

English/ Sem.3/ CC-14/Historical Linguistics

Proto-history and History of English Language

Proto-Indo-European (roughly 3500-2500 BC) and linguistic reconstruction :

Most languages in Europe, and others in areas stretching as far as India, are called Indo-European languages, as they descend from a language called Proto-Indo-European (PIE).

Here ‘**proto**’ means that there are no surviving texts in the language and thus that linguists reconstructed the language by comparing similarities and systematic differences between the languages descended from it.

The table below gives examples of historically related words in different languages which show either similarities in pronunciation, or systematic differences.

Example: most IE languages have /p/ in the first two lines, suggesting that PIE originally had /p/ in these words. Gothic and English have /f/ in these contexts, suggesting that PIE /p/ changed into /f/ in these languages. The underlined sounds furnish other examples of systematic differences between other sounds in IE languages. Systematic differences between sounds in related languages/dialects are very common because over time all languages/dialects undergo sound changes (sound shifts) in which particular sounds change their pronunciation :

Meaning	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Gothic	English	PIE
father	pita	pater	pater	fadar	father	*pāter
foot	padam	poda	pedem	fotu	foot	*ped
brother	bhratar	phrater	frater	brothar	brother	*bhrater
thou	twa	su	tu	thu	thou	*tu
bear	carry	bharami	phero	phero	fero	*bher
6	sas	hex	sex	saihs	six	*seks
7	septa	hepta	septem	sibun	seven	*septm

The asterisk () in the last column marks reconstructed forms. (The reconstructions are based on many facts beyond those seen in the table. They reflect 200 years of research.)*

The similarities and systematic differences in the table suggest a genetic relation between these languages (i.e. that they had the same ancestor language). They can't be coincidental since the same sound correspondences are found in many other words in these languages, but such correspondences are not found in most other languages in the world (say Arabic, Hungarian, Turkish), and especially not

in languages spoken in areas very distant from the areas where IE languages were originally found (e.g. Japanese, Zulu, Mohawk, Maori).

Indo-European language families : PIE split into distinct dialects/languages/families due to migration, language contact, conquest. Ten main families: Tocharian (extinct languages in Western China), Indo-Iranian (Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Pashto...), Armenian, Anatolian (extinct languages in Turkey, Syria, incl. Hittite), Albanian, Greek, Italic (Latin, Romance lges), Balto-Slavic (Latvian, Russian, Czech...) Celtic, Germanic (Gothic, English, German, Danish...) Few languages in/near Europe are not IE (exceptions are Basque, Hungarian, Turkish).

Proto-Germanic/Common Germanic (roughly 2000 BC - 250 BC) : Proto-Germanic (Common Germanic): reconstructed ancestor of Germanic languages:

West Germanic languages: German, Dutch, English

North Germanic (Scandinavian) languages: Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic.

East Germanic languages (all extinct), e.g. Gothic (the oldest attested Gmc. language)

Proto-Germanic speakers: originally IE nomads, settled in an area in Nth Germany and south Scandinavia, perhaps around 2000 B.C. (give or take several centuries). References to them by Roman authors after about 200 B.C. Very little common Germanic is recorded: a few words written down by Roman writers in 1st century BC & rare artefacts thought to reflect this stage of the language. Proto-Germanic may have been influenced by contact with speakers of now unknown languages (substrate effect: input from conquered people). These languages seem to have contributed a substantial amount of vocabulary to Proto-Germanic.

Anglo-Saxon (Old English) (450-1100)

Early history of the British Isles : From around 6000-4000 BC: Non-Indo-Europeans in British Isles. From about 700 BC: the first IE people in British Isles: the Celts. 55 BC-410 AD: Roman presence in British Isles (abandoned 410 AD).

Middle English (1100 – 1500)

The Normans in England (1066ff) The Norman Conquest: Normans under William the Conqueror won the battle of Hastings (1066) and took over England. The Normans were from Normandy; descendants of Norse invaders who had invaded Northern France. They spoke Norman French dialect.

The Middle English period is often dated from either 1100 or 1150, since by then the linguistic effects of the Norman Conquest were starting to take hold.

Early Modern English (1500-1700)

General observations : William Caxton in 1476 brings printing to England, enabling massive transfer of language in a fixed form (i.e. without scribes transferring texts into their own dialects), helping standardisation (since books had to be in a widely understood type of English).

Renaissance (16th c.): renewed interest in classical languages, much borrowing from Latin. The first attempts at linguistic purism in English, as well as spelling & other school books.

Late Modern English (1700 – now) Late Modern English (LME): from about 1700 until now (subsuming Present-Day English PDE from about 1900).

Effects of technological developments and colonisation.

Technological innovations (Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850) in England, USA (e.g. steam boat/train, electric devices, telegraph, phonograph, sewing machine).

New technology led to many innovations in the vocabulary:

New coinages: combustion, piston, hydraulic, condenser, electricity, telephone, telegraph, camera Pre-existing words receive new meanings: train, engine, locomotive, vacuum

Compounds: railway, horsepower, typewriter, airplane. **Scientific** advances also necessitated new coinages, often from **Latin/Greek morphemes**: vaccine, electron, chromosome, chloroform, caffeine, bacteria, chronometer, claustrophobia, ethnology

Technical innovations from Britain, USA led to further spread of English, since people from other countries had to learn about the technology in English.

Colonies in 18th-20th centuries: Canada, Australia, India, the Caribbean, Egypt, South Africa, Singapore, etc.: British Empire included 25% of the world around

1900. Resulting in spread of English and adoption of vocabulary from colonies:

India: pyjamas, thug, bungalow, cot, jungle, loot, bangle, shampoo, candy, tank.

Australia: boomerang, kangaroo, budgerigar

Spread of English: By 1950 about 80% of English speakers lived outside Britain.

(71) “English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age.

Conclusion : “Of all modern languages, not one has acquired such great strength and vigor as English... [it] may be called justly a language of the world, and seems, like the English nation, to be destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe”. (Jacob Grimm, 1852).

Courtesy: Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam