How English Works
A Linguistic Introduction
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Third Edition

The Process of Language Change

All living languages change all the time. Do you struggle to understand Chaucer and Shakespeare? Your teachers insist that both authors wrote in English, but sometimes it's Greek to you. The distance between you and Chaucer (who wrote at the end of the fourteenth century) or Shakespeare (who wrote at the end of the sixteenth century), or indeed between Chaucer and Shakespeare themselves, can be measured in terms of language change: sound change, grammatical change, semantic change. What results is not quite a foreign language but at least a language that can only be interpreted with help from footnotes or a historical dictionary like the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*—until you become familiar with it, of course. Still, if you and Shakespeare met on the street and began to speak to each other, your respective versions of English would be mutually intelligible: you would understand each other, though not effortlessly. You could not engage the poet who wrote down *Beowulf* (in the tenth century, scholars think) in conversation, however. Old English and Present-Day English are not mutually intelligible. The difference between them is 1,000 years—an eyeblink in evolutionary terms, but more like an eternity on the time-scale of language change.

Language Genealogies

Old English did not fall to earth with a meteorite or hatch from an egg or in any other way magically appear. It developed from the Germanic dialects brought to England in the fifth century. Many English speakers think English is a Romance language (descended from Latin) because English has so many Latinate words. But these words are borrowings into English, not signs of its genealogy. As shown in Figure 2, English is a member of the

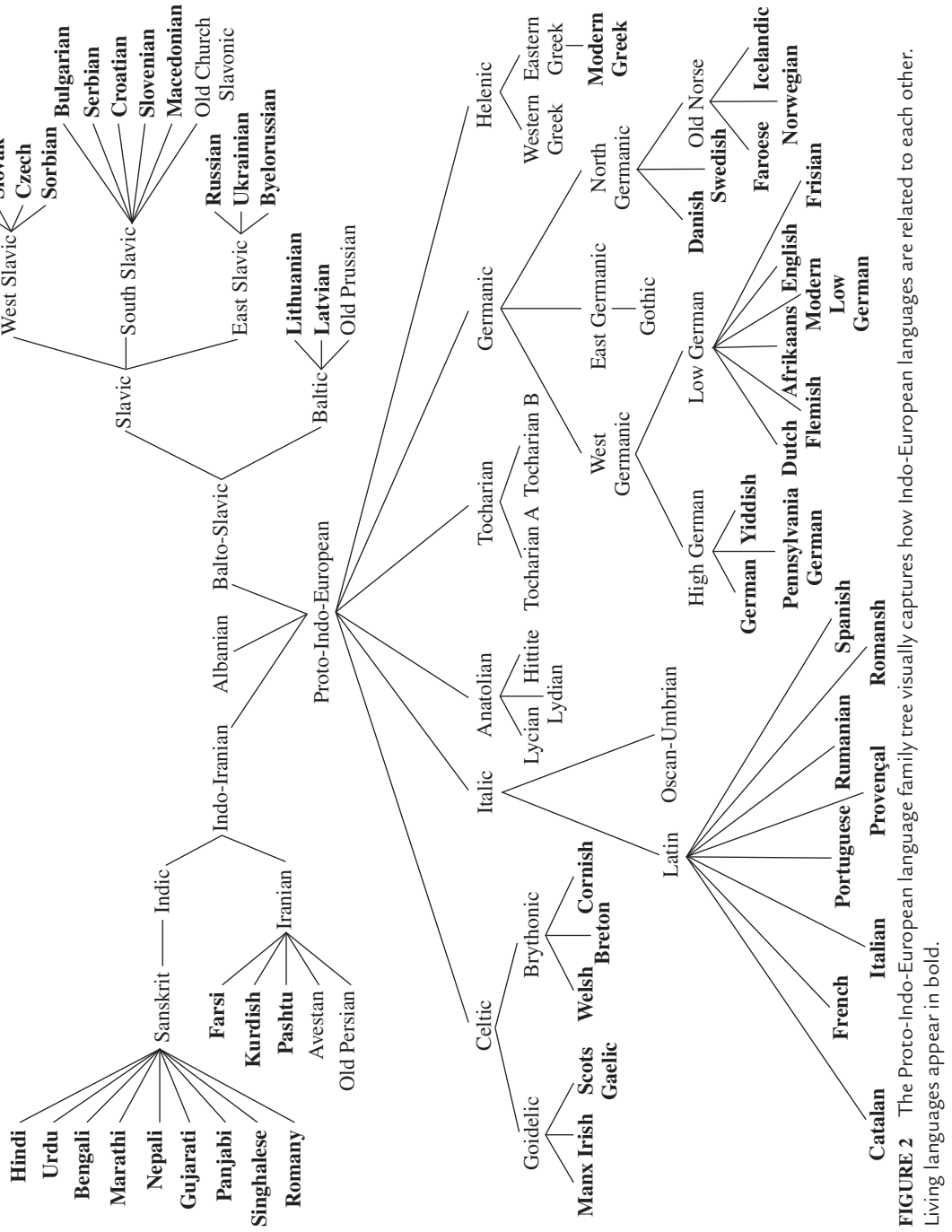
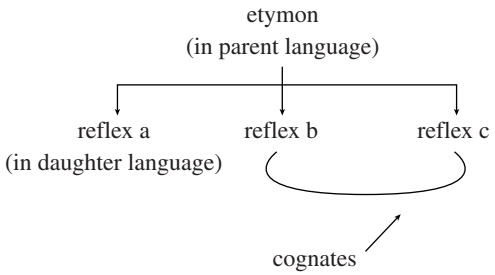


FIGURE 2 The Proto-Indo-European language family tree visually captures how Indo-European languages are related to each other. Living languages appear in bold.

Germanic family of languages, "cousins" with language like German, Dutch, and Icelandic. You can tell that these languages are related. English *father*, for example, closely resembles Dutch *vader* and German *vater*.

The job of the historical linguist is to explain just what the relationships are and how differences among related languages came to be. *Father, vader*, and *vater*, for example, all have a common ancestor word in a shared early Germanic ancestor language. These words are **reflexes** of that ancestor and **cognates** to one another; the ancestor is their **etymon.**



Cognate words or languages are, therefore, related to each other through a shared ancestor word or language.

In 1786, Sir William Jones, known as "Oriental" Jones, a justice of India's Supreme Court when India was under British rule, proposed that similarities among Greek (*patēr*), Latin (*pater*), and Sanskrit (*pitar-*) suggested that they had all developed from a common ancestor. In 1822, Jacob Grimm (one of the brothers of fairy-tale fame) took the argument a step further, specifically explaining sound changes that happened to make the sounds in Germanic words different from their Romance cognates—and different in systematic ways. For example, Indo-European *k* remains the sound /k/ in Latin but becomes /h/ in Germanic, which explains why in Modern English our *hearts* (an English word) are cared for by *cardiologists* (a Latin borrowing). This system of sound correspondences, known as Grimm's Law, explained the relationship between English *father* and Sanskrit *pitar-* and initiated the reconstruction of Indo-European, the common source for most current and historical languages of Europe and the Indian subcontinent.

Indo-European is a **proto-language**, one for which we have no written evidence, but which we can infer from comparison of its descendents and development of the laws according to which its sounds and word-forms changed. In other words, historical linguists must reconstruct Indo-European forms from evidence in its daughter languages and the rules of change that they have hypothesized. Linguists always put an asterisk (*) next to a hypothesized form in a proto-language to indicate that it is hypothesized—that we have no written evidence for it.

Linguists have traditionally dated Proto-Indo-European back about 6,000 years. Recent work by biologist Russell D. Gray, which applies mathematical tools for genes and species family trees to language family trees, proposes a much earlier date: 8,700 years ago, give or take 1,200 years. These conflicting dates add fuel to an ongoing debate based in part on archeological evidence about whether these Proto-Indo-European speakers were warriors who spread from the steppes of Russia or farmers who spread from ancient Turkey.

We can draw similar trees for other language families, such as Uralic and Altaic. The larger unresolved question is how all of these family trees are related to each other. Is there one proto-language from which they all descend, which can be traced back to our first ancestors in Africa? You may have heard of Nostratic, which some linguists propose as a parent language of several language families, but it is not widely accepted as such.

