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Dothraki & The Nostratic Superfamily

By McLean R. Ketchum (Qahlano)

Background: This piece was originally written by an MA student in linguistics as a response to an exam question. The original assignment was to prove, in 2000-2500 words, that Dothraki is a part of the Nostratic Superfamily of languages. Assuming, of course, that one believes the Nostratic Superfamily hypothesis.

Whether or not a given language belongs to a given language family can be hotly contested. When speaking of an invented language, or conlang (constructed language), it can be even more of a challenge to determine where in the 'real' world that language might fit. Dothraki is a conlang that was created beginning in 2009 by the linguist David J. Peterson for the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*. The Dothraki people, per the Living Language course book written on the language itself, are "a population of loosely confederated bands of horse-riding warriors who make their home on the steppes of Essos," while "Dothraki [the language] is a lightly inflectional language related to the Lhazareen language...The Dothraki have no writing system and no use for books. To be appreciated properly it needs to be spoken aloud. Forcefully" (Peterson, pp. 6-7). Because the Dothraki have no writing system and no books (their word for book, *timvir*, is borrowed from High Valyrian, another of Peterson's *Game of Thrones* conlangs), Dothraki is represented using a Romanization system. The fan-maintained English to Dothraki and Dothraki to English dictionaries, in addition to the official Living Language Dothraki book, CD, and companion app, represent the primary tools for learning the language. Before those resources existed, some dedicated fans learned as much as they could of Dothraki by watching the TV show – while there are some words in Dothraki in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series by George R. R. Martin that inspired the show, they are few and far between. Those few words are what Peterson used to begin building the language as it exists currently. Trying to discern where in the real world Dothraki might fit is an interesting challenge; I shall argue here in favor of it being part of the Nostratic Superfamily. The Nostratic Superfamily, per the definition in Lyle Campbell's *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* is a group of languages that are not yet known to be related, but that have been hypothesized to be so (Campbell, pg. 345). The Nostratic Superfamily has various slightly different versions, but the best-known version groups together Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, Kartvelian, Dravidian, and Afro-Asiatic. Some also include Chuckchi-Kamchatkan, Eskimo-Aleut, Sumerian, and Gilyak (Nivkh) (Campbell, pg. 346). The Nostratic Superfamily hypothesis is controversial, and how accepted it is depends on which community of linguists one asks. Lyle Campbell, the author of the historical linguistics textbook on which I have based some of my background knowledge, has himself argued against it. Regardless, by examining the phonology, lexicon, geography, and culture of the Dothraki people and their language, I intend to prove that Dothraki is indeed a branch of the Nostratic Superfamily, and is at least tangentially related to the languages listed above.

To begin with, there is the phonology of Dothraki as compared to the phonology of other languages in the Nostratic Superfamily. Most letters in Dothraki

