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19 Language history and change

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum,
si þin nama gehalgod.
Tobecume þin rice.
Gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg.
And forgyf us ure gyltas,
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum.
And ne gelæd þu us on costnunge,
ac alys us of yfele.

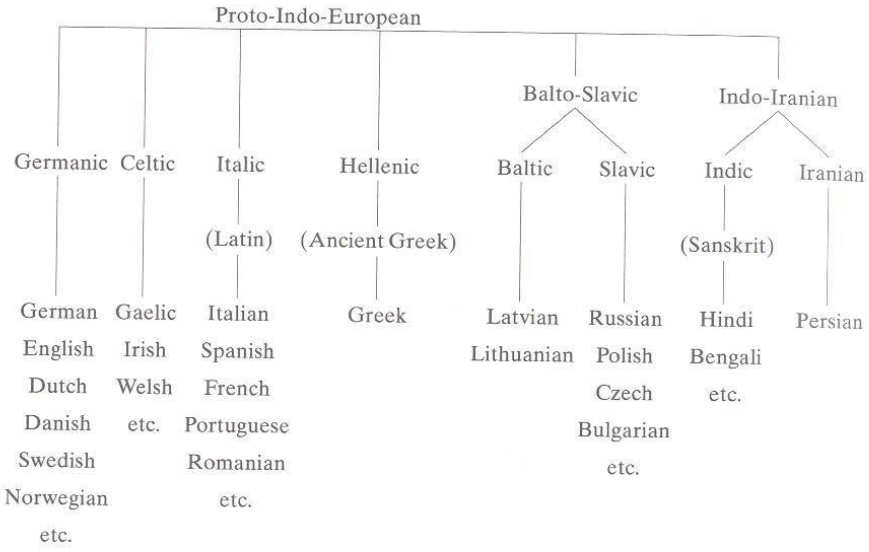
The Lord's Prayer (circa AD 1000)

In 1786, a British government official called Sir William Jones, who was working as a judge of the high court in India, made the following observation about the ancient language of Indian law which he had been studying:

> The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident.

Sir William went on to suggest, in a way that was quite revolutionary for its time, that a number of languages from very different geographical areas must have some common ancestor. It was clear, however, that this common ancestor could not be described from any existing records, but had to be hypothesized on the basis of similar features existing in records of languages which were believed to be descendants. Linguistic investigation of this type, still carried on two centuries after Sir William's original insight, focuses on the historical development of languages and attempts to characterize the regular processes which are involved in language change.

During the nineteenth century, when the historical study of languages (more generally described as **philology**) was the major preoccupation of linguists, a term came into use to describe that common ancestor. It incorporated the notion that this was the original form (*proto*) of a language which was the source of modern languages in the Indian sub-continent (*Indo*), and in Europe (*European*). With **Proto-Indo-European** established as the 'great-grandmother', scholars set out to trace the branches of her family tree, showing the lineage of many modern languages, as illustrated in the accompanying diagram.



Of course, this diagram shows only one family tree covering a small number of the languages of the world. There are considered to be about thirty such language families which have produced the more than 4,000 languages in the world. Some of these languages are much more widely spoken than others. In terms of numbers of speakers, Chinese has the most native speakers (close to 1 billion), while English (about 350 million) is more widely used in different parts of the world. Spanish has close to 300 million native speakers, Hindi has 200 million and Arabic and Russian have about 150 million each.

Looking at the Indo-European family tree, one might ask how it can be determined that these language groups are 'related'. On the face of it, two languages such as Italian and Hindi would seem to have nothing in common. One way to see the relationships more clearly is by looking at records of an older generation, like Latin and Sanskrit, from which the modern languages developed. For example, if we use familiar letters to write out the words for *father* and *brother* in Sanskrit, Latin and Ancient Greek, some common features become apparent:

Sanskrit	Latin	Greek	
pitar	pater	patēr	('father')
bhrātar	frāter	phrāter	('brother')

It is, however, extremely unlikely that exactly the same forms will regularly turn up, but the fact that close similarities occur (especially in the probable pronunciations of the forms) is good evidence for proposing a family connection.