Mechanics of Language Change

Looking at the Indo-European language family tree, you can grasp the big picture of language change. But you might naturally wonder how exactly dialects develop and then change within themselves so dramatically over time. Part of the answer goes back to the creativity inherent in human language. Every day, perhaps several times a day, each of us speaks or writes in ways that challenge conventional uses of English. When enough people do so often enough (or continually enough) for a long enough time, then a change is generalized (especially as children learn it as part of the system of English) and becomes a feature of the language. And those changes add up over time.

All fundamental aspects of a language change over time: sound, word forms, syntax, and vocabulary. William Labov, a leading American linguist who has completed two volumes in a proposed three-volume study of linguistic change, describes three factors that motivate change:

- *Internal factors*—those inherent to the structure, especially the sound structure of the language.
- *Social factors*—those that depend on the behavior of speech communities.
- *Cognitive factors*—those that depend on our comprehension of the language and on our mind's language processes.

Sociolinguists continue to learn how language change starts and spreads.

There is no decisive moment at which a daughter language splits from a parent language and gets its own name. Historical linguists make language family trees in retrospect. One could argue that French is Latin spoken in France, but because it has changed so dramatically from Latin and from other daughter languages such as Italian and Spanish, French is described as a distinct language with its own name. The Germanic tribes brought their Germanic dialects to England in 449 CE. "English" is said to begin around this time because the Germanic dialects spoken in England began to diverge and develop independently from the other Germanic dialects spoken in continental Europe. But in 449, the Germanic speakers in England did not think of themselves as speaking a new language. And subsequent generations of speakers in England were not aware of the larger implications of the small changes occurring in their language—that it was splitting further from German, Swedish, and other Germanic cousins and would one day get its own name.

Progress or Decay?

Because human language is infinitely creative, speakers are constantly using words in new combinations and with slightly—if not radically—new meanings. If other speakers start to use the words in this new way, they can create new conventional meanings or uses. In other words, if enough speakers adopt a new meaning or construction, it becomes

a conventional, accepted part of the day-to-day language. For example, after the noun *google* entered the language, some speakers began using it as a verb to describe the act of searching for something on the Internet. As more and more speakers have adopted the word as a verb, this use has become a conventional part of the language.

In a book about language change, Jean Aitchison (2001) raises a question that many people want answered: Is all this change progress or decay? Aitchison provides an answer but does not choose one side over the other. Language change, she asserts, is not decay or progress. While languages sometimes become more regular, they also sometimes introduce new exceptions that disrupt existing patterns. As Aitchison puts it:

> even if all agreed that a perfectly regular language was the "best," there is no evidence that languages are progressing towards this ultimate goal. Instead, there is a continuous pull between the disruption and restoration of patterns. In this perpetual ebb and flow, it would be a mistake to regard pattern neatening and regularization as a step forwards. Such an occurrence may be no more progressive than the tidying up of a cluttered office. Reorganization simply restores the room to a workable state. Similarly, it would be misleading to assume that pattern disruption was necessarily a backward step. Structural dislocation may be the result of extending the language in some useful way. We must conclude therefore that language is ebbing and flowing like the tide, but neither progressing nor decaying, as far as we can tell. (253)

Some linguists argue that languages maintain equilibrium over time in terms of grammatical complexity: a language may lose complexity in one feature while gaining it elsewhere.

All languages, and every historical stage of any given language, are equally capable of expressing anything that the speakers need to express. Languages often express similar things differently, but not because some are more "evolved" than others. For example, some varieties of Modern English use multiple negation (e.g., *I won't have none of that*) and some do not (e.g., *I won't have any of that*) because some varieties lost multiple negation over the centuries since Old English, while others retained this historical feature. Moving from multiple to single negation in the history of some varieties of English is not the result of laziness, sloppiness, or decay; it is also not the result of streamlining, efficiency, or improvement. Both structures are equally capable of expressing negation. It is all part of ongoing language change.

A Question to Discuss

Can Your Language Peeves Be Rethought?

All of us have our language peeves: the words or grammatical constructions that grate on our ears, that we just don't like. Maybe it's *BRB* pronounced "burb" or the road sign "Drive Slow" that uses a flat adverb (*slow* rather than *slowly*) or the notice at the grocery store that reads "Ten Items or Less." Often, our peeves focus on parts of the English language that are undergoing change. And as we discuss in the Special Focus section, sometimes usage that people don't like at one historical moment becomes standard at a later historical moment. What are your language peeves? Then for each one, try reframing it so that it is a positive rather than a negative development in the language.