

From UwU to OwO: How Languages Change



by Cedar

@cedarbarks.net

What's a Cedar?

- Software engineer with a linguistics degree
 - please don't be mean if I make mistakes
- Barks regularly
- Enjoys fountain pens and writing and reading and is totally untrustworthy

stuff I do (including these slides)





Stuff I Know

1. Ground rules
2. Why do languages change?
3. Semantic Drift
4. Grammar Changes
5. Sound Changes
6. Finding language families
7. Slang



Ground Rules

1. Perceived “closeness” to an “original” or “older” language is **morally meaningless**
2. Languages are living creatures, **and there is no “oldest language”**
3. “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”



Why do languages change?

1. Societal pressure
2. Ingroup signaling
3. Sound assimilation
4. Ease of production
5. Pattern matching
6. Contact with other languages

...and many more reasons!



Semantic Drift

What does the word “Livid” mean?

OE *bed* ‘prayer’ > *bead*

OE *cniht* ‘servant boy’ > *knight* – amelioration

OE *huswif* ‘housewife’ > *hussy* – pejoration

Semantic Drift: Recuttings

Boundaries between words shift creating new words

ME *an ekename* > ModE *a nickname*

ME *an apkin* > ModE *a napkin*

Semantic Drift: Back-formation

Taking a word and breaking it into more morphemes than were previously present

beggar > one who *begs*

The -ar is *not* the agentic suffix (like in teacher, worker, prowler)

ME peasee (mass noun) > pea-s (pl. count noun)

Semantic Drift: Narrowing I

Which of these is a *hound*?

A.



B.



C.



Semantic Drift: Narrowing II

The ancestor of the word “hound” applied to *any dog!*

OG *hund* ‘domestic canine’ > ModE *hound* ‘a dog bred to hunt by scent’

...so the ancestors for ‘hound’ and ‘dog’ meant the same thing?



Semantic Drift: Broadening

No! The ancestor for dog was more specific!

OE *docga* ‘mastiff’ (specific breed) > ME *dogge* ‘mastiff’ (derogatory; see cur) > ModE ‘dog’

It’s theorized that as dogs began to be seen as companions, the derogatory term became normalized more and more (ever call your dog “stinky?” etc?)

Semantic D

What does “ma

PIE **men-* 'to th
man 'adult mal

PIE **wihros* 'ma
male human' >

PIE **gwenh* 'wo
'adult female h



n being' > ME

vereman 'adult

ME *wifmann*
e)

Grammar Changes: Regularization

Irregular patterns get smoothed out—very common with plurals in English

OE *bec* (pl. of *boc*) > *?*beech*

kine (pl. of *cow*) > *cows*

The irregular plurals were regularized!

protogens, dragons, dogs...wolves? Not wolfs? lions, tigers, bears...sheep?
Not sheeps?

Perhaps one day these will be regularized, too!

Sound Changes: Assimilation

Sounds within a word become more alike over time!

Umlaut: a vowel within a word becomes more like another vowel in that same word.

PG **manniz* > Old Norse **menniz* > ME *menn* > ModE *men*

Sound Changes: Lenition

A consonant becomes “softer”

Common: a stop consonant becomes a fricative or an affricate.

/k/ > /ch/ or /s/

Latin *caelum* ‘sky’ > Spanish *cielo* ‘sky’

Old Norse *kirke* ‘church’ > ModE *church*



Sound Changes: Rhotacism

/s/, /z/ becomes /r/

Latin *corpus* > *corporal*, *corporate*, etc.

WG **was* ‘was’ and **wezun* ‘were’ > OE *waes* ‘was’ and *waeron* ‘were’

/s/ became /z/ (Verner’s Law), then intervocalic /z/ became /r/.

Sound Changes: Devoicing

A voiced consonant becomes voiceless.

Make an /f/ sound.

Make a /v/ sound. Feel that?

/f/ → [v] / V __ V : The voiceless /f/ becomes the voiced [v] when it occurs between two vowels.