Cognates

The process we have just employed in establishing some possible family connection between different languages involved looking at what are called **cognates**. Within groups of related languages, we often find close similarities in particular sets of terms. A cognate of a word in one language (e.g. English) is a word in another language (e.g. German) which has a similar form and is, or was, used with a similar meaning. Thus, the English forms *mother*, *father* and *friend* are cognates of the German forms *Mutter*, *Vater* and *Freund*. On the basis of these cognate sets, we would propose that such sets in modern English and modern German probably have a common ancestor in what has been labeled the Germanic branch of Indo-European. By the same process. we can look at similar sets, one from Spanish, *madre*, *padre* and *amigo*, and one from Italian, *madre*, *padre* and *amico*, and conclude that these close cognates also must be a clue to a common ancestor in the Italic branch.

Comparative reconstruction

Using information from these cognate sets, we can then embark on a procedure called **comparative reconstruction**. The aim of this procedure is to reconstruct what must have been the original, or 'proto' form in the common ancestral language. It's a bit like trying to work out what the great-grandmother must have been like on the basis of common features

possessed by the set of granddaughters. In carrying out this procedure, those working on the history of languages operate on the basis of some general principles, two of which are presented here.

The **majority principle** is very straightforward. If, in a cognate set, three forms begin with a [p] sound and one form begins with a [b] sound, then our best guess is that the majority have retained the original sound (i.e. [p]), and the minority has changed a little through time.

The **most natural development principle** is based on the fact that certain types of sound-change are very common, whereas others are extremely unlikely. Here are some well-documented types of sound-change:

(1) final vowels often disappear
(2) voiceless sounds become voiced between vowels
(3) stops become fricatives (under certain conditions)
(4) consonants become voiceless at the end of words

If you were faced with some examples from three languages, as shown here, could you make a start on comparative reconstruction by deciding what was the most likely form of the initial sound in the original language source of the three?

Languages

A	B	C	
cavallo	*caballo*	*cheval*	('horse')
cantare	*cantar*	*chanter*	('sing')
catena	*cadena*	*chaîne*	('chain')
caro	*caro*	*cher*	('dear')

Since the written forms can often be misleading, you would find out that the initial sounds of the words in languages A and B are all [k] sounds, while in language C the initial sounds are pronounced [š]. So, no doubt you immediately conclude that, in the original language, the words began with [k] sounds. What exactly is the evidence?

Well, first, there is the 'majority principle' in evidence, since two sets of forms have [k] and only one has [š]. Moreover, one could argue, the [k] sound is a stop consonant and the [š] sound is a fricative. According to the 'most natural development principle', changes tend to occur in the direction of stops becoming fricatives, so the [k] is more likely to have been the original. Through this type of procedure we have started on the comparative reconstruction of the common origins of some words in Italian (set A), Spanish (set B) and French (set C). In this particular case, you have some way of checking your findings because the generally proposed common origin for all three of these languages is Latin. Checking the Latin cognates for the forms under consideration, we will come up with *caballus*, *cantare*, *catena* and *carus*. So, our initial consonant reconstruction appears to be accurate.

Taking a more exotic example, imagine that the following fragment of data from three related (but otherwise unknown) languages is handed to you by a delirious linguist just rescued from the depths of the Amazon jungle. You realize that these examples represent a set of cognates and that it should be possible, via comparative reconstruction, to arrive at the proto-forms.

Languages

1	2	3	Protoforms	
mube	*mupe*	*mup*	_____	('stream')
abadi	*apati*	*apat*	_____	('rock')
agana	*akana*	*akan*	_____	('knife')
enugu	*enuku*	*enuk*	_____	('diamond')

A quick glance at the data might suggest that you can begin with the majority principle, and say that the most likely basic forms are those found in language 2 or in language 3. If this is indeed the case, then the consonant changes must have been of the type: [p] → [b]; [k] → [g]; [t] → [d], in order to produce the forms in language 1. There is a definite pattern here which is in accord with one type of 'most natural development', i.e. that voiceless consonants become voiced between vowels. So, the forms in lists 2 and 3 must have preceded those in list 1.

