

4. Investigating change in language. Causes and mechanisms of linguistic change: changes in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

(Handout)

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Some principles in the inquiry of historical linguistics are taken as maxims.

1. All languages are in continual process of change
2. All languages are subject to the same kind of modifying influence
3. Language change is regular and systematic, allowing for unhindered communication among speakers.
4. Linguistic and social factors are interrelated in language change (Hladký 2001)

Inner and outer history of the language

The outer history of the language is the events in the life (history) of the people speaking the language affecting the language i.e. history of the people reflected in their language. The inner history of the language is the description of the changes in the language itself, its grammar, phonetics, vocabulary and spelling. Whereas the previous chapter accounted for the outer history in particular, this chapter's focus is primarily laid upon the changes within the language, the inner history.

Chief characteristics of the Germanic languages

When we look for family relationships between languages, it is desirable to go back to the earliest known forms of the languages. The branch that English belongs to is called Germanic, and includes German, Dutch, Frisian, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. All these languages are descended from the dialect called Proto Germanic (PG). The table, presented by Barber, shows the seven words which appear in Old English, Gothic, Old High German and Old Norse. Gothic was the language of Goths, who were settled in the Black sea area in the 4th century A.D. but later formed relatively short lived kingdoms in Italy and Spain. Old High German was the ancestor of modern standard literary German. Old Norse was the early form of Scandinavian languages, as found for example in the Medieval Icelandic sagas (Barber 2012).

Old English	Gothic	Old High German	Old Norse
<i>Stān</i>	<i>Stains</i>	<i>Stein</i>	<i>Stein</i>
<i>Bān</i>	-	<i>Bein</i>	<i>Bein</i>
<i>Āc</i>	-	<i>Eith</i>	<i>Eik</i>
<i>Hām</i>	<i>Haims</i>	<i>Heim</i>	<i>Heimr</i>
<i>Rāp</i>	<i>Raip</i>	<i>Reif</i>	<i>Reip</i>
<i>Gāt</i>	<i>Gaits</i>	<i>Geiz</i>	<i>Geit</i>
<i>ān</i>	<i>ains</i>	<i>ein</i>	<i>einn</i>

Here, there are regular correspondences: words which have *ā* in Old English, have *ai* in Gothic, *ei* in Old High German and *ei* in Old Norse.

I. Phonetics and Phonology

One of the most important features of all Germanic languages is their **strong dynamic stress falling on the first root syllable**. Regarding vowels, the most significant feature of Germanic languages is the so-called **Ablaut** – the spontaneous, positionally independent alteration of

vowels inhabited by the Germanic languages from the Proto-Indo-European period. Ablaut may be of two types:

- a) **Qualitative ablaut:** alteration of different vowels, mainly the vowel [e]/ [a] or [e]/ [o]

Old Icelandic	<i>bera</i>	To give birth	<i>barn</i>	baby
Old High German	<i>Stelan</i>	To steal	<i>Stal</i>	stole

- b) **Quantitative ablaut:** change in the length of qualitatively one and the same vowel. It can be normal, lengthened and reduced. An example of the quantitative ablaut is the declension of the Greek word “*pater*” (father)

<i>Patér</i>	[e:]	Nominative case – lengthened stage
<i>Pater</i>	[e]	Vocative stage – regular stage
<i>Patros</i>	-	Genitive case – reduced stage

Another typical feature of all Germanic languages related to phonemic part of language is tendency of phonetic assimilation of the root vowel to the vowel of the ending, the so-called **Umlaut**, or mutation. There were several types of mutation (umlauts) but the most typical one is the palatal mutation or the *i-umlaut* where, under the influence of the sounds [i] or [j] in the suffix or ending, the front vowels became more front and more closed. This process must have taken place in the 5th and 6th centuries and can be illustrated by comparing words from the language of Gothic Bible showing the palatal mutation with corresponding words in other Germanic languages of a later period

Goth	<i>Harjis</i>	Old English	<i>Here</i>	Army
Goth	<i>Dómjan</i>	Old English	<i>Déman</i>	Deem
Goth	<i>kuni</i>	Old English	<i>cynn</i>	kin

The correspondence between the Indo-European and the Germanic languages can be traced back in the Grimm’s and the Verner’s laws which explain the first consonant shift. (for further reference, see Reznik (2001).

II. Grammar

One of the crucial processes in the development of the Germanic morphology was the **change in the word structure**. The common Indo-European notional word consisted of three parts: the root – expressing the lexical meaning, the inflection or ending – showing the grammatical form, and the so-called stem-forming suffix, a formal indicator of the stem type. However, in Germanic languages, the stem-forming suffix fuses with the ending and is no longer visible, thus making the word structure two element one.

