



## CHAPTER 17

# Language history and change

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum,  
si þin nama gehalgot.  
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 in costnunge,  
ac alys us of yfele.

The Lord's Prayer (circa 1000)

This barely recognizable version of the Lord's Prayer from about a thousand years ago provides a rather clear indication that the language of the "Englisc" has gone through substantial changes to become the English we use today. Investigating the features of older languages, and the ways in which they developed into modern languages, involves us in the study of language history and change, also known as **philology**. In the nineteenth century, philology dominated the study of language and one result was the creation of "family trees" to show how languages were related. Before all of that could happen, however, there had to be the discovery that a variety of languages spoken in different parts of the world were actually members of the same family.

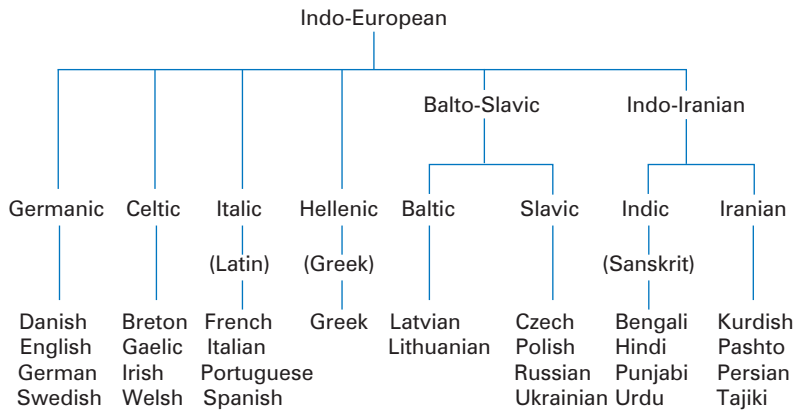


Figure 17.1

## Family trees

In 1786, a British government official in India called Sir William Jones made the following observation about Sanskrit, the ancient language of Indian law:

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. (Cited in Lehmann, 1967: 10)

Sir William went on to suggest, in a way that was quite revolutionary for its time, that 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 that were believed to be descendants.

During the nineteenth century, a term came into use to describe that common ancestor. It incorporated the notion that this was the original form (*Proto*) of a language that was the source of modern languages in the Indian sub-continent (*Indo*) and in Europe (*European*). With **Proto-Indo-European** established as a long ago “great-great-grandmother,” scholars set out to identify the branches of the Indo-European family tree, tracing the lineage of many modern languages. Figure 17.1 shows a small selection of the Indo-European languages in their family branches.

## Indo-European

Indo-European is the language family with the largest population and distribution in the world, but it isn’t the only one. There are about thirty such language families containing a large number of different individual languages. According to one

reputable source (Ethnologue, 2013), there are actually 7,105 known languages in the world. Many of these languages are in danger of extinction while a few are expanding. In terms of number of speakers, Chinese has the most native speakers (over 1 billion), while Spanish (over 400 million) and English (over 330 million) are more widely used in different parts of the world.

Looking at the Indo-European family tree, we might be puzzled initially by the idea that all these diverse languages are related. After all, two modern languages such as Italian and Hindi would seem to have nothing in common. One way to get a clearer picture of how they are related is through looking at records of an older generation, like Latin and Sanskrit, from which the modern languages evolved. 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	Ancient Greek	
pitar	pater	patēr	("father")
bhrātar	frāter	phrāter	("brother")

While these forms have rather clear similarities, it is extremely unlikely that exactly the same words will be found throughout the languages. However, the fact that close similarities occur (especially in the probable pronunciations of the words) is good evidence for proposing a family connection.

