

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

We have, so far, focused on **synchronic linguistics**, which is the study of language or aspects of language at one given time. We have focused on contemporary linguistics, but now we will be looking at languages in the past and how they changed and evolved. Note that historical linguistics is not about the history of linguistics, but rather the study of a language or languages at a time in the past. It is called **diachronic** if it studies language through more than one period of time, e.g. in the past vs. now.

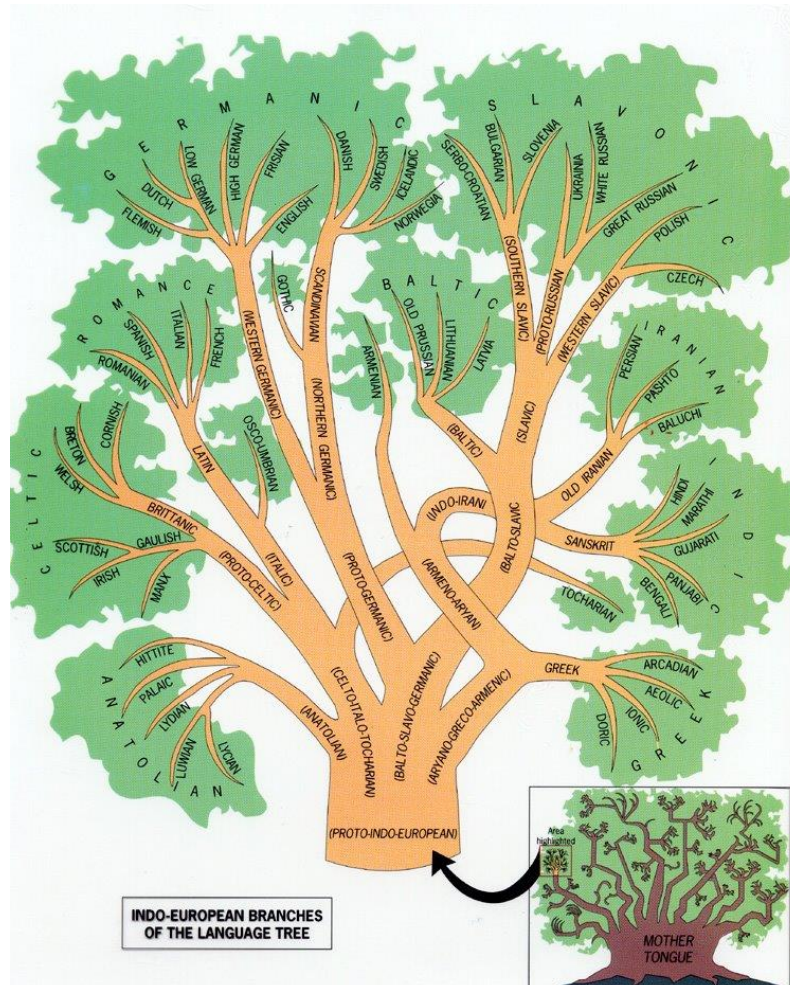
It is important to know what can change and what can't. Imagine a language X. Just like any language, it has the five layers starting with the phoneme, up to morphemes, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. All of these are prone to change. And when we talk about change, we mean that which happens naturally, as a language takes its course. What we mean by the inability to change is that which needs to be deliberately changed, as a spelling reform. Spelling is an aspect of language which does not usually change (naturally), and is rather a form of artificial change, if found, taking the shape of a spelling reform.

Take for example the English word 'night'. 'Night' has a strange spelling, considering the existence of a grapheme <gh> that is 'silent'. Why is it silent? It is pronounced as /nait/ after several changes that had occurred on the way it is pronounced. To address this, we have to start taking steps back to Middle English, Old English, and perhaps their ancestor, Common Germanic. In ME, this word was pronounced as /nixt/, possibly realized as [niçt]. Late ME could be when this sound was lost and we ended up with /ni:t/. This means that OE definitely had the [x] still there. Now we know that English <gh> corresponded to /x/ at some point in the past. If we go back further, this /x/ can be traced back to Proto Indo-European (PIE henceforth) /k^w/. The reconstructed PIE word for night (or evening) is '*nók^wts'. Through several changes over hundreds or even thousands of years, we ended up with English 'night', German 'Nacht', French 'nuit', Italian 'notte', Polish/Czech (Slavic) 'noc' etc.