In any case, the inflectional system of Proto-Germanic may be compared with Latin. The English sentence “*The master beat the servant*” could be rendered in Latin, word for word as “*Dominus verberavit servum*”, though Classical Latin would normally prefer the order “*Dominus servum verberavit.*” Altering the word order will not alter the basic meaning of the sentence. English uses word order to indicate who is the beater and who is beaten, but in Latin, this information is expressed by inflections –*us* a –*um*. If we wish to say that the servant beat the master, we must change these endings and write “*Servus dominum verberavit.*” Latin inherited its system of case inflections from Proto-Indo- European, and a somewhat similar system was inherited by Proto- Germanic, though both Latin and Proto-Germanic reduced the number of case distinctions: for all practical purposes, they had only five or six cases, whereas Proto-Indo-European had at least eight. As in Latin, in Proto-Germanic, there were separate

inflections for the singular and the plural. In Proto-Indo-European, there had also been inflections for the *dual* number, that is, to indicate that there were *two* of a thing, but the dual survives only vestigially in the Germanic languages.

In Proto-Germanic, as in other Indo-European languages, there was no single set of case inflections used for all nouns alike, but several different sets, some nouns following one pattern, and others another. That is, there were **various declensions** of nouns. All nouns, moreover, had grammatical gender: every noun had to be either masculine, feminine or neuter. This grammatical gender had no necessary connection with sex or with animacy: the names of inanimate objects could be masculine or feminine, and the names of sexed creatures could be neuter. The words for *he*, *she* and *it* had to be used in accordance with grammatical gender, not in accordance with sex or animacy. This is still, to some extent, the case in Modern German, where for example *das Mädchen* ‘the girl’, being neuter, has to be referred to as ‘*it*’, while *die Polizei* ‘the police’, being feminine, has to be referred to as ‘*she*’. Similar considerations apply to adjectives. The Proto-Germanic developed two distinct sets of inflections for the adjectives called the **strong and the weak declensions of adjectives**. Most adjective could have been treated within both types of declension. Agreeing with the noun in gender and case, the adjective by the type of declension expressed the idea of definiteness (weak declension) and indefiniteness (strong declension), the meaning which was later to be expressed by the definite and indefinite articles, not yet known in Germanic languages in that time. The distinction between the strong and the weak forms of the adjective has not survived in Modern English, but it can still be found in many of the other Germanic languages. In Modern Swedish, for example, ‘a good friend’ is *en god vän*, but ‘my good friend’ is *min goda vän*. Proto-Germanic, like Proto-Indo-European, also had a system of cases for the pronouns, articles and similar words. Where Modern English has the one form *the*, Proto-Germanic had a whole series of forms according to the case, number and gender of the noun that followed. This was still so in Old English, where ‘the woman’ is *se wīfmann* (masculine), ‘learning’ is *sēo lār* (feminine) and ‘the woman’ is *þæt wīf* (neuter). The declension of the definite article is still found in Modern German, where the articles are treated as *der*, *die*, *das*. Similarly, with the personal pronouns (*I*, *you*, *he*, etc.), which had different forms for different cases.

Proto-Indo-European also had a great array of inflections for its verbs. Proto-Germanic retained many of these, but it simplified the system. For example, it had only **two tenses of the verb**, a present tense and a past tense: there were forms corresponding to *I sing* and *I sang*, but no distinct forms with such meanings as ‘*I shall sing*’, ‘*I have sung*’ and so on. Within these two tenses, however, Proto-Germanic had different endings for different persons and numbers, like Latin, in which ‘I sing’ is *cantō*, ‘he/she sings’ is *cantat*, ‘they sing’ is *cantant* and so on. It was in the verbs that Proto-Germanic made one of its own distinctive developments. From Proto-Indo-European it had inherited a whole series of verbs that showed change of tense by changing the vowel of their stem, like Modern English *I sing*, *I sang*, or *I bind*, *I bound*; these are called **strong verbs**. This alternation of vowels for grammatical purposes is highly characteristic of the Indo-European languages, and there were large numbers of strong verbs in Proto-Germanic. Alongside these strong verbs, however, Proto-Germanic invented a new type, called **weak verbs**. In these, the past tense is formed by adding an inflection to the verb-stem.

III. The vocabulary of Proto-Germanic

Some of the vocabulary of Proto-Germanic also seems to be peculiar to it, since it is not paralleled in other Indo-European languages. Among the words peculiar to Germanic are a number that have to do with ships and seafaring: words to which there are no certain correspondences in other Indo-European languages include *ship*, *sail*, *keel*, *sheet*, *stay* ('rope supporting a mast'), possibly *oat*, and *sea* itself.

