

Historical Linguistics

What is Historical Linguistics?

- Historical linguistics is the study of how languages **change** over time and
- of their **relationships** with other languages.
- All languages change over time, and not randomly.
- There are many patterns and generalizations we can make upon examining the histories of various languages.
- Looking for these historical patterns of languages falls within the general aim of linguistics: to find patterns in human languages in general.

Diachronic Analysis

diachronic (**dia** = throughout; **chron** = time).

There are patterns which simply cannot be discerned without looking at a language at multiple points in time.

Diachronic analysis is the domain of *historical linguistics*.

Because devices for recording sounds (and thus also speech) have only been around for about a century, the vast majority of data used for historical linguistics is textual (but where available, spoken language remains primary evidence).

Two Approaches to the Study of Language

So far we have been concentrating exclusively on a language **at one point in time** (usually now, the modern form of a language). This sort of analysis is called **synchronic** (**syn** = same; **chron** = time).

But we may also study the **history** of a language or languages to discover patterns which are only evident when comparing a language with itself at different stages of its development.

An example:

- English of Shakespeare's time "*What thinkest thou?*"
- Modern English: "*What do you think?*"

We see here both *syntactic change* (word order), *morphological change* (verb endings), and *lexical change* ("*thou*" was common, now obsolete).

Kinds of Language Change

Languages undergo change at all linguistic levels: phonetic, phonemic, morphological, syntactic, semantic.

1. Phonetic: Old English had the sound u-umlaut, while that sound is no longer present in modern English (ME).
2. Phonemic: Old English regarded [v] as an allophone of /f/, while in ME /v/ is a phoneme itself.
3. Morphological: Old English had case endings on normal nouns to distinguish indirect objects and direct objects. ME has no such marking.
4. Syntactic: Old English allowed all questions to be formed by inverting the subject and the verb. ME only allows this with auxiliaries, and uses "do" otherwise.
5. Semantic: In Old English, "girl" referred to young men and women.

Why Do Languages Change? Language splitting

A language may split into two or more languages if the speakers become separated into two or more groups with little or no contact.

Example *Latin*: After the heyday of the Roman Empire, Latin-speaking peoples were scattered far and wide around Europe and eventually lost contact with people in other regions. Thus the Latin of people living in Iberia eventually became Spanish, Portuguese or Catalan, people in Gaul spoke French and Provençal, and so on for all the Romance languages.

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Why Do Languages Change? Borrowings

Borrowings frequently obscure the relationship of languages by “covering the tracks” of historical development.

For example, the Latin word for beer was “*cerevisia*”. Spanish preserved this word in the form “*cerveza*”. French, however, while it is a direct descendant of Latin, chose to borrow the word “*Bier*” from the German tribes its speakers were in contact with (French: *bière*).

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Why Do Languages Change? Language contact

Language contact also plays a major role in language change.

If two groups of people speaking two different (possibly completely unrelated) languages come in close contact with each other (for trade, etc.), then each group’s language may begin to adopt features of the other’s. Vocabulary is frequently added to a language through language contact. (e.g.: skunk, moccasin, chipmunk from Native American languages). Less frequently phonetic, phonemic, and even syntactic, morphological and semantic borrowing can occur.

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Attitudes Towards Language Change

Language change has frequently been resisted throughout the ages.

One of the most prominent examples of such resistance has been the formation of language academies, institutions organized to attempt to regulate, stop, or even reverse language change.

Such organizations see themselves as “defending” their language from the “invasion” of “barbaric” terms from other languages, or else preventing “vulgar speech” from “corrupting” the language as a whole.

While such government efforts to stop language change can force newspapers and book publishers to conform to specific guidelines, they cannot control how people speak, and it is there that language change originates.

You cannot prevent language change with any amount of force – it is an inherent part of every living human language.

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Models of Language Change

When we say that languages are “related”, what exactly do we mean?

- The Family Tree Model
- The Wave Model

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if two languages show a significant amount of similarity, then one can conclude that they are related. This works together with the *regularity hypothesis* in the following way:

Say we have two languages, A and B, which show a good deal of similarity. We conclude by the *regularity hypothesis* that the source of the similarity is not superficial, but has arisen through regular, “normal” change. Then, because the two languages are similar, we conclude by the *relatedness hypothesis* that they are genetically related in some way.

In the family tree model, languages are treated much like humans are in a family tree – they have “mothers”, “sisters”, and “daughters”. The model is represented by a tree, with older generations at the top and descendants at the bottom. If a language is connected to a language directly above it by a “branch”, then the lower language is a daughter of the higher language. Sisters are languages which have the same mother.