leaf/leaves, wolf/wolves



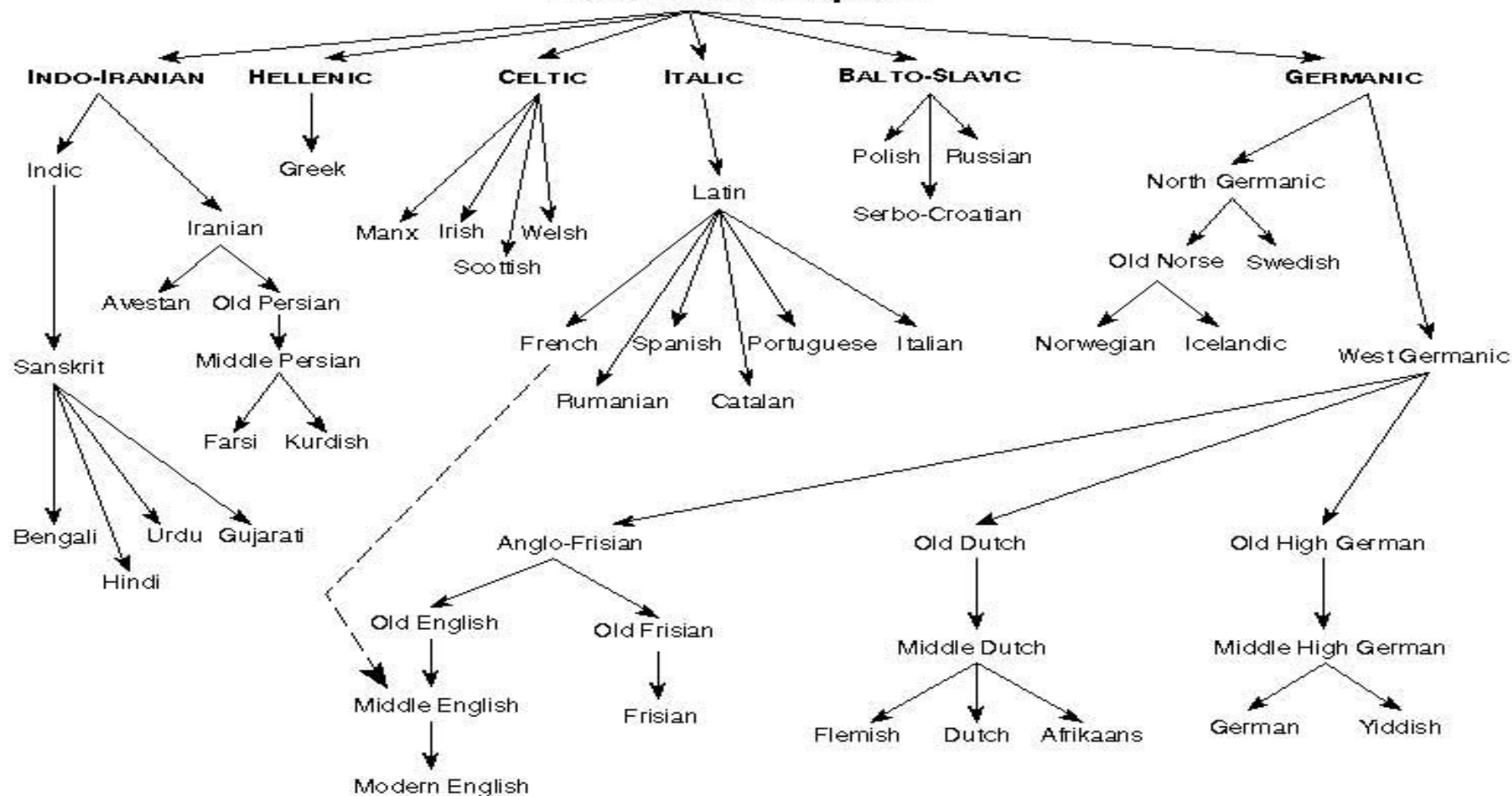
Latin	Greek	English
duo	duo	two
edo	edo	eat
decem	deka	ten
genus	genos	kin
ager	agros	acre
labium	–	lip
cannabis	kannabis	hemp
lubricus	–	slippery

Grimm’s Law: Where Latin and Greek have voiced stops, English has voiceless stops

d > t
g > k
b > p

Latin	Greek	English
duo	duo	two
edo	edo	eat
decem	deka	ten
genus	genos	kin
ager	agros	acre
labium	–	lip
cannabis	kannabis	hemp
lubricus	–	slippery

Proto-Indo-European



Finding language families I

Which of these two languages are related?

‘two’

A.	B.	C.
<i>er</i>	<i>erku</i>	<i>duo</i>

- A. B and C
- B. A and C
- C. C and B
- D. A and B
- E. That Charlie Kirk joke was offensive and this presentation should be shut down immediately. Also A and B.

Finding language families II

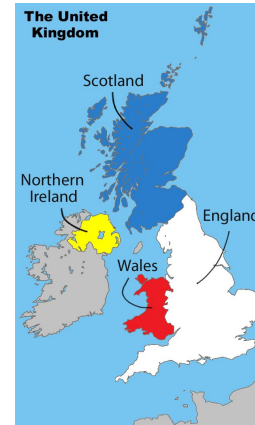
PIE **dw* > Armenian *erk*

	Mandarin	Armenian	Greek
‘two’	<i>er</i>	<i>erku</i>	<i>duo</i>
‘fear’		<i>erki-</i>	<i>dwi-</i>
‘long’		<i>erkar</i>	<i>dwaron</i>

Finding language families III

...further evidence that looking similar is not enough to determine relatedness

Mbabaram	English
<i>dog</i>	<i>dog</i>



Slang

Your turn! Name some furry slang!



In many cases, slang is created to denote group belonging—we use the same slang as our friends to show that we are connected.

Eventually, with acceptance/greater knowledge of the group in question...slang becomes part of everyday speech!

Thanks for coming : D