Which of the two lists, 2 or 3, contains the older forms? Remembering one other 'natural development' feature (i.e. that final vowels often disappear), we can propose that the forms in list 3 have consistently lost the final vowels which still exist in list 2. Our best guess, then, is that the forms in list 2 come closest to what must have been the original proto-forms. One of our delirious linguist's problems has been solved.

Language change

The reconstruction of proto-forms is an attempt to determine what a language must have been like before written records began. However, even when we have written records from an older period of a language such as English, they may not bear any resemblance to the written English to be found in your daily newspaper. The version of the Lord's Prayer quoted at the beginning of the chapter provides a good illustration of this point. To see

how one language has undergone substantial changes through time, let us take a brief look at the history of English.

The historical development of English is usually divided into three major periods. The Old English period is considered to last from the time of the earliest written records, the seventh century, to the end of the eleventh century. The Middle English period is from 1100 to 1500, and Modern English from 1500 to the present.

Old English

The primary sources for what developed as the English language were the Germanic languages spoken by a group of tribes from northern Europe who invaded the British Isles in the fifth century AD. In one early account, these tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes were described as "God's wrath toward Britain". It is from the names of the first two that we have the term 'Anglo-Saxons' to describe these people, and from the name of the first tribe, the Angles, that we get the word for their language, *Englisc*, and for their new home, *Engla-land*.

From this early variety of *Englisc*, we have many of the most basic terms in our language: *mann* ('man'), *wīf* ('woman'), *cild* ('child'), *hūs* ('house'), *mete* ('food'), *etan* ('eat'), *drincan* ('drink') and *feohtan* ('fight'). By all accounts, these pagan settlers certainly liked *feohtan*. However, they did not remain pagan for long. From the sixth to the eighth century, there was an extended period in which these Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity and a number of terms from the language of religion, Latin, came into English at that time. The origins of the modern words *angel*, *bishop*, *candle*, *church*, *martyr*, *priest* and *school* all date from this period.

From the eighth century through the ninth and tenth centuries, another group of northern Europeans came first to plunder, and eventually to settle in, parts of the coastal regions of Britain. They were the Vikings and it is from their language, Old Norse, that we derived the forms which gave us a number of common modern terms such as *give*, *law*, *leg*, *skin*, *sky*, *take* and *they*.

Middle English

The event which more than anything marks the end of the Old English period, and the beginning of the Middle English period, is the arrival of the Norman French in England, following their victory at Hastings under William the Conqueror in 1066. These French-speaking invaders proceeded to take over the whole of England. They became the ruling class, so that the language of the nobility, the government, the law and civilized behavior in England for the next two hundred years was French. It is the source of such modern terms as *army*, *court*, *defense*, *faith*, *prison* and *tax*.

Yet the language of the peasants remained English. The peasants worked on the land and reared *sheep*, *cows* and *swine* (words from Old English), while the French-speaking upper classes talked about *mutton*, *beef* and *pork* (words of French origin). Hence the different words in modern English to refer to these creatures 'on the hoof' as opposed to 'on the plate'.

Throughout this period, French (or, more accurately, an English version of French) was the prestige language and Chaucer tells us that one of his Canterbury pilgrims could speak it:

> *She was cleped Madame Eglentyne*
> *Ful wel she song the service dyvyne,*
> *Entuned in hir nose ful semely,*
> *And Frenshe she spak ful faire and fetisly.*

This is an example of Middle English, written in the late fourteenth century. It has changed substantially from Old English, but several changes were yet to take place before the language took on its modern form. Most significantly, the vowel sounds of Chaucer's time were very different from those we hear in similar words today. Chaucer lived in what would have sounded like a 'hoos', with his 'weef', and 'hay' would romance 'heer' with a bottle of 'weena', drunk by the light of the 'moan'. In the two hundred years, from 1400 to 1600, which separated Chaucer and Shakespeare, the sounds of English underwent a substantial change to form the basis of Modern English pronunciation. Whereas the types of borrowed words we have already noted are examples of external change in a language, many of the following examples can be seen as internal changes within the historical development of English.

