Lith. **lašta** '(dog) kennel; cage; coop'.

We might add at least three more possibilities. One, the ancient Lithuanian verb **lesti** "peck; pick up by pecking" could be added to the two verbal roots mentioned earlier. Two, the change from Proto-Indo-European **\*nisdos** (**\*niz-dos**) to Baltic **\*lizdos/lizdas** could be looked upon as a partial regressive dissimilation at a distance, i.e., since both 'n' and 'd' are produced, or articulated, in the same general dental area, the shift from 'n' to 'l' may mean just that. Three, it could be any "combination" of the various shifts outlined above.

But, for now, the l in Baltic, instead of the expected n is still an unsolved riddle.

## 2. Case No. 2: The Lithuanian Frequentative Past Tense.

While Lithuanian **lizdas** 'nest' has its equivalents in Latvian and Old Prussian, thus we assume it has its origins in Common Baltic, or Proto-Baltic, the Frequentative Past Tense is found in Lithuanian only. Namely, with the suffix **-dava-**, or, more realistically, **-dav-**, plus the regular thematic endings of the simple past (= -au, -ai, -o; -ome, **-ote**, -o), one derives this particular tense from any infinitive:

<b>būti</b> 'to be'	<b>eiti</b> 'to go'
<b>aš būdavau</b> 'I used to go'	<b>aš eidavau</b> 'I used to go', etc.
<b>tu būdavai</b>	<b>tu eidavai</b>
<b>jis būdavo</b>	<b>jis eidavo</b>
<b>mes būdavome</b>	<b>mes eidavome</b>
<b>jūs būdavote</b>	<b>jūs eidavote</b>
<b>jie būdavo</b>	<b>jie eidavo</b>

No other Indo-European language has this kind of frequentative past tense. It cannot be very ancient in Lithuanian either since it is always regularly derived,<sup>13</sup> and in some Lithuanian dialects it has slightly different phonological patterns, or is hardly ever used. The puzzle, the mystery here lies in the question of the origin of the suffix **-dav-**. First of all, this suffix can be reduced, as it were, to only **-da-** since the V in **-dava-** is automatic: in Modern Lithuanian one has to have either 'v' or 'j' between two possibly contiguous vowels.<sup>14</sup> Again, as in the case of Lith. **lizdas**, several attempts have been made to solve this question, all unsuccessful. The one theory that has been enjoying some discussion is the one proposed by the same Latvian linguist, Janis Endzelins:

"In Lithuanian the suffix **-davā-** is added to the infinitive stem to create a form which denotes some kind of customary past action or process, e.g. **dúoti: dúodavau** '(I) used to give;' **sakýti: sakýdavau** '(I) used to say; **lándžioti: lándžiodavau** '(I) used to crawl about.' These forms are conjugated like the a-stem preterit forms, e.g. second person sing, **dúodavai**, third person **dúodavo**, etc. These forms probably developed in the following manner: the preterits **šáudė, spjáudė, jódė, mindė** (inf. **šáudyti** 'to shoot,' **spjáudyti** 'to spit,' **jódyti** 'to ride about **mindyti** 'to trample,' **stúmdyti** 'to push about') changed into **šáudavo, spjáudavo, jódavo, mindavo, stumdavo** on the pattern of such forms as, for example, **rėkavo** '(he) cried repeatedly,' **šūkavo** '(he) clamoured,' **ùbagavo** '(he) begged,' **tarnāvo** '(he) served,' etc. Then on the model of **spjáuti** 'to spit' and **spjáudavo** 'he spit (repeatedly),' there could have arisen the form **pjáudavo** 'he used to cut' beside **pjáuti** 'to cut.'<sup>15</sup>

This idea of Enzelins is possible because analogy is one of the main phenomena contributing heavily to language change. However, it cannot be proven to be the all-acceptable solution.

