

3. Variation and Change III

Introduction to Language (Ling 201)

Prof. Pentangelo

Spring 2026

Language change

- Over the last two weeks, we talked about language variation – different dialects, languages, styles, registers.
- This week, we'll talk about how variation drives change.
- Key topics to look out for:
 1. What it means for languages to be related.
 2. How historical languages can be reconstructed.
 3. Change is not degeneration; it's evolution.
 4. Change is constant and normal.

Why do languages change?

John McWhorter – Rickerson & Hilton ch. 7

- Languages are *always* changing.
- This is true of all natural phenomena: clouds, species, climate, etc.



“In English, you can see this easily because our spelling often preserves the way the language was pronounced seven hundred years ago. The word *name*, for instance, used to be pronounced ‘NAH-muh.’ But we stopped saying the final /e/ and the AH sound (NAHme) drifted into an AY sound (NAYm).” (p.34)

- This constant change is where new languages come from. If Latin never changed, we wouldn’t have today’s Italian, French, Spanish, etc.

Language change

David Crystal ch. 21



“All living languages change. They have to. Languages have no existence apart from the people who use them. And because people are changing all the time, their language changes too, to keep up with them. The only languages that don’t change are dead ones.” (p.131)

- We develop new words for new things.
- We lose old words for old things.
- Pronunciation drifts.
- Syntax (which Crystal calls ‘grammar’) changes as well.
- People often resist change when it’s highly noticeable.

This reading really complements the McWhorter chapter nicely.

Variation \Rightarrow Change

- Think about how language is acquired.
- Children learn from their family, often their parents.
- Formal instruction often follows in school.
- The linguistic habits of one generation get amplified in the next, leading to the spread of certain features in a local area.
- Additionally, language contact, often through immigration, can lead to language change. We'll see an example of this soon.



Variation \Rightarrow Change

- Varieties are often tied to geographic areas. (Think of regional dialects.)
- Latin gave rise to Spanish and Italian (and other languages).
- Spanish descended from the dialect of Latin spoken in what's now Spain, while Italian descended from the Latin dialect spoken in what's now Italy.
- Different dialects of one language can eventually give rise to multiple languages.



Spain and Italy with today's borders.

Activity!

- Break up into groups of about 6 people and do Activity 1 on your sheets now. This activity will help prepare you for your first group assignment, which is due during our next class.
- Report back

Language Change

- All languages change over time. This is not ‘degeneration’ or ‘corruption’ — this is normal.
- The English spoken today is just as good, authoritative, and valid as the English spoken 100 or 1,000 years ago, even if it is different.
- Language change is driven by language variation: the fact that different populations speak a given language slightly differently than each other.
- We can illustrate this by talking about *eggs*.



fayn wolde I satysfye euery man/ and so to doo toke an olde booke and redde therein/ and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lord abbot of Westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euidences wryton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to our englysshe now vsed/ And certaynly it was wryton in such wyse that it was more lyk to dutche than englysshe I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden/ And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that. Whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne/ For the englysshe men/ken borne vnder the domynacyon of the moone. Whiche is neuer stedfaste/ but euer wauerynge/ weyrynge o; ne season/ and waneth & dyscreaseth another season/ And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchautes were in a ship in taryse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specyally he axyd after eggys And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaüt was angry. for he also coude speke no frenshe. But wolde haue hadde egges/ and she vnderstode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryt. egges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man that is in ony reputacyon in his couñtre. wyll vnter his comynycacyon and maters in such maners & termes/ that fewe men shall vnderstonde theym/ And som ho;

B³L

From the preface to *Eneydos*, Caxton's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, 1490.

And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchautes were in a ship in taryse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specyally he axyd after eggys And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaüt was angry. for he also coude speke no frenshe. But wolde haue hadde egges/ and she vnderstode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryt. egges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man this is in ony reputacyon in his couñtre. wyll utter his comynycacyon and maters in such maners & termes that fewe men shall understone theym



Eggs or eyren?