Why are we talking about this? First and foremost, you should know that this branch of linguistics is extremely vast and varied (but what branch isn't?) and so we will keep going back and forth between topics, digressing every now and then, branching out and talking about many things. We want to discuss **language families**, now. When we look at these different words for 'night' in German, Romance languages (not to be conflated with Romantic!), and Slavic languages, we notice a similarity among all these forms. All of them contain, albeit underlyingly, a trace of their ancestor, PIE '*nók^wts'. Historical linguistics is precisely the study of this 'genetic' relationship between words and languages. We can see the 'DNA' of '*nók^wts' running through

the blood of English ‘night’. ‘Night’, then, is a **descendant** of *nók^wts. The other forms of ‘night’ from other languages are also **descendants** of *nók^wts. What about the relationship among the different forms ‘night’, ‘Nacht’, ‘nuit’, ‘notte’, ‘noc’ etc.? We call these words **cognates**. The word ‘cognate’ itself derives from Latin ‘con/com’ ‘together’ + ‘(g)natus’ ‘born’. These words are ‘born together’.

Question: Can you think of other descendants of *nók^wts?



Language families

As we can see, languages are grouped together according to ‘family’ relationships. The ancestor of a certain language is called the ‘mother’ language, while the descendant is a ‘daughter’ language. ‘sister’ languages refer to those that share a common ‘mother’, e.g. French and Italian are ‘sisters’ whose ‘mother’ is ‘Latin’.

Studying these relationships reveals a great deal about how language changes and evolves over time. Going back in time to discover the ‘blueprints’ of a language or a set of languages not only helps us understand how it changed over time, but also to predict how it could change in the future as well.

What do these ‘blueprints’ include? What enables us to know which languages to group with which?

This can range from phonemic contrasts to syntactic structure. Basically, a language family (or subfamily) shares common phonology, morphology, and syntax. Typically, languages that belong to the same family or subgroup of languages share sounds, words, morphological systems/paradigms, and syntactic structures.

Exercise: Look at these words from various Indo-European languages. Can you guess their cognates in English and/or other languages?

1. /duxtar/ in Persian
2. /axt/ in German
3. /k^wod/ in Latin
4. /poði/ in Greek

Sound changes are changes that may alter one or more property of a certain sound. Take the sound /k/, for example. What can we change about it? Recall from our class on phonology that every sound has 3 main or primary features of articulation. Changes can occur to one or more of these features. This means that for /k/ we may change the place of articulation, the manner of articulation, or whether or not it’s voiced. We may also change two of these or all of them. It is important to note that these changes happen in bits and pieces, not all at once. Let us go back to the example of *nok^wts. The /k^w/ sound had to undergo many different changes from PIE to Modern English /0/ (zero, phi or null, signifying that the sound does not exist anymore). /k^w/ first had to **spirantize**, that is, become a fricative. The first change that happened, then, is a change of the manner of articulation from a stop /k/ to a fricative /x/. Note that /k/ and /x/ share the same place of articulation, i.e. velar, and so that did not change at the beginning. /x/ later on underwent **debuccalization**, which is the process by which a consonant loses its place of articulation, and by losing your place of articulation, you’re either left with no place of articulation, or somewhere around the glottis. This yields a /h/. So /x/ would have had to turn to /h/ before disappearing completely. H-loss (h-dropping) is a pretty common phenomenon cross-linguistically.

Then, we have seen two kinds of changes so far. One change that operates on the manner of articulation, which we call spirantization. A stop consonant, then, becomes a fricative without changing its place of articulation through this operation. The other change, debuccalization, makes a consonant lose its place while typically retaining the manner, which means it would become /h/ if it’s a fricative and a glottal stop /ʔ/ if it’s a stop (but not always!).

Question: What are the spirantized versions of the English stops /p/ /b/ /t/ /d/ /k/ /g/?



Sounds changes are typically conditioned, in that the surroundings of a consonant play a role in how it changes and what it changes into. For example, **palatalization** is more likely to happen if a consonant precedes a front vowel. This means that /ki/ is more likely to become /tʃi/ than /ka/ becoming /tʃa/ (although possible). Sometimes, however, this change is **spontaneous**, i.e. **unconditioned or unmotivated**. Italian /kjamare/ ‘chiamare’ ‘to call’ from Latin /kla:ma:re/ is an example of spontaneous palatalization, where the consonant cluster /kl/ became /kj/.

This is how we end up with cognates like French ‘chevre’ /ʃevʁ/ and Italian ‘capra’ /kapra/ both meaning ‘goat’.

Beware of false cognates! A famous example of a false cognate is English ‘dog’ and Mbabaram /dog/ ‘dog’ meaning ‘dog’ as well. Though these words look the same, sound the same, and mean the same, they do not come from the same origin and do not share ancestry.

Sound change is expected to be regular. This means that if a sound change happens, it is usually due to a rule that operates anywhere where it is applicable. For example, there are many laws that describe how a certain sound change happened at a certain point in the past. One such law is **Grimm’s law**. **Grimm’s law** (also known as the **First Germanic Sound Shift**) is a set of sound rules describing the PIE stop consonants as they developed in Proto Germanic in the 1st millennium BC. The law describes shifts affecting PIE stops /b^h/ /d^h/ /g^h/ in Common Germanic (or Proto Germanic).