I would like to mention one more possibility. It can *be* assumed that Proto-Indo-European (=PIE) had the root **\*do-** 'to give.' There is no reason to reject the existence of the root **\*do-**, with the short 'o.' in quantitative ablaut with the root **\*do-**, i.e., with the long 'o.' The shorter root (i.e., **\*do-**) most probably had a different meaning, something, possibly, like "to accomplish; to do." It is quite possible that the same root (i.e., PIE **\*do-**, Lith. **da-**) could be seen in the formation of the very interesting Lithuanian Special Present Active Adverbial Participle in **-damas, -dama**.<sup>16</sup> Thus, **matydamas** 'in the act of seeing; while seeing' could be considered as consisting of **maty** + **da** + **m** + **as**, in which **maty** is the basic infinitive stem, **-da-** (= 'doing it') + **m-**, a suffix like in the present passive participle (cf. **matomas**), and, of course, **-as** is the nominal/adjectival ending.

### Case No. 3: Lithuanian **kiaulė** 'pig.'

As we had already alluded to above, most of the Lithuanian words for both wild as well as domestic animals that are found in reconstructed Proto-Indo-European can be easily explained as having been derived regularly from the proto-language. But Lith. **kiaulė** 'pig,' so far, has defeated all the efforts. Professor William R. Schmalstieg, most probably, comes closest:

"In Ernst Fraenkel's **Litauisches etymologisches Wörterbuch** (Heidelberg, 1955 ff.) the word **kiaulė** 'pig' is connected with Gk. **solóus** known from Hesychius where it is defined as 'us 'swine.' I suspect that this etymology is incorrect and that **kiaulė** is related rather to the Indo-European root **\*keu** 'to cover,' the root which is found in Lith. **kėvalas, kėvetas, kiąutas** 'husk, shell' and hence is related to Gk. **kútos, skútos** 'skin, hide,' Latin **cutis**, Old Prussian **keuto** 'hide'.<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt in my mind that Schmalstieg's views may be correct. It is possible from the point of view of phonology, morphology, and word-formation. What bothers me a little (and some other linguists) is the semantic development. To quote Professor Schmalstieg again:

"Thus we can explain **kiaulė** (accent class 2) as a derivative of **\*kiąuti**. From the meaning 'to cover (oneself), to grow (oneself) a hide' there was derived a noun of action which eventually came to be a concrete noun with the meaning 'the

animal which grows a hide,' hence a 'pig.'[18](#)

Unfortunately, most of the other domestic as well as wild animals grow a hide too. Why would then only the pig be considered as "the animal which grows a hide?" How about a horse, a cow, or a dog? As I have said above already, one cannot reject Schmalstieg's suggestion out of hand, but one cannot confirm it either.

I have only one suggestion here, and even that I mention with hesitation. Several Indo-European languages (i.e. Slavic, Germanic, Greek, Latin . . .) have a name for pig which is derived from an apparently onomatopoetic \*su-. Maybe this was the call signal used in calling pigs. Lithuanian, however, uses a slightly different call for pigs: **kū-kū-kū**. Now, it is conceivable that the \*su- represents the zero grade of some original word(s), namely: \*seu-/\*sou-/\*su-. I suppose it is not too far fetched to assume the following possibility: in ancient times, the ancestors of the Lithuanians, for some reason, replaced the initial s- of \*seu- with the velar 'k,' thus: \*keu-. This form, then, could have easily led to the noun/appellative \***keu-lē**, eventually to Standard Modern Lithuanian **kiaulė** (pronounced **k'eul'ė**).[19](#)

## Case No. 4: Lithuanian Hydronyms.

Generally speaking, Lithuanian hydronyms[20](#) are very much "Indo-European." Most of them, particularly the more archaic ones, represent the oldest layers of name giving. However, there are several dozens of these hydronyms that still defy our efforts. In the very interesting **Etymological Dictionary of the Lithuanian Hydronyms**[21](#) we can clearly see that. 61 such names of the Lithuanian rivers and lakes are listed in the next page.