- Old English had *æg*, plural *ægru*.
- By Middle English, this had become *ey* and *eyren*.
- Vikings had conquered much of north and eastern England in the 9th century. They introduced a lot of new words, including Old Norse *egg*.
- Around 1490, some English speakers said *eggs*, while others said *eyren*. This is an example of **language variation**.

Which one was correct?

Both were!

- Today, we say *eggs* exclusively. This is an example of **language change**.



Eggs or eyren?

- Old English *ǣg* and Old Norse *egg* look and sound similar. In fact, they are related.
- In historical linguistics, when two words (or languages) are related, it means that they came from a common ancestor, in this case Proto-Germanic.

Beware! Not all similar-sounding words are related. English *much* and Spanish *mucho* have different origins, even though they sound alike and have similar meanings.

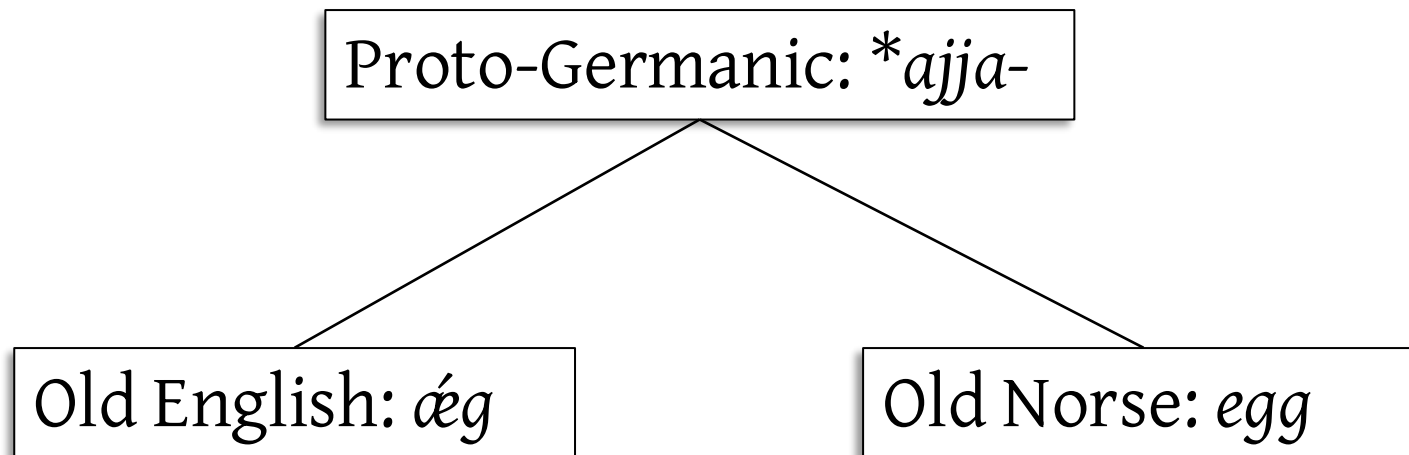
- Words that share a common ancestor are **cognates**.
- The Proto-Germanic word for 'egg' was **ajja-*

In historical linguistics, * means it's a reconstruction, not that it's ungrammatical.



Eggs or eyren?

- Based on what we know so far, we can make a tree to show how Proto-Germanic, Old English, and Old Norse are related.

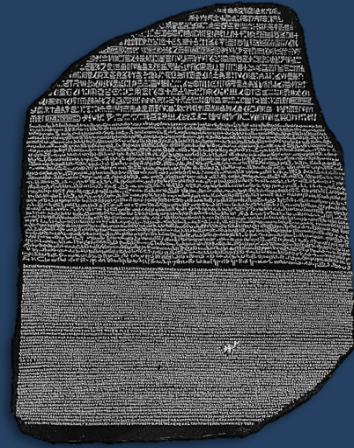


Break

- Let's take a ten-minute break now

Historical Linguistics

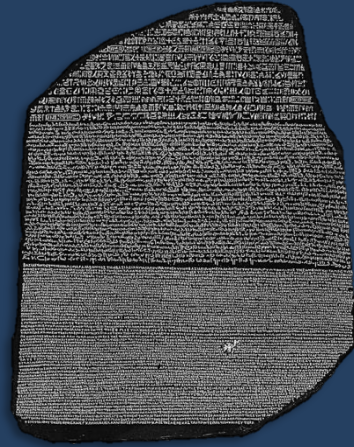
- **Historical linguistics** is the branch of linguistics that studies language change.
- When we analyze a language as it exists at a particular time, e.g. the present, we are conducting a **synchronic** analysis.
- When we analyze how a language changes over time, we are conducting a **diachronic** analysis. (You'll do this kind of analysis soon.)
- Most of what we've done so far has been synchronic.
- In historical linguistics, we conduct diachronic analyses.



Historical Linguistics

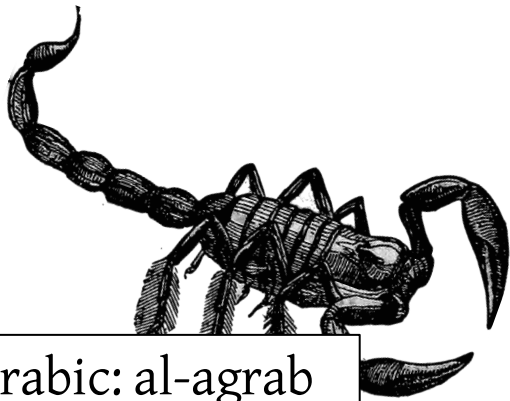
- Historical linguistics dates back to the late-18th century, when European scholars discovered that many European and Asian languages shared a lot of features.
- They hypothesized that these languages all descended from a single common ancestor, Proto-Indo-European (PIE).
- These Indo-European languages constitute one major family of languages.
- In the centuries since, we've discovered many other families.

Did they think PIE was the ancestor of *all* languages?



Historical Linguistics

- We must never assume that languages are related just because they share similar or even identical words.
- Sometimes, a language **borrow**s words from another. This does not mean the languages are related.



Arabic: al-*agrab*

Spanish: *alacran*



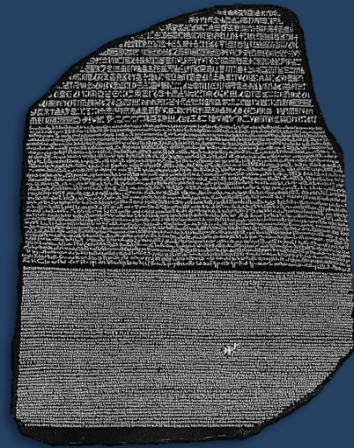
Arabic: *nāranja*

Spanish: *naranja*



Arabic: *al-qadi*

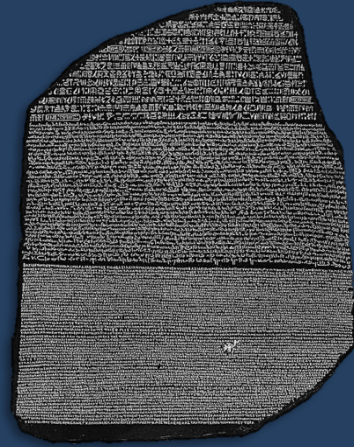
Spanish: *alcalde*



Spanish borrowed these words from Arabic. Spanish and Arabic are not related, as we'll see.

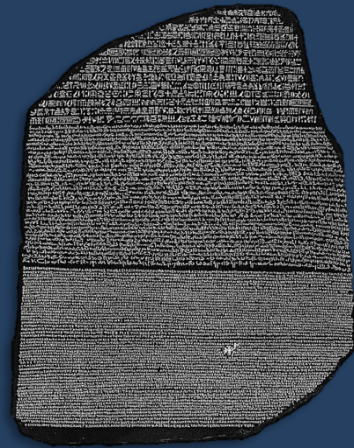
Historical Linguistics

- So how do we see if two languages are related?
- **Comparative method:** Find a large number of correlations between form and meaning in both languages. Not a few words, but across the language, including **core vocabulary**—where borrowings rarely occur.
- A list of core vocabulary was developed by Morris Swadesh, and it is called the Swadesh list. (A few different Swadesh lists, with varying lengths, are used today.)
- Let's compare Spanish and Arabic using a portion of the Swadesh list.



Spanish and Arabic core vocabulary

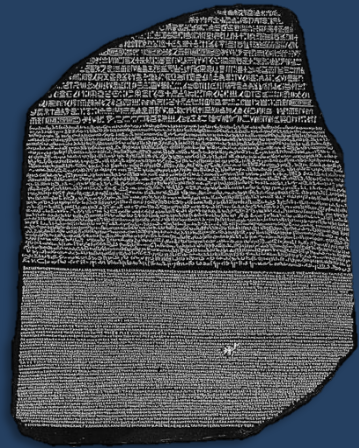
	Spanish	Arabic
I	yo	ʾanā
you (singular)	tú, vos, usted	ʾanta, ʾanti
he	él	huwa
we	nosotros, nosotras	naḥnu
five	cinco	ḵamsa, ḵams
long	largo	ṭawīl
thick	grueso	samīk
heavy	pesado	ṭaqīl
man (adult male)	hombre	rajul
husband	esposo, marido	zawj, baʿl
mother	madre	ʾumm
animal	animal	ḥayawān
snake	serpiente	ḥanaš, ṭuʿbān, ḥayya, ʾafʿan
forest	bosque	ḡāba



Spanish and Arabic have no similarity in core vocabulary. They are definitely **not** related.

Spanish and Italian core vocabulary

	Spanish	Italian
I	yo	io
you (singular)	tú, vos, usted	tu, Lei
he	él	lui, egli
we	nosotros, nosotras	noi
five	cinco	cinque
long	largo	lungo
thick	grueso	spesso
heavy	pesado	pesante
man (adult male)	hombre	uomo
husband	esposo, marido	marito
mother	madre	madre
animal	animal	animale
snake	serpiente	serpente
forest	bosque	foresta

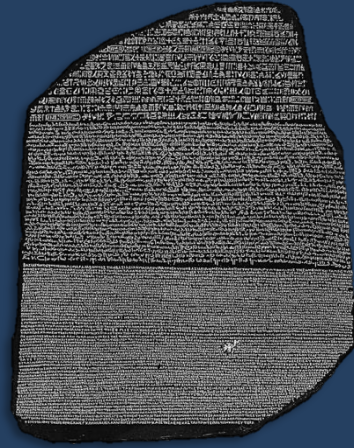


Spanish and Italian have substantial similarity in core vocabulary. They **are** related.

Both descended from Latin, and are sometimes called “Romance languages,” because Latin was the language of the Romans.

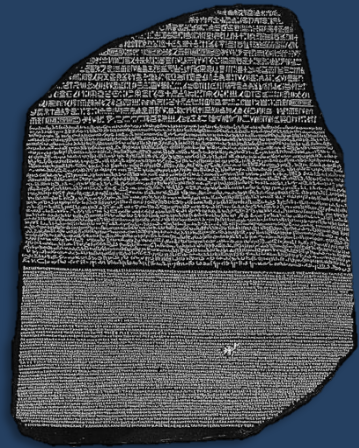
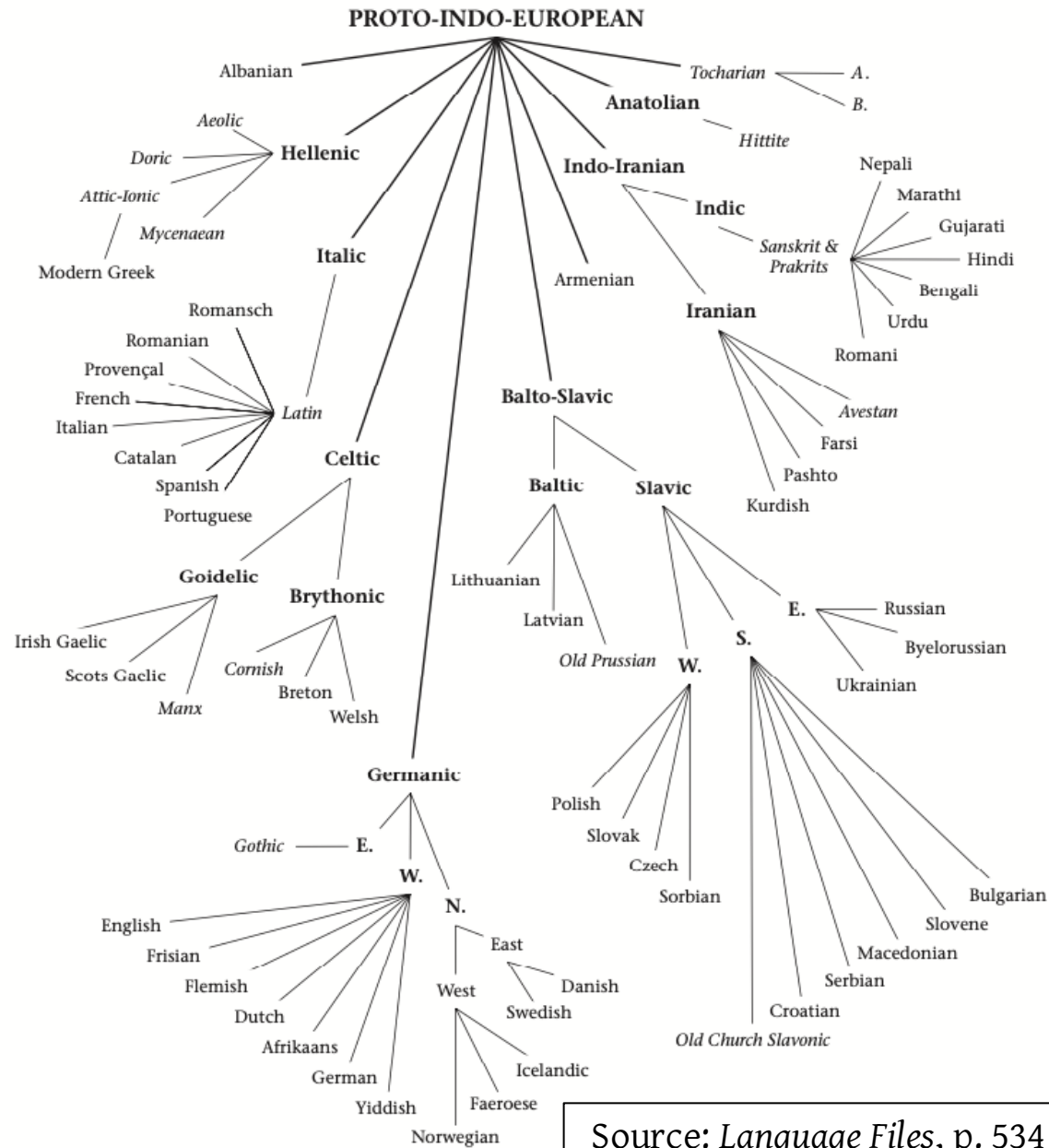
Activity!

- Now, do activity 2 on your sheets.
- Now 3.
- Now 4.



We can illustrate language relationships with a family tree.

This depicts the Indo-European family: all of the languages that descended from PIE. (We'll zoom in on English soon.)



Source: *Language Files*, p. 534

What was the original language?

Barry Hilton – Rickerson & Hilton ch. 4

- Humans needed to be anatomically capable of speech before language was able to develop.
- One necessity: a lowered larynx.

“You can talk—and participate in civilization—because you *can't* wolf your food.” (p.23)

- Note that chimpanzees and gorillas have been able to learn sign language to some extent, but they can't speak.

Hilton overstates the case a bit – some other animals also have the descended larynx, e.g. certain species of deer, but they have never spoken as far as we know. See Fitch & Reby 2001.



What was the original language?

