

## **Today's topics:**

- **Linguistic relationships**
- **Reasons for language change**

# Synchronic and diachronic linguistics

- What is synchronic linguistics?
- What is diachronic linguistics?
- How would we classify these examples?
  - (1) An in-depth analysis of sentence structure in Ancient Greek as spoken in Athens in the year 400<sub>BCE</sub>
  - (2) A comparison of the pronunciation of the diphthong /aj/ as spoken on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, in 1965 and 2005

# Arbitrariness of the sign

- Saussure proposed an important principle known as the **arbitrariness of the sign**
  - This is discussed in your reading, although not with that name
- What did Saussure mean?
  - Are there exceptions to this principle?
  - This principle is particularly important in the study of historical linguistics – why?

## Arbitrariness of the sign?

- From *IHL*, Ch 1, exercise 2 (p 20)

*Which of these words means ‘big’ (vs. ‘small’)?*

Paamese	mari:te	titi:te
Fijian	levu	lailai
Tagalog	mali?it	malaki
Kwaio	sika	ba?i
Gumbaynggir	barwaj	ʝunuj
Samoan	lapo?a	laiti:ti

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- Can we state a (partial) generalization?
  - Does our generalization work for English?

# Arbitrariness of the sign? – Summary

- Most words have an **arbitrary** relationship between sound and meaning
- Sometimes we find **sound symbolism**; exx:
  - Animal names and sounds
  - Words representing sensations
  - A cross-linguistic *tendency* for [a], ([o]) to represent “large” things or sounds, and [i], ([u]) to represent “small” ones
- Implications of this discussion for finding language relationships?

# Arbitrariness of the sign? – Summary

- Implications of this discussion for finding language relationships?
  - When multiple languages have similar **sound/meaning pairs**, this deserves investigation
  - But be careful about claiming that two languages are related, if your only similarities look like plausible cases of sound symbolism

# Relationships between languages?

- *IHL*, p 4: “If we compare two different words used by two different groups of people speaking different languages, and we find that they express a similar (or identical) meaning by using similar (or identical) sounds, then we need to ask ourselves this simple question: Why?”
- So...Why? Some examples:
  - English *good* vs. German *gut* ‘good’
  - English *pork* vs. French *porc* ‘pig, pork’
  - English *dog* vs. Mbabaram (Aus.) *dog* ‘dog’



# Languages with a common origin

## English vs. German *good* / *gut*

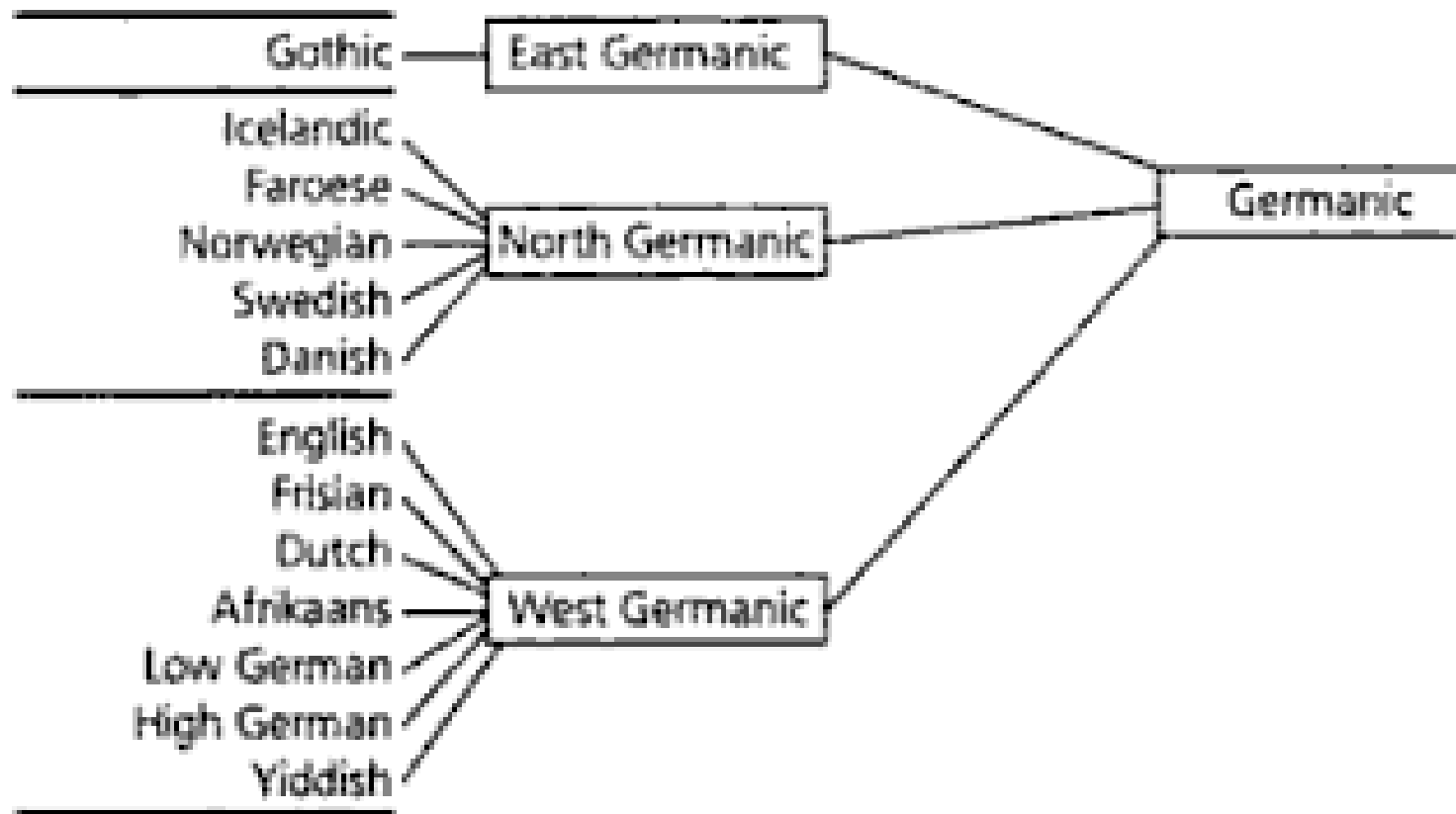
- From the OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*):
  - Old English *gód*
  - Old High German *guot*, *kuot*, *guat*, *kuat*, etc.
  - Proto-Germanic *\*gôđo-*
- Proto-Germanic is a protolanguage; what does this mean?
  - Why does the Proto-Germanic form of the word have a ‘ \* ’ in front of it?