## Cognates

The process we have just used to establish a possible family connection between different languages involved looking at what are called "cognates." Within groups of related languages, we can often find close similarities in particular sets of words. A **cognate** of a word in one language (e.g. English) is a word in another language (e.g. German) that has a similar form and is or was used with a similar meaning. The English words *mother*, *father* and *friend* are cognates of the German words *Mutter*, *Vater* and *Freund*. On the basis of these cognates, we would imagine that 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 in Spanish (*madre*, *padre*, *amigo*) and Italian (*madre*, *padre*, *amico*) and conclude that these cognates are good evidence of a common ancestor in the Italic branch of Indo-European.

## Comparative reconstruction

Using information from sets of cognates from different (but apparently related) languages, we can 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. 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.

## General principles

The **majority principle** is very straightforward. If, in a cognate set, three words begin with a [p] sound and one word begins with a [b] sound, then our best guess is that the majority have retained the original sound (i.e. [p]).

The **most natural development principle** is based on the fact that certain types of sound change are very common whereas others are extremely unlikely. The direction of change described in each case (1)–(4) has been commonly observed, but the reverse has not.

- (1) Final vowels often disappear (*vino* → *vin*)
- (2) Voiceless sounds become voiced, often between vowels (*muta* → *muda*)
- (3) Stops become fricatives (*ripa* → *riva*)
- (4) Consonants become voiceless at the end of words (*rizu* → *ris*)

## Sound reconstruction

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

Languages			
A	B	C	
<i>cantare</i>	<i>cantar</i>	<i>chanter</i>	(“sing”)
<i>catena</i>	<i>cadena</i>	<i>chaîne</i>	(“chain”)
<i>caro</i>	<i>caro</i>	<i>cher</i>	(“dear”)
<i>cavallo</i>	<i>caballo</i>	<i>cheval</i>	(“horse”)

Since the written forms can often be misleading, we check that the initial sounds of the words in languages A and B are all [k] sounds, while in language C the initial sounds are all [ʃ] sounds.

On the evidence presented, the majority principle would suggest that the initial sound [k] in languages A and B is older than the [ʃ] sound in language C. Moreover, the [k] sound is a stop consonant and the [ʃ] sound is a fricative. According to one part of the “most natural development principle,” change tends to occur in the direction of

stops becoming fricatives, so the [k] sound 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 (A), Spanish (B) and French (C). In this case, we have a way of checking our reconstruction because the common origin for these three languages is known to be Latin. When we check the Latin cognates of the words listed, we find *cantare*, *catena*, *carus* and *caballus*, confirming that [k] was the initial sound.

### Word reconstruction

Looking at a non-Indo-European set of examples, we can imagine receiving the following data from a linguist recently returned from an expedition to a remote region of the Amazon. The examples are a set of cognates from three related languages, but what would the proto-forms have looked like?

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

Using the majority principle, we can suggest that the older forms will most likely be based on language 2 or language 3. If this is correct, then the consonant changes must have been [p] → [b], [t] → [d] and [k] → [g] in order to produce the later forms in language 1. There is a pattern in these changes that follows one part of the “most natural development principle,” i.e. voiceless sounds become voiced between vowels. So, the words in languages 2 and 3 must be older forms than those in language 1.

Which of the two lists, 2 or 3, contains the older forms? Remembering one other “most natural development” type of sound change (i.e. final vowels often disappear), we can propose that the words in language 3 have consistently lost the final vowels still present in the words of language 2. Our best guess, then, is that the forms listed for language 2 are closest to what must have been the original proto-forms.

## The history of English

The reconstruction of proto-forms is an attempt to determine what a language must have been like before any written records. 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 form of the language found today. The version of the Lord's Prayer quoted at the beginning of this chapter provides a good illustration of this point. Even some of the letters seem quite alien. The older letters þ (called "thorn") and ð ("eth") were both replaced by "th" (as in *þu* → *thou*, *eorðan* → *earth*), and æ ("ash") simply became "a" (as in *to dæg* → *today*). To see how one language has undergone substantial changes through time, we can take a brief look at the history of English, which is traditionally divided into four periods.

Old English: before 1100

Middle English: 1100 to 1500

Early Modern English: 1500 to 1700

Modern English: after 1700

## Old English

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The primary sources for what developed as the English language were the Germanic languages spoken by a group of tribes from northern Europe who moved into the British Isles in the fifth century. 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 that we get the word for their language *Englisc* and their new home *Engla-land*.

From this early version of *Englisc*, now called **Old English**, we have many of the most basic terms in the language: *mann* ("man"), *wif* ("woman"), *cild* ("child"), *hūs* ("house"), *mete* ("food"), *etan* ("eat"), *drincan* ("drink") and *feohtan* ("fight"). These pagan settlers also gave us some weekday names, commemorating their gods *Woden* and *Thor*. However, they did not remain pagan for long. From the sixth to the eighth century, there was an extended period during which these Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity and a number of terms from Latin (the language of the religion) came into English at that time. The origins of the contemporary English 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 then to settle in parts of the coastal regions of Britain. They were the Vikings and it is from their language, Old Norse, that the original forms of *give*, *law*, *leg*, *skin*, *sky*, *take* and *they* were adopted. It is from their winter festival *jól* that we have *Yule* as a term for the Christmas season.

## Middle English

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The event that 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, after their victory at Hastings under William the Conqueror in 1066. These French-speaking

invaders became the ruling class, so that the language of the nobility, government, law and civilized life in England for the next two hundred years was French. It is the source of words like *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 upper classes talked about *mutton*, *beef* and *pork* (words of French origin). Hence the different terms 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 her nose ful semely,  
And Frenche she spak ful faire and fetisly.*

This is an example of Middle English from the late fourteenth century. It had changed substantially from Old English, but other changes were yet to take place. Most significantly, the vowel sounds of Chaucer’s time were very different from those we hear in similar words today. Chaucer lived in a “hoos,” with his “weef,” and “hay” might drink a bottle of “weena” with “heer” by the light of the “mona.”

In the two hundred years, from 1400 to 1600, that separated Chaucer and Shakespeare, the sounds of English underwent a substantial change known as the “Great Vowel Shift.” The effects of this general raising of long vowel sounds (such as long [o] moving up to long [u], as in *mōna* → *moon*) made the pronunciation of Early Modern English, beginning around 1500, significantly different from earlier periods. The introduction of printing in 1476 brought about significant changes, but because the printers tended to standardize existing pronunciations in the spelling of words (e.g. *knee*, *gnaw*), later pronunciation changes are often not reflected in the way Modern English (after 1700) is written.

Influences from the outside, such as the borrowed words from Norman French or Old Norse that we have already noted, are examples of **external change** in the language. Other types of changes, especially sound changes, which don’t seem to be caused by outside factors, are the result of processes of **internal change**.

## Sound changes

In a number of changes from Middle to Modern English, some sounds disappeared from the pronunciation of certain words, in a process simply described as **sound loss**. The initial [h] of many Old English words was lost, as in *hlud* → *loud* and *hlaford* → *lord*. Some words lost sounds, but kept the spelling, resulting in the “silent letters” of

contemporary written English. Word-initial velar stops [k] and [g] are no longer pronounced before nasals [n], but we still write the words *knee* and *gnaw* with the remnants of earlier pronunciations.

Another example is a velar fricative [x] that was used in the pronunciation of the older form *niht* as [nixt] (closer to the modern German pronunciation of *Nacht*), but is absent in the contemporary form *night*, pronounced as [nait]. A remnant of this type of sound is still present in some dialects, as at the end of the Scottish word *loch*, but it is no longer a consonant in Modern English speech.

## Metathesis

The sound change known as **metathesis** involves a reversal in position of two sounds in a word. This type of reversal is illustrated in the changed versions of these words from their earlier forms.

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

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 already*, can still be heard instead of *ask*.

The reversal of position in metathesis can sometimes occur between non-adjointing sounds. The Spanish word *palabra* is derived from the Latin *parabola* through the reversal in position of the [l] and [r] sounds. The pattern is exemplified in the following set.