Barry Hilton – Rickerson & Hilton ch. 4

“Historical linguists have developed a method of reconstructing [...] long-dead languages from clues surviving in their descendants, and almost all of them believe it allows valid deductions about languages whose descendants have been separated for up to about five to seven thousand years.” (p.22)

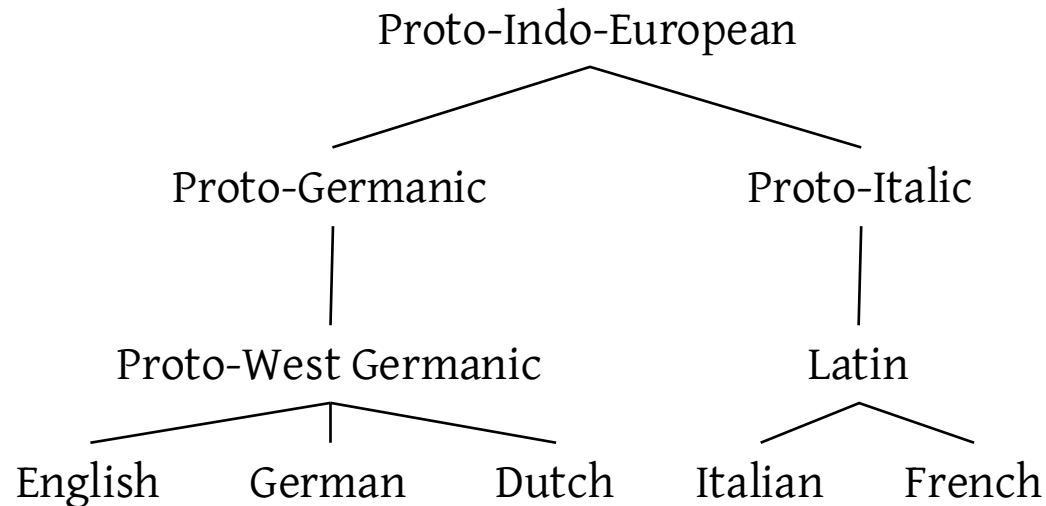
- This involves doing the comparative method as we discussed it and working backwards to reconstruct ancestral forms based on common features in the daughter languages and recurring patterns.
- Working very far back, we have reconstructed Proto-Indo-European (spoken about 6,000 years ago) with some confidence.



Do all languages come from the same source?