# Languages with a common origin

- Languages with a common origin are often said to be genetically related
  - **WARNING:** This does not mean ‘genetic’ in the biological / DNA sense
- The term ‘genetic’ is used as a metaphor, because the languages have developed over time (or ‘descended’) from a common language (their ‘ancestor’)
- The genetic-relationship metaphor is useful because it lets us draw a ‘family tree’ to represent linguistic relationships

# Languages with a common origin

- The Germanic family (in part)
  - Protolanguages are indicated here in boxes



(graphic from Campbell 2004)

# *Borrowing of forms between languages*

## English vs. French *pork* / *porc*

- From the OED:
  - < Anglo-Norman *porc*, *pork*, *porck*, *porke* and Old French, Middle French, French *porc* domestic pig (1100), *pork* (1155), wild boar (1170), [...] < classical Latin *porcus* pig
- Are English and French languages that have a common source?
  - If so, how do we know this is a case of borrowing rather than of historically related words? → *Hold that thought...*

# Chance resemblances between languages

## English vs. Mbabaram (Aus.) *dog* / *dog*

- From Dixon (1984):

The Mbabaram word *dog* “came from an original *gudaga*, which is still the word for dog in Yidin (Dyirbal has shortened it to *guda*). The initial *g* would have raised the *a* in the second syllable to *o*, the initial *gu* dropped and so did the final *a* (another common change in the development of Mbabaram). Ergo, *gudaga* became *dog*—a one in a million accidental similarity of form and meaning in two unrelated languages.”

Dixon, R.M.W. 1984. *Searching for Aboriginal Languages: Memoirs of a Field Worker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

# How do we know what we've found?

- How do we distinguish between these three scenarios?
  - (a) Languages with a common origin
  - (b) Cases of borrowing between languages
  - (c) Chance resemblances

# How do we know what we've found?

- How do we distinguish between these three scenarios?
  - (a) Languages with a common origin
  - (b) Cases of borrowing between languages
  - (c) Chance resemblances
- Languages with a common origin show sound correspondences that are **systematic**
  - This makes chance resemblances easy to rule out [see [this interesting demonstration](#)]
  - Borrowing can still be hard to distinguish, especially if there was a lot of it long ago

# Languages change!

- As we saw last class, language change is
  - pervasive and unavoidable
  - often viewed negatively (for social reasons?)
- The ‘Lord’s Prayer’ exercise
  - How does the language seen in the [King James Version text of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’](#) differ from the English of today?
  - Are there any social values attached to these linguistic changes?



## Some reasons to consider

- The reading discusses some reasons that have been put forward for why languages change
- Class discussion: Let's address the following questions about the proposed reasons for language change raised in the reading

# Reasons(?) for language change

## Discussion topic #1

- Here are two “reasons” for language change (or differences between languages) that were considered in the past, but are now completely discredited
  - “Anatomy and ethnic character”
  - “Climate and geography”
- Construct a counterexample for each of these claims to show that they are nonsense.

# Reasons(?) for language change

## Discussion topic #2

- Another potential reason discussed in the reading is labeled “Local identification.”
  - What do Crowley & Bowerman mean by this?
  - Can their description of this situation be broadened? Does it always have to involve “what was originally a foreign language”?

# Reasons(?) for language change

## Discussion topic #3

- One frequently proposed reason for language change is labeled “Simplification.”
  - What is an argument in **support** of simplification as a reason for language change?
  - What are two or three **problems** raised by Crowley & Bowerman for this proposed explanation for language change?

# Reasons(?) for language change

## Discussion topic #4

- Another frequently proposed reason for language change is labeled “Structural pressure.”
  - What do Crowley & Bowerman mean by this?
  - What problems do they raise for this proposed example?
- IHL (17-18): “any attempt at a general explanation of sound change that contains the word ‘tend’ is of little value.”
  - Any comments? Do you agree or disagree?

# Reasons(?) for language change

- What are we left with?
- Essentially, several potential causes that look like they are onto something, but which need refinement
- We will return to these questions as the course proceeds

## For next time

- We will review basic phonetics (Ling 101)
  - Use the web links to review if you need a refresher!
- Then, we will start a discussion of types of sound change (IHL, Ch 2)
  - Keep today's questions about simplification and structural pressure in mind