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The Family Tree Model

The family tree model was the first attempt at depicting the relationships between languages. It rests on two assumptions:

1. The **Regularity Hypothesis**: this is the idea that languages change in **regular** ways – they do not exhibit wild, random changes which seem to follow no patterns. This is necessary because without it, observed similarities between languages would not lead us to conclude that they came from a common source which has diverged in “regular” ways – they could just as easily have come from completely different sources, but have changed so fundamentally and erratically that they end up having many similarities.
2. The **Relatedness Hypothesis**: This is the hypothesis which says that

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Evaluation of the Family Tree Model

Prof:

- Easy to see relationships.

Contra:

- Division between languages and their descendants is deceptively clear.
- It does not represent internal variation at all.

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The Wave Model

Motivation: Correct some of the problems with the family tree model.

The idea is that instead of having definite delineations between languages, there are “waves” of linguistic change which affect some languages but not others, and tend to spread out to other languages nearby.

Pro:

- Represents dialects and the continuums which always exist between them in a satisfying way.
- Represents the fact that languages do not split away from their mothers cleanly, it is always a gradual process.

Contra:

- Difficult to tell what language descends from what, there are so many relationships depicted that overall patterns become hard to pick out.

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What if You Don't Have Records of a Language?

How do we know about supposed mother languages if there are usually no speakers of these languages and frequently no texts?

The answer is **reconstruction**. We reconstruct vanished languages by comparing features of their descendant languages.

This method is known as the **comparative method**: you **compare** various languages and look for similarities which may indicate a genetic link.

It is known as the **comparative** method because it is only valid if **multiple** languages are used. One has no idea which features of a language in isolation are due to inheritance or borrowing, and only comparison with other languages can clarify this.

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Problems With Both Theories

These theories emerged over a hundred years ago, when historical linguistics was still in its infancy. Since then we have discovered that some of the assumptions they rest on are not as solid as once thought.

- Languages can be remarkably similar in, e.g., syntax (cf. Korean and Japanese which are almost isomorphic) but not be related at all.
- Language borrowing can bring unrelated languages closer together in a “regular” way, yet they may not be “related” genetically. This adds further complications to the historical linguist's task, as they must try to discover which parts of a language come from historical development and which come from borrowing.

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Sound Change – and why it is studied

Sound change is the most commonly studied form of language change in diachronic linguistics. There are several reasons for this:

1. **Momentum**: Sound change was the almost exclusive focus of past historical linguists. Thus the greatest amount of existing historical work is on sound change.
2. **Close Links to Other Sorts of Change**: Sound change plays a part in almost every aspect of language change. As an example, the morphological and syntactic changes that came from the loss of case endings in Old English were in large part due to the characteristic Germanic first-syllable stress which tended to make the case endings garbled and therefore indistinguishable, leading speakers to find other means of expressing grammatical relations.

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3. **Family Relationships Based on Sound Change:** It is by comparing sound changes and similarities that we determine which languages are genetically related to which. Sounds are far more stable over time than are syntax, semantics, morphology, or other aspects of language.
4. **The Clearest Sort of Language Change:** Sound change is easier to deal with at a beginning level, and the methods used transfer to the study of other sorts of language change.

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Types of Sound Change

Phonological processes which are dependent on the phonetic environment are referred to as **conditioned**, those which are not as **unconditioned**.

Conditioned Sound Changes:

- **Assimilation:** Two sounds become more like each other when they are near or touching. e.g., wulfas [wulfas] → [wulvas]
- **Dissimilation:** Two sounds become less like each other when near or touching. e.g., [fifθ] → [fift]
- **Deletion:** Sounds are deleted in certain environments. e.g., [nɔzə] → [noz]
- **Insertion:** Sounds are inserted in certain environments. e.g., [æθlit] → [æθɔlit]

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What is a Sound Change?

Phonological processes may be restricted to certain situations or certain speakers, or they may be accepted by all speakers of a given language. An example of the former is found in various contractions such as “wanna”, which are restricted to casual conversation, and not accepted in formal situations. An example of the latter would be the aspiration of word-initial voiceless stops in English.

Sound Change is a phonological process which has been accepted by *all speakers* of a language (or dialect).

Sound changes tend to spread from speaker to speaker gradually in a wave-like pattern until they are uniformly used by all speakers in a linguistics community. They do not spontaneously occur everywhere in a language.

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Conditioned Sound Changes:

- **Monophthongization:** Diphthongs become monophthongs. e.g., rule ([rɪwɔ]) [iw] → [u] ([rul])
- **Diphthongization:** Monophthongs become diphthongs. e.g., MidE ([hus]) [u] → ModE [aw] (house, mouse)
- **Metathesis:** The order of sounds change. e.g., ask → aks
- **Raising/Lowering:** The position of the tongue becomes either higher or lower when producing certain sounds. e.g., mete → meat ([metə] → [mit])
- **Backing/Fronting:** The position of the tongue becomes either more forward or more back. e.g., path [a] → [æ]

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