

Linguistics

THE History of Linguistics

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The three major directions of linguistics in the past two centuries

- **19th century**: Historical Linguistics
- **Early- to mid-20th century**: Structural and Descriptive Linguistics
- **Mid- to late-20th century**: Generative Linguistics and the Search for Universals

19th Century: Historical Linguistics

Before the 19th century, language in the Western world was of interest mainly to philosophers. It is significant that the Greek philosophers **Plato** and **Aristotle** made major contributions to language study. **Plato**, for example, is said to have been the first person to distinguish between **nouns** and **verbs**.

In 1786, **Sir William Jones** pointed out that Sanskrit (the old Indian language), Greek, Latin, Celtic and Germanic all had striking structural similarities. He concluded that because of these impressive likenesses among these languages, they must spring from one common source. And that was **the birthdate of Linguistics**.

Sir William Jones

Sir William Jones was a British judge who lived in India, began to study **Sanskrit**. This is a very old language of India, and at the time was used in Indian law. Like others before him, Jones noticed many **similarities** between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and other European languages. For example:

Sanskrit	Latin	Greek	English
pitr	pater	pater	father
matar	mater	matr	mother

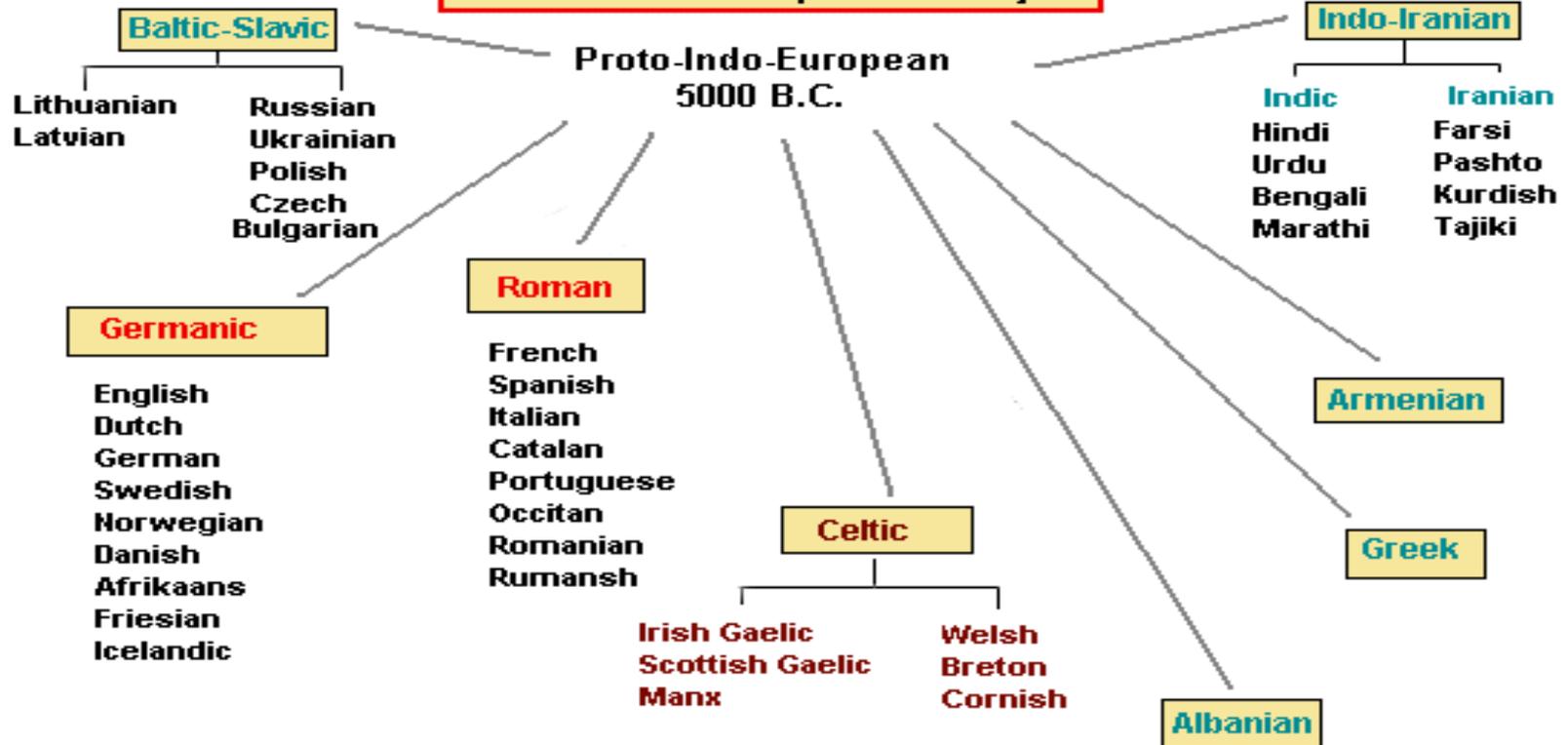
The Indo-European Family

People had thought that Latin, Greek, and all European languages came from Sanskrit, but Jones disagreed. He wrote that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin all came from a ‘common source’, which had perhaps disappeared.

There was a lot of interest in his idea and other people began to study these three languages. Their work proved that Jones was right. We now know that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, and many other languages all belong to one enormous ‘family’ of languages called **the Indo-European family**.

Jones’s ‘common source’ from which all these languages developed is now known as **Proto-Indo-European**.

The Indo-European Family



Young Grammarians: Language Change

In the last quarter of the century, a group of scholars centered around Leipzig, nicknamed the '**Young Grammarians**', claimed that **language change** is '**regular**'.