1. PIE b^h → b → p → f CG
2. PIE d^h → d → t → θ CG
3. PIE g^h → g → k → x CG

Question: Can you describe what is happening according to Grimm’s law, stage by stage?

This is called **regular change**. Change, of course, can happen for several other reasons that are not regular. Analogy, borrowing and sometimes unknown causes can lead to change. This type of change is called **sporadic** and may affect only one word or a few words without any apparent regularity.



While Latin deus can be translated as and bears superficial similarity to Greek θεός, theós, meaning "god", these are false cognates; the two come from different roots. A true cognate of deus is Ζεύς (Zeús)

they're cognate cuz sporadic sound change lol



Rules, like everything else, come and go. Sometimes, these rules operate on the entire system, and so we cannot see their effects on the surface of the language contemporarily, e.g. the change from /kʷ/ to English /h/ /w/ or /0/ in the form of <wh>. Other times, a rule may operate on a certain set of words, and then stop operating after some time. This is the case with English plurals like 'foot' 'feet' and 'tooth' 'teeth'. *Then, an exception is merely a continuation of an obsolete rule!*

The **Great Vowel Shift** was a series of changes that took place primarily between the 13th and the 16th centuries, beginning in southern England and today having influenced effectively all dialects of English. Through this vowel shift, the pronunciation of all Middle English long vowels was changed.

Word	Vowel pronunciation	
	Late Middle English before the GVS	Modern English after the GVS
bite	/i:/	<u>/aɪ/</u>
meet	/e:/	<u>/i:/</u>
meat	/ɛ:/	
serene		
mate	/a:/	<u>/eɪ/</u>
out	/u:/	<u>/aʊ/</u>
boot	/o:/	<u>/u:/</u>
boat	/ɔ:/	<u>/oʊ/</u>
stone		

Word	Diphthong pronunciation	
	Late Middle English before the GVS	Modern English after the GVS
day	/æɪ/	<u>/eɪ/</u>
they		
boy		
law	/aʊ/	<u>/ɔ:/</u>
knew	/eʊ/	<u>/ju:/</u>
dew	/ɛʊ/	
know	/ɔʊ/	<u>/oʊ/</u>

We have talked about exceptions and their nature. Another seeming exception is what we call the **Germanic strong verb**. **Germanic strong verbs** can be found in English. They are called strong because they can change the vowel of their stem. Examples include ‘drive’ type verbs, ‘choose’, ‘bind’, ‘bear’, ‘give’, ‘shake’, ‘fall’. These groups (and the members that belong to them) are called strong verbs. **Weak verbs**, on the other hand, do not induce any kind of vowel change, and rather stick to the ‘-ed’ ending. However, some verbs look as if they are strong, when in reality they are just irregular weak verbs.

Question: Where does ‘sing’ belong?



'sing' type

Stop giving me your loudest vowels



You are my strongest verb

What about **irregular weak verbs**? Well, these verbs, just like regular weak verbs, inherit the past tense ‘-ed’ ending (phonologically) historically, which could be /t/, /d/ or /id/ (as in started /startid/). Such a verb would be ‘think’. The past tense of think, historically, was thinkt, then a change occurred changing /kt/ to /ht/ (or possibly /xt/). This means that we had ‘thinkt’. After that, a new rule took place which said that there could be no nasal sound preceding a velar/glottal fricative! Now we have ‘thVht’ (V means indeterminate vowel) to deal with. The vowel there changed gradually, probably starting with a nasalized vowel that later disappeared: ‘thinkt’ → ‘thinkt’ → ‘thāht’ → ‘thoht’ (Old English).

Exercise: Think of irregular weak verbs like ‘seek’ and ‘bring’. Derive the historical process by which they inherit their past tense conjugations.

Question: Can you think of such a distinction in noun classes, i.e. strong and weak?

We have so far discussed one type of change, i.e. phonological, which drives morphological change (in a morphophonological sense). What other types of change might there be?

A change in meaning is a type of semantic change. **Pejoration** is a process by which a word starts having a negative meaning or connotation. An example of this would be English ‘notorious’ which used to mean famous, but over time it gained a negative connotation.

Amelioration, on the other hand, is the process by which a word gains a positive meaning or connotation. A famous example of this is English ‘nice’ which used to mean ‘foolish’ but now means ‘pleasant’.

Grammaticalization is a type of change whereby a lexical item starts changing gradually (cline) from being a lexical word to a grammatical word, then a clitic and finally an affix. An example of this is the adverbial suffix -ly in English. We can trace back the origin of this suffix to a palatalized form of 'like' in Old English. This can be roughly visualized as 'slow like' 'slowlike' 'slowliche' (Middle English), 'slowly'.

Question: Can you think of other instances of grammaticalization, whether in English or your own language?