GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURE WORDS.

Diffusion versus Common Heritage.

We now turn to the geographical distribution of linguistic data. The mode of argumentation is here essentially the same as that employed in studying the distribution of culture elements; in other words, the more extended the geographical distribution of a culture word, the older the word and, by inference, the older its associated concept. Owing to the ease with which borrowed culture elements are renamed, whether by means of a transfer of meaning of an old term or by means of a new descriptive term, the method must be used with great caution. There are, however, two factors in regard to which the evidence derived from linguistic data is generally less liable to misinterpretation than that which is directly derived from the distribution of culture.

In discussing the distribution of a culture element we found that it was in many cases practically impossible, or at least difficult, to distinguish between similarity due to diffusion from a certain centre and similarity due to retention of the element by tribes originally forming part of one and the same cultural community. For reasons which we cannot here take up fully it is, on the other hand, very frequently possible to distinguish between a word of native origin and one which has been borrowed from without. Applying this to the problem of distribution, we find that we are often able to distinguish between cultural terms that have been inherited in common by the languages forming a linguistic stock or subdivision thereof and cultural terms that have passed beyond the limits of such a group and been taken up by one or more languages of an alien group. Naturally, it is also very possible that a culture term travels from one language to others of the same linguistic group, so that the problem arises of how to keep apart primary stock words from such as have been diffused within the genetic group. Roughly speaking, we may say that the criteria for such distinction are the same as for the more fundamental distinction we have first mentioned; the criteria are merely more delicately