If one read this list slowly, and if one is a native speaker of Lithuanian, there is an "echo" here, in almost all of these lovely names of the rivers and the lakes both of what I may call Indo-European/Baltic/Lithuanian types as well as an "echo" of some ancient, mysterious, strange elements. Without any doubt, some roots of these words, as well as some suffixes could be explained, but, taken together, they cannot be explained, at least at the time of this writing. Eventually, it will be possible to explain some of them, but right now we can only enjoy reading and using them.

### Lithuanian Rivers and Lakes

- |                     |                    |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Alšia (r.)       | 31. Lamėstas (r.)  |
| 2. Altis (r.)       | 32. Likupis (r.)   |
| 3. Anga (r.)        | 33. Liūdė (r.)     |
| 4. Anykščiai (l.)   | 34. Lūja (r.)      |
| 5. Ankaris (r.)     | 35. Maučiodis (r.) |
| 6. Apsta (r.)       | 36. Melmentas (r.) |
| 7. Apšriuotis (r.)  | 37. Midega (r.)    |
| 8. Artava (r.)      | 38. Minsnoras (r.) |
| 9. Arvystas (r.)    | 39. Nečeskas (l.)  |
| 10. Audenis (l.)    | 40. Nerema (r.)    |
| 11. Baka (l/r.)     | 41. Paštys (l.)    |
| 12. Bižas (r.)      | 42. Piešys (r.)    |
| 13. Cedvė (r.)      | 43. Praviena (r.)  |
| 14. Ciras (r.)      | 44. Rešketa (r.)   |
| 15. Dalidas (r.)    | 45. Roduntas (r.)  |
| 16. Dausinas (l.)   | 46. Skinija (r.)   |
| 17. Detela (l.)     | 47. Snetela (r.)   |
| 18. Galba (r.)      | 48. Stidilis (r.)  |
| 19. Galgaitis (l.)  | 49. Svingis (l.)   |
| 20. Glasmynas (l.)  | 50. Ubesiukas (r.) |
| 21. Jagomantas (l.) | 51. Urmis (l.)     |
| 22. Josvainis (r.)  | 52. Vastapa (r.)   |
| 23. Jusinė (r.)     | 53. Vencavas (l.)  |
| 24. Kaivadys (r.)   | 54. Vėzgė (r.)     |
| 25. Kančioginą (r.) | 55. Viekšnia (r.)  |

26. Kavalys (r.)  
27. Keizaras (l.)  
28. Kiše (r.)  
29. Korubis (r.)  
30. Kušupis (r.)

56. Vievis (l.)  
57. Vypla (r.)  
58. Volaujė (r.)  
59. Zapsė (r.)  
60. Žaisa (r.)  
61. Žvarkulis (r.)

I am tempted here to make a rather daring suggestion. It is not really mine, but it comes from Professor Marija Gimbutas. In several of her books and articles<sup>22</sup> as well as in her lectures, she had been hinting that Lithuanian may have taken over and retained some words from the non-Indo-European (and non-Finno-Ugric as well) original inhabitants of ancient Europe, of pre-Indo-European Europe.<sup>23</sup> These could have been the people who had inhabited the area which later became Indo-European, and eventually, Baltic, sometimes after the last ice age retreated but before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. I will be very frank here: we have not a single shred of linguistic evidence recorded for these people. However, it is clear that they had a well-developed language, or languages, and they "may have named the various rivers and lakes, and the later Indo-Europeans may have taken over these names."<sup>24</sup>

1 Cf. Sir William Jones, "The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus," reprinted in: **A Reader in Nineteenth-Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics**, edited and translated by Winfred P. Lehmann, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1967, pp. 7-20.

2 Of course, in the nineteenth century, it was almost entirely historical.

3 This was done, primarily, by Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm. Later, many Indo-Europeanists considered material from Lithuanian as well as from other Baltic languages.

4 These "basic levels of language development" are separated, primarily, for didactic purposes. Every student of linguistics knows that a change in one level influences other levels. Cf. any introductory book on linguistics.

