Chapter 8 Historical linguistics
Laura Grestenberger

"Delving Deeper"

Language universals and language change

While most of the examples of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic change we have discussed in the book chapter came from English or French, it is striking that we observe the same types of changes in completely unrelated languages as well. This may suggest that some aspects of language change are due to cross-linguistic **universals** and the way these interact with the human perceptual, articulatory, and interpretive faculties. Given that all humans are born with the capacity to acquire language, this is not particularly surprising. An important principle of historical linguistics that results from this observation is the **Uniformitarian principle**, which states that past language stages conform to the same basic principles as contemporary language stages.

- **Uniformitarian Principle**

  "The general processes and principles which can be noticed in observable history are applicable in all stages of language history." (Hock 1991, 630)

The Uniformitarian Principle states that the basic principles of the human language faculty have remained unchanged since it developed. This means that if an infant born in Montreal this year time-traveled to Bronze Age South Russia (accompanied by adults, of course—unaccompanied babies mustn't time-travel), he or she would be able to acquire Proto-Indo-European (the reconstructed language spoken in that area 6,000-5,000 years ago) without any problem. Likewise, a Proto-Indo-European time-traveler baby would easily be able to acquire any of the languages currently spoken in Montreal.

According to the Uniformitarian Principle, there is no reason to believe that Old Chinese or Proto-Indo-European were any more or less complex and expressive than any of the languages currently spoken around the globe. Moreover, it means that the possible diachronic developments that we observe in language change are constrained by the same principles of UG that we observe in the study of synchronic variation between different languages. For example, we have seen in section 8.5.2. that the subject pro-drop property of languages varies both synchronically and diachronically. Synchronically, Italian is a pro-drop language, while English is not. But while subject pro-drop is ungrammatical in Modern English, it was perfectly fine in Old English. At some point in the development of Old English to Modern English, this pro-drop property was lost. Crucially, the diachronic variation we observe in the history of English is parallel to the synchronic variation we see in contemporary languages.

Language families: The classification of Languages meets Historical Linguistics

Languages that are genetically related by virtue of being descended from a common ancestor language (or "Proto-G", see above) are called **language families** (see Chapter 7 The Classification

of Languages). Languages that belong to the same family are often represented in tree models, like the one in figure 1 below. These tree models are used by linguists to represent **subgrouping** within language families, that is, to show which languages are more closely related to each other within the same family. Each node in the tree stands for a subfamily of a larger macrofamily. The tree in Figure 1 illustrates the Indo-European language family, which descends from the reconstructed ancestor language **Proto-Indo-European** (spoken ca. 4,000 BCE).

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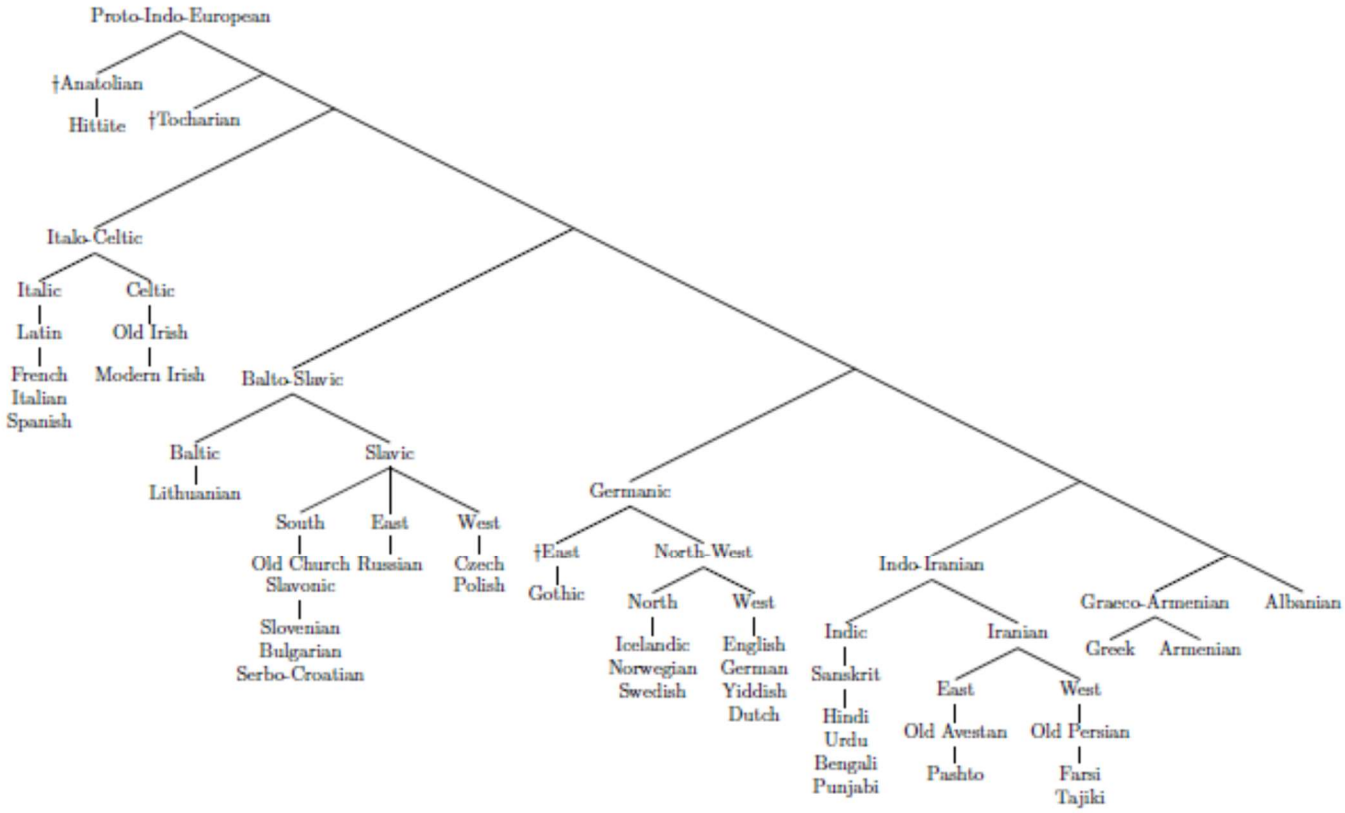

Figure 1. The Indo-European language family.

Since the 19th century historical linguists have studied a number of language families and have reconstructed their family trees using the comparative method. Here are some more examples of reconstructed proto-languages and their descendant language families:

- Proto-Sino-Tibetan: from which, e.g., Modern Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese and Tibetan are descended
- Proto-Semitic: descendants include Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic and Maltese and the extinct Semitic languages of ancient Mesopotamia (Akkadian, Babylonian, Ugaritic)
- Proto-Algonquian: from which the Modern Algonquian languages spoken in North America are descended, e.g., Ojibwe, Blackfoot and Mi'kmaq
- Proto-Austronesian: e.g., Malayo-Polynesian languages (Malagasy, Malay, Oceanic languages such as Samoan and Maori)

There are many others, and the reconstruction of the world's language families is far from complete. Moreover, many of the language families mentioned above have been shown to belong to even larger macrofamilies that include several reconstructed proto-languages. For example, Proto-Semitic goes back to a macrofamily called Proto-Afro-Asiatic which includes Egyptian and its modern descendent Coptic, the Cushitic languages (e.g., Somali), and the Berber and Chadic languages. Proto-Algonquian goes back to a macrofamily called Proto-Algic, from which the Yurok and Wiyot languages which were spoken on the North American West Coast are also descended. Other macrofamilies are more controversial: it has been claimed that Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Uralic (the reconstructed language from which Finnish and Hungarian are descended) are related through a common ancestor, sometimes called Nostratic. However, this claim has never gained acceptance due to the lack of reliable sound correspondences (see the next section). Whether we will ever be able to reconstruct "Proto-World" is likewise an open (and highly controversial) question.

Figure 2 illustrates the Algonquian language family, which goes back to Proto-Algonquian spoken around 1,000 BCE.

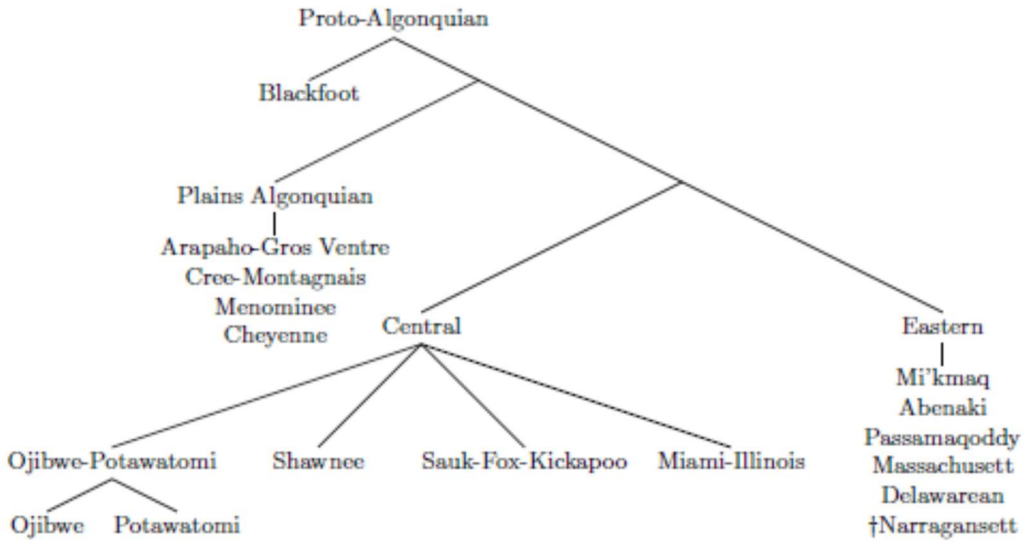

Figure 2. The Algonquian language family (based on Goddard, 1996; Mithun, 1999).

Figure 3 illustrates the Semitic language family, which goes back to Proto-Semitic. This was spoken in the first half of the 4th millennium BCE.

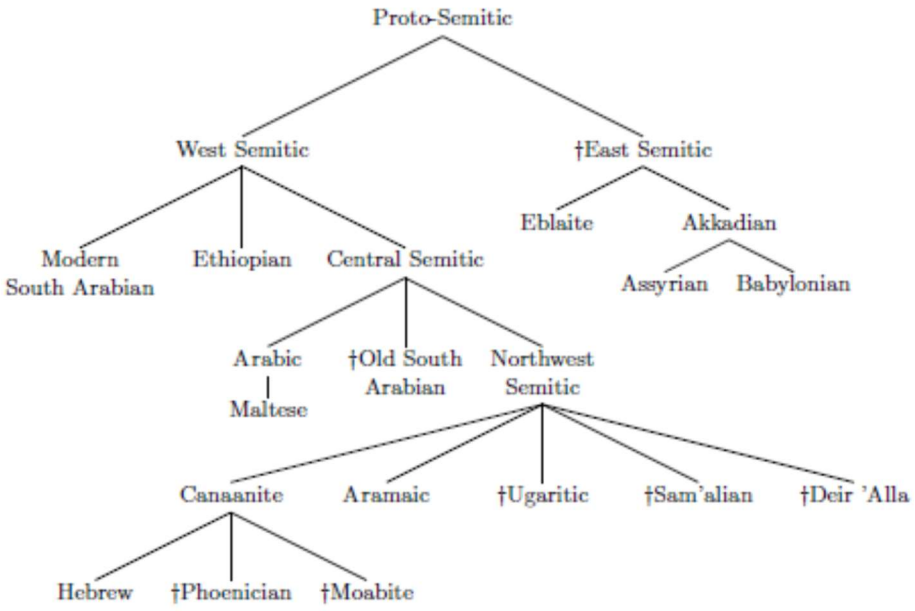

Figure 3. The Semitic language family (based on Faber, 1997).

Syntactic change: Verb movement parameters

The position of the finite verb in a clause varies from language to language. In some languages, the verb comes after the subject and the object of a clause (SOV languages, e.g., Japanese, Latin, German). In others, the verb comes after the subject, but before the object (SVO languages, e.g., French, English, Chinese). Another common word order type is VSO, in which the verb comes before the subject and the object (e.g., the Mayan languages, Arabic, the Celtic languages). There is also often *synchronic* variation. For example, the standard German word order is SVO in main clauses, but SOV in subordinate clauses. This variation is usually explained through **verb movement** (see Chapter 5 Syntax): the finite verb moves to different positions in the clause (usually functional projections like the heads of IP and CP).

Given this synchronic variation, we expect to see some diachronic variation as well, and this is indeed what we find. Modern English lexical verbs famously do not move: They occur *after* negation markers and adverbs and never occur before the subject of a clause, including in interrogative clauses. This is illustrated in the following examples (finite verbs are **bolded**, the items whose relative position to the verb is of interest are underlined).

1) Modern English verbs
    a. Cora did not **feed** the turtle.
    b. Cora never **feeds** the turtle.
    c. When did Cora **feed** the turtle?

The lexical verb always stays in its position immediately before the object *the turtle* in (1). In negative clauses, (1a), and interrogative clauses, (1c), English moreover uses a finite form of the auxiliary *do* ("***do*-support**"), while the lexical verb *feed* stays in its base position near the end of the clause.

This was different in Old English and Middle English. Up until Middle English, there was no *do*-support, and lexical verbs occurred before negation markers and adverbs (it is unclear if and when turtles were fed, hence the examples are more prosaic):

2) Middle English verbs (from Ringe and Eska 2013):
   a. … spoile him of his riches by sondrie frauds, which he **perceiueth** not.
   b. Quene Ester **looked** never with swich an eye.
   c. How great and greuous tribulations **suffered** the Holy Appostyls…?

These sentences are ungrammatical in Modern English. In (2a), the lexical verb occurs *before* the negation marker rather than after it and there is no *do*-support. In (2b), it occurs *before* the adverb *never* rather than after it, and in the interrogative clause in (2c) there is no *do*-support and the verb occurs *before* the subject rather than after it.

This means that up until Middle English, lexical verbs could *move* across negation markers, adverbs, and even subjects (in interrogative clauses) to a position closer to the beginning of a clause. We have good reasons to believe that this position is the **tense phrase** (**TP**) (as you saw in Chapter 5 Syntax and the corresponding Delving Deeper), which contributes tense (past vs. present, etc.) and agreement (person, number) to the meaning of a finite verb. This movement is illustrated in the tree on the right in Figure 4. Assuming that the adverb *never* is in a fixed position adjoined to the VP in Middle English and Modern English, the verb moves across the adverb to T in Middle English (the arrow indicates the movement of the verb), but stays below the adverb in Modern English in the tree on the left (the verb moves even further up the tree in interrogative clauses like (2c), but we can leave those aside for now).

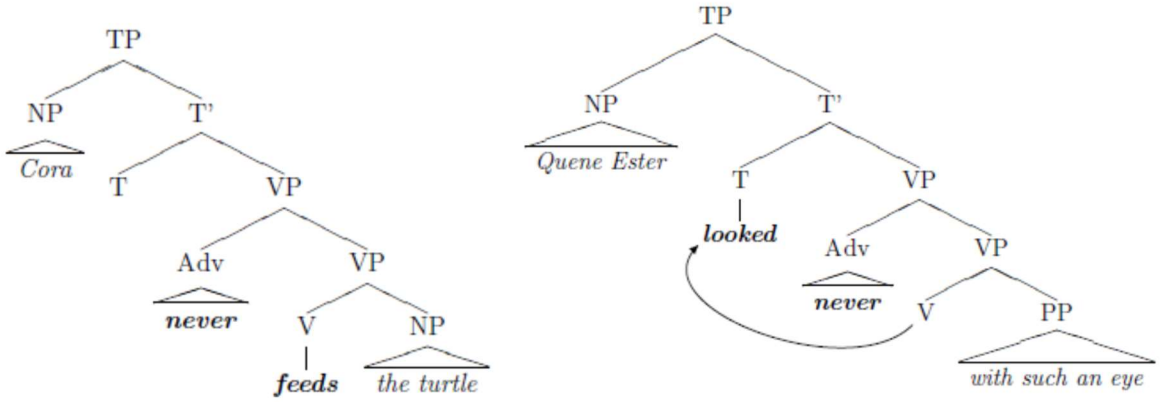

Figure 4. Modern English vs. Middle English verbs.

We can therefore posit that there is a verb movement parameter which specifies whether a lexical verb V moves to T in finite clauses:

- **The V-to-T parameter** (Roberts 2007: 45): *Does V move to T in finite clauses*?
  YES: **Middle English**, French, Welsh, Italian, Icelandic, Greek …
  NO: **Modern English**, Swedish, Danish ….

The setting for this parameter changed from YES to NO on the way to Modern English. This change seems to have been connected to the rise of *do*-support in late Middle English. Since auxiliaries like *do* occupy T, the lexical verb cannot move to T in sentences with *do*-support, such as the Modern English equivalents of (2a) and (2c), and so verb movement was eventually lost in English.

References

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