Latin		Spanish	
<i>miraculum</i>	→	<i>milagro</i>	("miracle")
<i>parabola</i>	→	<i>palabra</i>	("word")
<i>periculum</i>	→	<i>peligro</i>	("danger")

## Epenthesis

Another type of sound change, known as **epenthesis**, involves the addition of a sound to the middle of a word.

*æmtig* → *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' pronunciation of *something* as "sumpthing." Anyone who pronounces the



word *film* as if it were “filum,” or *arithmetic* as “arithametic,” is producing examples of epenthesis in Modern English.

### Prothesis

One other type of sound change worth noting, though not found in English, involves the addition of a sound to the beginning of a word and is called **prothesis**. It is a common feature in the evolution of some forms from Latin to Spanish.

<i>schola</i>	→	<i>escuela</i>	(“school”)
<i>scribere</i>	→	<i>escribir</i>	(“to write”)
<i>spiritus</i>	→	<i>espíritu</i>	(“spirit”)
<i>sperare</i>	→	<i>esperar</i>	(“to hope”)

Spanish speakers who are starting to learn English as a second language will sometimes put a prothetic vowel at the beginning of some English words, with the result that 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 order most common in Modern English, but we can also find a number of different orders that are no longer used. For example, the subject could follow the verb, as in *ferde he* (“he traveled”), and the object could be placed before the verb, as in *he hine geseah* (“he saw him”), or at the beginning of the sentence, as in *him man ne sealde* (“no man gave [any] to him”).

In the last example, the use of the negative also differs from Modern English, since the sequence *\*not gave (ne sealde)* is no longer grammatical. A “double negative” construction was also possible, as in the following example, where both *ne* (“not”) and *næfre* (“never”) are used with the same verb. We would now say *You never gave* rather than *\*You not gave never*.

<i>and</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>sealdest</i>	<i>þū</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>næfre</i>	<i>ān</i>	<i>ticcen</i>
and	not	gave	you	me	never	a	kid

### Loss of inflections

However, the most sweeping change in the form of English sentences was the loss of a large number of inflectional suffixes from many parts of speech. Notice that, in the previous examples, the forms *sealde* (“he gave”) and *sealdest* (“you gave”) are

differentiated by inflectional suffixes (-e, -est) that are no longer used in Modern English. Nouns, adjectives, articles and pronouns all had different inflectional forms according to their grammatical function in the sentence.

## Semantic changes

The most obvious way in which Modern English differs from Old English is in the number of borrowed words that have come into the language since the Old English period. (For more on borrowing, see [Chapter 5](#)). 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 heard. A common Old English word for “man” was *were*, but it has fallen out of use, except in horror films where the compound *werewolf* occasionally appears. A number of expressions such as *lo*, *verily* or *egad* are immediately recognized as belonging to a much earlier period, along with certain medieval-sounding names such as *Bertha*, *Egbert* and *Percival*.

### Broadening of meaning

Another process is described as **broadening** of meaning, as in the change from *holy day* as a religious feast to the very general break from work called a *holiday*. We have broadened the use of *foda* (fodder for animals) to talk about all kinds of *food*. Old English words such as *luflic* (“loving”) and *hræd* (“quick”) not only went through sound changes, they also developed more complex evaluative meanings (“wonderful” and “preferentially”), as in their modern uses: *That’s a lovely idea, but I’d rather have dinner at home tonight*. Another example 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.

### Narrowing of meaning

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 to refer to any woman, but has narrowed in its application nowadays to only married women. A different kind of narrowing can lead to a negative meaning for some words, such as *vulgar* (which used to mean simply “ordinary”) and *naughty* (which used to mean “having nothing”).

## Diachronic and synchronic variation

None of these changes 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 individual child has to “recreate” 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 and 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 that 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 [Chapters 18 and 19](#).