They argued that if, in any word of a given dialect, one sound changes into another, the change will also affect all other occurrences of the same sound in similar phonetic surroundings.

Young Grammarians

For example, in Old English the word *chin* was pronounced '*kin*' (spelled *cinn*). This change from a **k**-sound to **ch** affected all other **k**-sounds that occurred at the beginning of a word before **e** or **i**.

So we also get chicken, *child*, *chide*, *chip*, *chill*, *cheese*, *cheek*, *chest*, *chew*, and so on - all of which originally had a **k**-sound at the beginning.

Early- to mid-20th century: Structural and Descriptive Linguistics

In the 20th century, the emphasis shifted from language change to **language description**. Instead of looking at how a selection of items changed in a number of different languages, linguists began to concentrate on describing single languages at one particular point in time.

De Saussure (1857-1913) is considered the father of structural and modern linguistics. His crucial contribution was his explicit statement that all language items are essentially **interlinked**.

De Saussure: The Structural Linguist

It was De Saussure who first suggested that language was like a game of **chess**, a system in which each item is defined by its relationship to all the others.

His insistence that language is a carefully built structure of interwoven elements initiated the era of **structural** linguistics.



Bloomfield: Descriptive Linguistics

In 1933, **Bloomfield** published comprehensive work entitled '**Language**' in which he attempted to lay down rigorous procedures for describing any language. Bloomfield considered that linguistics should deal **objectively** and **systematically** with observable data. So he was more interested in how items were arranged than in meaning.

During this time, large numbers of linguists concentrated on writing descriptive grammars of unwritten languages. This involved finding native speakers of the language concerned and collecting sets of utterances from them.

Descriptive Linguistics: Problems in Analytical Techniques

In the course of writing such grammars, a number of problems arose which could not be solved by the methods proposed by Bloomfield. So an enormous amount of attention was paid to **the refinement of analytical techniques**.

For many, the ultimate goal of linguistics was the perfection of **discovery procedures** - a set of principles that would enable a linguist to discover in a foolproof way the linguistic units of an unwritten language.

Descriptive Linguistics: Problems in Analytical Techniques

The **Bloomfieldians** laid down a valuable background of linguistic methodology for future generations. But linguistics also became very **narrow**. Trivial problems of analysis became major controversial issues, and no one who was not a linguist could understand the issues involved.

By around 1950 linguistics had lost touch with other disciplines and become an abstruse subject of little interest to anyone outside it. **It was ready for a revolution.**

Generative Linguistics: Mid- to late-20th century



In 1957, linguistics took a new turn. **Noam Chomsky**, then aged twenty-nine, published a book called: **Syntactic Structures**. Although containing fewer than 120 pages, this book started a revolution in linguistics.

Chomsky is, arguably, the most influential linguist of the century. Certainly, he is the linguist whose reputation has spread furthest outside linguistics.

Chomsky

He has transformed linguistics from a relatively obscure discipline into a major social science of direct relevance to psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and others.

Chomsky has shifted attention away from detailed descriptions of actual utterances and started asking questions about **the nature of the system** that produces the output. According to Chomsky, Bloomfieldian linguistics was too ambitious in that it was unrealistic to expect to be able to lay down foolproof rules for extracting a perfect description of a language from a mass of data.

Chomsky

According to Chomsky, Bloomfieldian linguistics was **too limited** because it concentrated on describing sets of utterances that happened to have been spoken. Chomsky claimed that grammar should be more than a description of old utterances. It should also take into account **possible future utterances**.

Thus, the traditional viewpoint that the main task of linguists is simply to describe a corpus of actual utterances cannot account for the characteristic of **productivity** (the ability of human beings to produce and comprehend an indefinite number of novel utterances).

Chomsky: Generative Linguistics

Chomsky points out that anyone who knows a language must have **internalized a set of rules** that specify the sequences permitted in their language. In his opinion, a linguist's task is to discover these rules, which constitute the grammar of the language in question.

A grammar that consists of a set of statements or rules that specify which sequences of a language are possible, and which are impossible:

Generative Grammar

Chomsky: Generative Linguistics

In Chomsky's words, grammar is a device that generates all the grammatical sequences of a language and none of the ungrammatical ones. Such grammar is perfectly explicit, in that nothing is left to the imagination.

Chomsky has also redirected attention towards **language universals**. He points out that as all humans are rather similar, their **internalized language mechanisms** are likely to have important common properties.

Chomsky: Universal Grammar

Chomsky argues that linguists should concentrate on finding elements and constructions that are available to all languages, whether or not they actually occur. Above all, they should seek to specify the universal bounds or constraints within which human language operates.

The constraints on human language are **inherited** ones. Human beings may well be pre-programmed with a **basic knowledge** of what languages in general are like, and how they work. Chomsky has given the label **Universal Grammar** to this inherited core. He regards it as a major task of linguistics to explore its make-up.

Chomsky: Universal Grammar

An explosion of interest in language among non-linguists has been a valuable by-product of Chomsky's work. The emphasis within linguistics has turned to the language potential of human beings in general, rather than the detailed description of single languages.

As a result, huge numbers of psychologists, neurologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers have begun to take a greater interest in language and linguistics. Collaboration between linguists and these other social scientists has led to the development of other fields such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

QUESTIONS

- Why were 19th-century linguists so interested in **historical** linguistics?
- Why is de **Saussure** an important figure in linguistics?
- What is a **generative** grammar, and how does it differ from a **descriptive** grammar?

Linguistics: Jean Aitchison