Proto-Germanic speakers borrowed a number of words from neighbouring speech communities, especially Celtic and Latin speakers, who were on a higher cultural level and so had things to teach them. Groups speaking Celtic languages were skilled in metallurgy, and the Germanic words for iron and lead (seen for example in Old English *īren*, *lēad*) were probably borrowed from them. From the Romans were borrowed many words to do with war, trade, building, horticulture and food

The influence of Latin also extended to bound morphemes. The Germanic languages share the suffix which usually appears in Modern English as *-er* (Old English *-ere*), as in Old English *bōcere* 'scribe' and *sangere* 'singer'

IV. Alphabet

Some Germanic peoples had their own system of writing with the distinctive alphabet called runic, each letter of which was called a rune. Runes were used to record the early stages of Gothic, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, English, Frisian, Frankish, and various tribal languages in Central Germania. The oldest runes are dated to the 2nd cent. A.D. The early runes were not written but incised – runic script was designed for inscribing, at first on wood. The shapes of runes were adjusted to the material they were incised to (wood)...e.g. curves were avoided. As there were variations in the forms of runic writings, it is not possible to give a standard pattern for Germanic runic alphabet. The earliest known runic alphabet had 24 letters arranged in a particular order which, from the name of its first 6 letters, is known as the futhork (in the same way as the word alphabet comes from Greek alpha and beta). In that times, the text could have been written from the left to the right and from the right to the left equally well. There was no distinction between capital and lower case letters.

Runes were widely used by many Germanic nations. By 500 A.D. they were found not only in Denmark, England, Sweden and Norway, but also in Poland, Russia and Hungary. Runes may have influenced the later Roman alphabet. (Rezník 2001).

Old English was written in the runic alphabet. This alphabet was used in Norther Europe – in Scandinavia, Present-day Germany and the British Isles. It has been preserved in about 4000 inscriptions and a number of manuscripts. The version found in Britain uses extra letters to cope with the range of sounds found in Old English. In its most developed form in the 9th century Northumbria, it consisted of 31 letters (symbols).

The meaning of rune: What rune means is "debatable" According to David Crystal, there is a long-standing tradition which attributes to it such senses as whisper, mystery and secret suggesting that the letters were originally used for magical rituals. Current research shows that the word rune (OE run) was fully assimilated into Anglo-Saxon Christianity and meant simply "sharing of knowledge or thoughts"

The overall character of Germanic languages largely influenced Old English which, not only used runic alphabet as many languages of that time, but also had its morphology arranged in the way which clearly reminded of its relation to other Germanic languages. Old English used a range of native words which were later searched for by linguists at the University of Toronto and the corpus of Old English was created.

V. The Old English Corpus

There is a gap between the arrival of Anglo-Saxons and the first English manuscripts. A few scattered inscriptions in the language date from 5th and 6th centuries written in the runic alphabet which the invaders brought with them but these give very little evidence of what the language was like. The literary age began after the arrival of the Roman missionaries, led by Augustine who came to Kent in 597 A.D. Subsequently, many Latin manuscripts were produced. Because of this increasing literary climate, Old English manuscripts began to be written as well. The first texts dating from about 700 A.D., are glossaries of Latin words translated into Old English and a few early inscriptions and poems. Many manuscripts were burned in 8th century during the Viking invasions. The chief literary work of that period, the heroic poem *Beowulf*, survived in a single copy. Most extent Old English texts were written in the period following the reign of King Alfred (849 – 899) who arranged for many Latin works to be translated, including Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. However, the corpus of Old English is quite small. The number of words in the corpus of Old English compiled at the University of Toronto, which contains all the texts, is only 3.5 million words

Study Guide:

1. Explain the difference between the inner and the outer history of language.
2. Explain the origin of the Germanic languages (what language were they descended from?)
3. Explain the change in the word structure in the Proto-Germanic language.
4. Compare some aspects of declensions in Latin and the Proto-Germanic language. Give an example.
5. Describe the category of gender in Proto-Germanic nouns. Are there any examples of similar gender treatment in a modern language?
6. How many verb tenses were there in the Proto-Germanic language? Were there distinctive forms for expressing modality?
7. What is the difference between the strong and the weak declension of proto-germanic verbs?
8. Why do you think curves were avoided in the forms of early runes?
9. What was the most developed runic alphabet in Old English and how many letters did it consist of?
10. Could you comment on borrowings into the vocabulary of the Proto-Germanic language?