Allan R. Bomhard – Rickerson & Hilton ch. 5

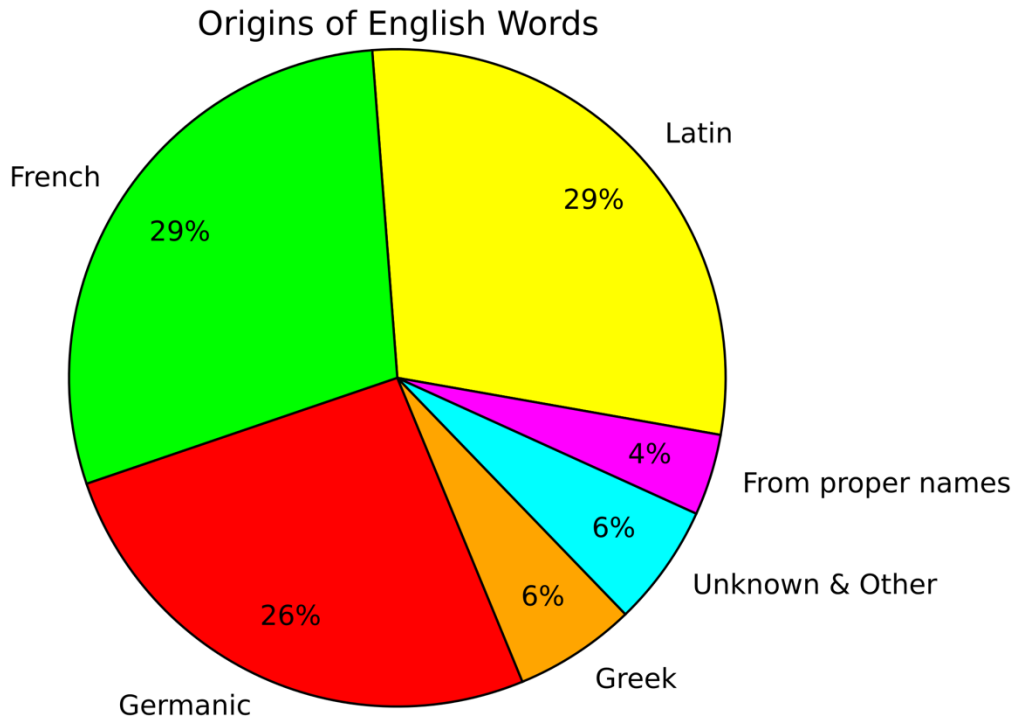
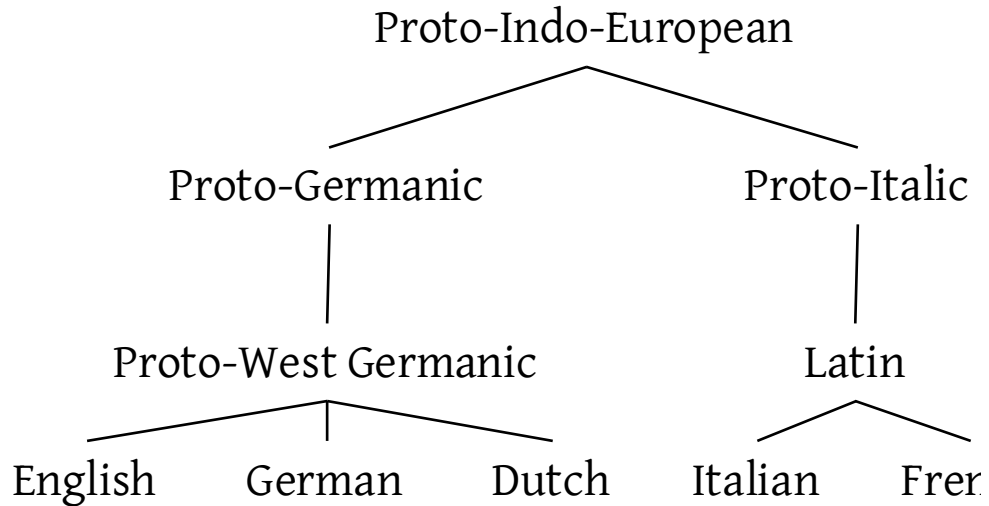
- Languages are related in a similar way to how people are: they share ancestors in common.