Sound changes

One of the most obvious differences between Modern English and the English spoken in earlier periods is in the quality of the vowel sounds. Here are some examples of words, in phonetic transcription, whose general form has remained the same, but whose vowel sounds have changed considerably. (Note the use of the colon which indicates that the vowel sound is long.)

Old English	Modern English	
hu:s	*haws*	('house')
wi:f	*wayf*	('wife')
spo:n	*spu:n*	('spoon')
brɛ:k	*bre:k*	('break')
hɔ:m	*hom*	('home')

Not only did types of sounds change, but some sounds simply disappeared from the general pronunciation of English. One notable example is a voiceless velar fricative /x/ which was used in the Old English pronunciation of *nicht*, as [nɪxt] (close to the modern German pronunciation), but is absent in the present-day form *night*, as [nayt]. A number of other sound changes have been documented.

The change known as **metathesis** involves a reversal in position of two adjoining sounds. Examples are (from the Old English period):

acsian → *ask* *bridd* → *bird* *brinnan* → *beornan (burn)*
frist → *first* *hros* → *horse* *waeps* → *wasp*

Indeed, the cowboy who pronounces the expression *pretty good* as something close to *purty good* is producing a similar example of metathesis as a dialect variant within Modern English. In some American English dialects, the form *aks*, as in *I aksed him*, can still be heard in place of *ask*.

The reversal of position in metathesis may actually occur between non-adjoining sounds. The Spanish form *palabra* was created from the Latin *parabola*, via the reversal of the [l] and [r] sounds. Notice that the pattern is repeated in the following set:

Latin	Spanish	
parabola	→ *palabra*	('word')
periculum	→ *peligro*	('danger')
miraculum	→ *milagro*	('miracle')

Another change involves the addition of a sound to the middle of a word, which is known as **epenthesis**. Examples are:

aemtig → *empty* *spinel* → *spindle* *timr* → *timber*

The addition of a [p] sound after the nasal [m], as in *empty*, can also be heard in some speakers' pronunciations of *something* as *sumpthing*. If you sometimes pronounce the word *film* as if it were *filum*, or *arithmetic* as *arithametic*, then you are producing examples of epenthesis in Modern English.

One other type of change worth noting, though not found in English, occurs in the development of other languages. It involves the addition of a sound to the beginning of a word and is called **prothesis**. It is very common in the change of pronunciation of some forms from Latin to Spanish, as in these examples:

schola → *escuela* ('school')
spiritus → *espíritu* ('spirit')

Indeed, speakers of Spanish who are learning English as a second language will often add a vowel sound to the beginning of some English words, so words like *strange* and *story* may sound like *estrange* and *estory*.

Syntactic changes

Some noticeable differences between the structure of sentences in Old and Modern English involve word order. In Old English texts, we find the subject-verb-object ordering most common in Modern English, but we can also find a number of different orders which are no longer possible. For example, the subject can follow the verb, as in *fērde he* ('he traveled'), and the object can be placed before the verb, as *hē hine geseah* ('he saw him'), or at the beginning of the sentence *him man ne sealde* ('no man gave [any] to him'). In this last example, the use of the negative also differs from Modern English, since the sequence **not gave* is no longer grammatical. A 'double-negative' construction was also possible, as in this example, with both 'not' and 'never'.

and ne sealdest þū mē nǣfre ān ticcen
(and) (not) (gave) (you) (me) (never) (a) (kid)
'and you never gave me a kid'

Perhaps the most sweeping change in the form of English sentences was the loss of a large number of inflectional affixes from many parts of speech. Notice that, in our examples, the verb forms *sealde* ('he gave') and *sealdest* ('you gave') are differentiated by inflectional suffixes which are no longer found in Modern English. Nouns, adjectives, articles and pronouns all took different inflectional forms according to their grammatical function in the sentence.