are pronounced as they are in English; Dothraki is a conlang that was invented by a native English speaker, spoken on the television show by actors who – for the most part – are also native English speakers. As with many words in English, there are sometimes multiple acceptable pronunciations for one word in Dothraki, depending upon whether the speaker is native or non-native. There are several key phonological differences between Dothraki and English. Three of the most notable perhaps are the Dothraki ‘q,’ which is like the ‘k’ in *sky*, “but pronounced deep in the back of the throat” (Peterson, pg. 14); the Dothraki ‘kh,’ which is compared to the ‘ch’ at the end of ‘Bach,’ and is represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet as [x]; and the Dothraki ‘r,’ which is described as “rolled, as in Spanish, when at the beginning of the word and followed by a vowel, at the end of the word, or when doubled; everywhere else, tapped” (Peterson, pg. 15). Peterson himself has expressed that he sourced the phonology of the Dothraki ‘q’ from the voiceless uvular stop ‘q’ in Standard Arabic (D. Peterson, personal communication, October 17, 2014). Arabic in turn belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages, a family that is also included in the Nostratic Superfamily. This same voiceless uvular stop occurs also in Aleut (Ladefoged, 2005), another language that is part of the Nostratic Superfamily hypothesis. Moving on to the second pertinent example, the Dothraki ‘kh’ occurs quite frequently in the dialogue of the HBO television series. Interestingly, most of the actors who are tasked with pronouncing it end up saying it the way a non-native Dothraki speaker would – as a plain ‘k,’ rather than the [x] it should be. The title *khaleesi*, for example, is basically the Dothraki equivalent of ‘queen’; it refers to the wife of a *khal*, who is the leader of a horde or tribe known as a *khalasar*. *Khaleesi* should be pronounced [xaleesi] but is often pronounced [kaleesi] or even [kalisi] instead. The other previously mentioned words that start with ‘kh,’ *khal* and *khalasar*, should also rightly be pronounced with the [x] sound at the beginning. The voiceless velar fricative [x] occurs across multiple languages, including many members of the Nostratic Superfamily – Aleut, Arabic, Somali, West Frisian, and Yiddish, just to name a few. It even existed in Old English in the word *wealh*, pronounced [wæalx], meaning ‘foreigner’ or ‘slave.’ The third example, the Dothraki ‘r,’ is described specifically as rolled ‘as in Spanish,’ and Spanish is of course a member of the Nostratic Superfamily itself. In addition, the rolled ‘r’ appears in Finnish, which is a member of the Uralic family of languages – the Uralic family too being a member of the Nostratic Superfamily. The other ‘r’ that occurs in Dothraki, described as ‘tapped,’ is an alveolar flap that also occurs in quite a few languages that are included in the Nostratic Superfamily: Dutch, Hebrew, Punjabi, and Galician, just to name a handful. These three examples of Dothraki phonology demonstrate clearly that Dothraki is a branch of the Nostratic Superfamily, since its phonology so closely resembles that of many members of the Nostratic Superfamily.

The lexicon, geography, and culture of the Dothraki are all closely bound together – essentially, the lexicon itself reflects both the Dothraki culture and the geography of where they live, based on what words it does and does not contain. To begin with, the specific words included in the lexicon of Dothraki provide quite a few clues as to where Dothraki would fit into the world’s ‘real’ languages. The Dothraki culture is intensely horse-focused; they travel everywhere on horseback and are wary of crossing water that their horses cannot drink (meaning, they are

not big fans of oceanic travel). In their lexicon, they have a specific word that means 'poison water,' because of this belief – any water that their horses cannot drink may as well be poison. The word, *evethiz*, is a simple compound of their word for water, *eveth*, and their word for poison, *iz*. Perhaps the most similar 'real world' culture to the Dothraki, at least in terms of their focus and dependence on horses, would be the Mongol Empire. The languages spoken among the Mongol hordes at that time would have been Turkic and Mongolian, both of which have been hypothesized to be members of the Altaic family of languages, which is itself a family belonging to the Nostratic Superfamily. Interestingly, the Mongol hordes drank fermented mare's milk that they called *airag*, and the Dothraki lexicon coincidentally contains a phrase for this drink as well – *lamekh ohazho*, *lamekh* meaning 'mare's milk' and *ohazho* meaning 'fermented.' As well, the Mongol Empire is said to have originated in the steppes of Asia, and the Dothraki have been described as living on the steppes of Essos, so it is clear that in at least a very basic way, the geography of the two cultures would likely be fairly similar, as both live or lived on the steppes. Another clue in favor of Dothraki being a member of the Nostratic Superfamily has to do with what core vocabulary is proposed for the Nostratic Superfamily itself. One of the words in this core vocabulary means 'boar,' as in a wild or feral pig, and as it turns out, Dothraki has a word for 'boar,' too – *qifo*. Furthermore, while the Nostratic Superfamily core vocabulary does not include words for 'white lion' and 'black stork,' Dothraki does, and the presence of these words in Dothraki turns out to be vitally important to its potential inclusion in the Nostratic Superfamily. The fact that Dothraki has both of those words provides an intriguing clue towards the geography of the Dothraki people. The black stork, or *qana* in Dothraki, avoids large bodies of water, like the Dothraki, and the range of the black stork includes the Palaearctic – a range that would cover most if not all of the languages of the Nostratic Superfamily. White lions are found mostly in captivity now, but based on oral records (and the earliest recorded sighting of them in 1938), they likely originated in a specific part of Africa. They are very rare in the wild, so for Dothraki to have a word in the lexicon that means 'white lion' – the word *hrakkar* – means that the Dothraki probably would, in the 'real' world, live somewhere similar to this part of Africa, and so their language would then fit into the Nostratic Superfamily, like some of the other 'real' languages spoken in that region.

