

Language History and Change ♦

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin nama gehalgod.

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 (c. 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.

Family Trees

In 1786, a British government official in India called *Sir William Jones* made this observation about Sanskrit, the ancient language of Indian law (Lehman, 1967: 10): 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. 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.



Indo-European is the language family with the largest population and distribution in the world, but it is not the only one. There are about thirty such language families containing a large number of different individual languages. According to one reputable source (Ethnologue, 2015), there are actually 7,102 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 pate-r (“father”) bhrātar frater phrāter (“brother”) While these forms have 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 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 can see that Modern English and Modern German must have a common ancestor in the Germanic branch of Indo-European. We can look at similar sets in the Italic branch of Indo-European and find cognates in Spanish (madre, padre, amigo) and Italian (madre, padre, amico).