5 We have, here, primarily the spoken language in mind. The written documents reflect these changes as well, but not always in a clearly distinguishable way.

6 Athematic verbs are usually much more archaic, more primordial, since they "add" the endings directly to their basic stem, or root; thematic verbs, on the other hand, always have a vowel between the main stem and the basic ending. In Lithuanian, one can find about 70 of such ancient athematic verbs, or their relics.

7 These terms, i.e., Proto-Slavic versus Common Slavic usually mean the same. However, some linguists differentiate between them. For them, Proto-Slavic may mean the language when it had just separated from (late) Proto-Indo-European; Common Slavic, on the other hand, may mean the later stage of the language from which individual Slavic languages have developed.

8 Ernst Fraenkel, **Litauisches etymologisches Wörterbuch** (two volumes), Heidelberg and Göttingen, 1962-1965. (The first issue really came out in 1954).

9 Cf. Vincas Urbutis, **Baltų etimologijos etidai**, Vilnius, 1981, esp. pp. 85 ff., and 120 ff.

10 Zero grade is one of the fundamental 'grades' in the systematic sequencing of the Indo-European vowels. The other two fundamental grades are the "normal e-grade," and the "normal o-grade." For example, in Lithuanian **kelti** 'to raise,' the **-el-** reflects the Indo-European normal e-grade; in Lithuanian **kalnas** 'mountain, hill,' the **-al-** represents the Indo-European normal o-grade (i.e., Lithuanian short a from PIE short o). Lithuanian **kilti** 'to rise' represents the PIE zero grade, since Lith. **-il-** comes from the PIE sonantic \*l. Thus, we can reconstruct this sequence for Proto-Indo-European as **el:ol:l** which gave Lithuanian **el:al:il**.

11 Cf. Janis Endzelins' **Comparative Phonology and Morphology of the Baltic Languages**, translated by William R. Schmalstieg and Benjamins Jegers, Mouton, the Hague-Paris, 1971, pp. 239-240.

12 Ernst Fraenkel, op. cit., vol. I, p. 383.

13 By "regularly derived," we mean it is always regular, with no exceptions. This derivation happens, usually, by analogy to preexisting patterns. If it is entirely regular, both phonologically as well as by accentuation, this usually means that it cannot be very ancient.

14 This is a phonological/phonetic phenomenon of Modern Lithuanian: if, etymologically, two vowels occur contiguously, a sort of glide must be put in between, either **-v-**, or **-j-**. Cf. Lith. **ėjo** '(he, she, it, they) went, walked,' from etymological \*eo, or \*ea. Lith. **buvo** 'he, she, it, they were,' from etymological \*buo, or \*bua.

15 Janis Endzelins, op. cit., pp. 239-240.

16 About the formation, etc., cf. Leonardas Dambriūnas, Antanas Klimas, and William R. Schmalstieg, **Introduction to Modern Lithuanian**, Franciscan Fathers Press (341 Highland Blvd., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11207, USA), 3rd edition, 1980. Esp. pp. 208 and 280.

17 William R. Schmalstieg, "Lith. **KIAULĖ 'PIG'**," **Slavic and East European Journal**, New Series, vol. V (XIX) (1961), pp. 139-140.

18 William R. Schmalstieg, op. cit., p. 139.

19 On the pronunciation of Lithuanian, cf. Footnote #16.

20 Hydronyms are names of the bodies of water of all types.

21 Aleksandras) Vanagas, **Lietuvių hidronimų etimologinis žodynas**, Vilnius, 1981.

22 Cf. particularly her articles in the **Journal of Indo-European Studies**.

23 We know something about them only from archeology. Some obscure inscriptions have been found, but nobody claims to be able to decipher them.

24 This does not mean that all these 61 Lithuanian hydronyms would be able to lay claim to such great antiquity, i.e., about 8,000-10,000 years. However, some of them may have been borrowed, or simply taken over, from the non-Indo-European inhabitants of Europe, although we will never be able to prove it for sure.