A particularly important cultural aspect of the Dothraki and their language is the religion they follow. The Dothraki believe in a central god, the Great Stallion, known in Dothraki as *Vezhof* (Peterson, 4/16/2012). The Dothraki believe that when a person dies, he or she must be cremated so as to be spiritually set free from this world and move on to a realm called the Night Lands, or *Rhaeshi Ajjalani* (Peterson, 4/9/2012). Not burning someone's corpse is not only a cultural faux pas, but a terribly nasty insult as well; in fact, in one scene of the television series the Dothraki leader Khal Drogo threatens an enemy by saying that he will not burn his body, that he will leave him out to rot, to be consumed by animals, etc. This is about the worst death threat one can utter in Dothraki – it implies that not only are you going to kill the person, you are going to bar him from joining his ancestors and the Great Stallion in the Night Lands by not burning his corpse. One 'real world' religion that also requires cremation is the Hindu religion. Hinduism is the majority religion

for the people in India and Nepal, and coincidentally, the official languages of India and Nepal – Nepali, Hindi, and English – fall under the umbrella of the Nostratic Superfamily. Cremation is considered an option for many cultures, but it is specifically a requirement in Hinduism, just as it is a requirement in Dothraki culture. Additionally, the Dothraki believe specifically in their one god, the Great Stallion, but they do not actively deny the existence of other gods – they just believe their god is the most powerful, and the most likely to help them. This type of belief is known as henotheism, and as a word, henotheism was originally coined to describe a theology particular to the Rigvedic religion. The Rigvedic religion, in turn, is thought of as the predecessor of Hinduism, so that one might think of the Dothraki religion as a predecessor to a Hindu-esque religion that might later develop as the people and their culture change and evolve. This, when combined with the importance of cremation in both Hinduism and the Dothraki Great Stallion-based henotheistic religion, points at the Dothraki culture as being at least partially based on Indo-Aryan culture. Indo-Aryan as a language family is a branch of the Indo-Iranian language family, which is of course then a member of the Indo-European language family, and Indo-European itself is included in the Nostratic Superfamily. The religion of the Dothraki, based on its tenets and requirements, seems to be loosely based on an early form of Hinduism, and as Hinduism is the majority religion for people who speak languages that are included in the Nostratic Superfamily hypothesis, it stands to reason that the Dothraki language, too, would be included in the Nostratic Superfamily.

Dothraki is a fascinating and extensive conlang that, according to its creator, is still under construction. While he has created upwards of 3,000 words at this point, David J. Peterson has expressed the desire to someday expand the Dothraki language to at least 10,000 words. Naturally, conlangs are based on real languages – no matter how inventive a language creator is, he or she must draw upon his or her own real-world knowledge and what resources are available to create a language from thin air (or, as the case is here, create a language from a short list of words that George R. R. Martin created from thin air). It is my belief that if Dothraki were included in the world's real languages, if it had to branch off of any particular superfamily, it would be the Nostratic Superfamily. The evidence is all there: Dothraki sounds like a Nostratic language, it has the lexicon of one, its people live in a geography not unlike that of a Nostratic language region, and the Dothraki culture seems to align with several Nostratic language cultures, among them Indo-Aryan and early Mongolian. I feel that the data that thus far exists on Dothraki – the language and the people – points directly toward the Dothraki language being a branch of the Nostratic Superfamily because no other hypothesis seems nearly as sound. As a researcher, I found that the most striking evidence for Dothraki being a branch of the Nostratic Superfamily came not from the lexicon or the phonology, as I might have expected, but from a specific aspect of the culture – in terms of major world religions, the Dothraki religion resembles early Rigvedic much more than I ever would have realized, if not for the intense research I did on the subject. While this striking similarity alone is not enough to make the case for Dothraki being a branch of the Nostratic superfamily, I believe that when combined with the other extensive evidence I have presented, it paints a very clear picture of the Dothraki

language – or, as they would call it, *lekh dothraki* – and its place in both the fantasy world, and our own.

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