Lexical changes

The most obvious way in which Modern English differs lexically from Old English is in the number of borrowed words, particularly words of Latin and

Greek origin, which have come into the language since the Old English period. Less obviously, many words have ceased to be used. Since we no longer carry swords (most of us, at least), the word *foin*, meaning 'the thrust of a sword', is no longer everyday usage. A common Old English term for 'man' was *were*. This is no longer in general use, but within the domain of horror films, it has survived in the compound form, *werewolf*. A number of expressions, such as *lo*, *verily*, *egad*, are immediately recognized as belonging to a much earlier period of the language and, as has been pointed out by Langacker (1973), there is a certain medieval ring to some names – *Egbert*, *Percival* or *Bertha* – which makes them quite unfashionable in Modern English.

Perhaps more interesting are the two processes of broadening and narrowing of meaning. An example of **broadening** of meaning is the change from *holy day* as a religious feast to the very general break from work called a *holiday*. Another is the modern use of the word *dog*. We use it very generally, to refer to all breeds, but in its older form (Old English *docga*), it was only used for one particular breed.

The reverse process, called **narrowing**, has overtaken the Old English word *hund*, once used for any kind of dog, but now, as *hound*, used only for some specific breeds. Another example is *mete*, once used for any kind of food, which has in its modern form, *meat*, become restricted to only some specific types. The Old English version of the word *wife* could be used of any woman, but has narrowed in its application to only married women. A different kind of narrowing can lead to a negative meaning for words that previously were simply "ordinary" (= *vulgar*) or "worth noting" (= *naughty*).

The process of change

None of the changes described here happened overnight. They were gradual and probably difficult to discern while they were in progress. Although some changes can be linked to major social changes caused by wars, invasions and other upheavals, the most pervasive source of change in language seems to be in the continual process of cultural transmission. Each new generation has to find a way of using the language of the previous generation. In this unending process whereby each new language-user has to 'recreate' for him- or herself the language of the community, there is an unavoidable propensity to pick up some elements exactly and others only approximately. There is also the occasional desire to be different. Given this tenuous transmission process, it should be expected that languages will not remain stable, but that change and variation are inevitable.

In this chapter we have concentrated on variation in language viewed **diachronically**, that is, from the historical perspective of change through time. The type of variation which can be viewed **synchronically**, that is, in terms of differences within one language in different places and among different groups at the same time, is the subject of the final two chapters.

Study questions

1 What sound changes are illustrated by the following pairs?
(a) *glimsian* →*glimpse* (b) *scribere* →*escribir* (c) *thridda* →*third*

2 How would you group the following languages into pairs which are closely related from a historical point of view: Romanian, Czech, Dutch, French, Gaelic, German, Russian, Welsh?

3 What are 'cognates'?

4 If you had the following data to work from, could you make a first guess at the probable proto-forms?

Languages

1	2	3		
cosa	*chose*	*cosa*	_____	('thing')
capo	*chef*	*cabo*	_____	('head')
capra	*chèvre*	*cabra*	_____	('goat')

5 From what you know of the influence of Norman French in the Middle English period, which of the following words would you guess was from Old English, and which from Old French:
calf veal venison deer?

Discussion topics/projects

A Consider the following data:

Languages

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
fem	*pyat*	*cinco*	*piec*	*itsutsu*	*fünf*	*cinque*	('five')
fire	*chetyre*	*cuatro*	*cztery*	*yottsu*	*vier*	*quattro*	('four')

(i) There are six sets of examples from Indo-European languages here. Which one sample is most likely to be non-Indo-European?

(ii) The remaining six sets can be divided into three pairs of closely related languages. Which examples seem to go together as pairs?

(iii) With which pair would you associate the English language?