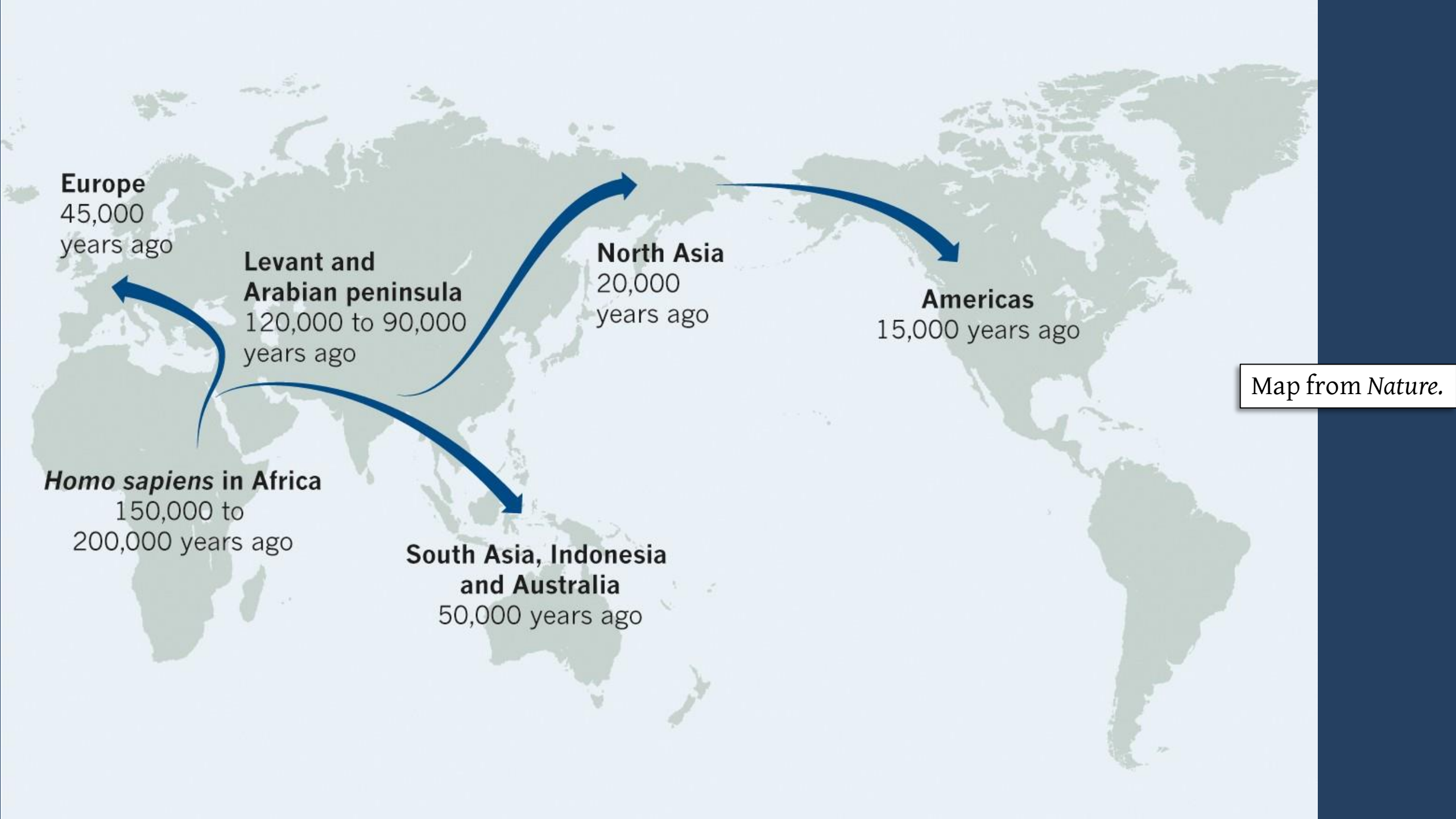
The above is *highly* simplified.

PGmc.	English	German
*mōdar	mother	Mutter
*fadar	father	Vater
*watar	water	Wasser
*hūsa	house	Haus
*haimaz	home	Heim
*gaistaz	ghost	Geist
*stainaz	stone	Stein

Did English come from Latin?



- English did **not** come from Latin.
- But most of its vocabulary ultimately did.
- But most of its *everyday* vocabulary did not.



Europe
45,000
years ago

**Levant and
Arabian peninsula**
120,000 to 90,000
years ago

North Asia
20,000
years ago

Americas
15,000 years ago

***Homo sapiens* in Africa**
150,000 to
200,000 years ago

**South Asia, Indonesia
and Australia**
50,000 years ago

Map from *Nature*.

Do all languages come from the same source?

Allan R. Bomhard – Rickerson & Hilton ch. 5

- Could it be that *all* language families are related?



????

Proto-Indo-European

Proto-Germanic

Proto-Italic

Proto-Afro-Asiatic

Cushitic

Semitic

Proto-West Germanic

Latin

Oromo

Somali

Arabic

Hebrew

English

German

Dutch

Italian

French

The above is *highly* simplified.

For next time:

- Read pp.21–33 in Crystal's *A Little Book of Language* and pp. 124–127 in Rickerson & Hilton's *5 Minute Linguist*.
- Do Group Assignment #1 – you'll present this in class. Choose your groups now and give me a list of all your group's members before leaving tonight.