Licture 14

* **Introduction**

Investigating the features of older languages, and the ways in which they developed into modern languages, involves us in the study of language history and change, also known as **philology**. In the nineteenth century, philology dominated the study of language and one result was the creation of ‘family trees’ to show how languages were related. Before all of that could happen, however, there had to be the ‘discovery’ that a variety of languages spoken in different parts of the world were actually members of the same family.

* **Family trees**
* Sir William Jones, a British government official in India, suggested that a number of languages from very different geographical areas must have some common ancestor. It was clear, however, that this common ancestor could not be described from any existing records, but had to be hypothesized on the basis of similar features existing in records of languages that were believed to be descendants.
* During the nineteenth century, a term came into use to describe that common ancestor. It incorporated the notion that this was the original form (*Proto)* of a language that was the source of modern languages in the Indian sub-continent (*Indo)* and in Europe *(European).* With **Proto-Indo-European** established as some type of ‘great-great-grandmother’, scholars set out to identify the branches of the Indo-European family tree, tracing the lineage of many modern languages.
* Indo-European is the language family with the largest population and distribution in the world, but it isn’t the only one. There are about thirty such language families containing at least 4,000, and perhaps as many as 6,000, different individual languages. Some of these languages are in danger of extinction while others are expanding. In terms of number of speakers, Chinese has the most native speakers (about 1 billion), while English (about 350 million) is more widely used in different parts of the world.
* **Family connections**
* Looking at the Indo-European family tree, we might be puzzled initially by the idea that all these diverse languages are related. After all, two modern languages such as Italian and Hindi would seem to have nothing in common. One way to get a clearer picture of how they are related is through looking at records of an older generation, like Latin and Sanskrit, from which the modern languages evolved.
* **Sanskrit Latin Ancient Gree**k
* pitar pater patē̆r (‘father’)
* bhrā̆tar frā̆ter phrā̆ter (‘brother’)
* **Cognates**
* The process we have just used to establish a possible family connection between different languages involved looking at what are called ‘cognates’.
* **Cognates** are words in different languages that have a similar form and meaning (e.g. English ‘*friend*’ and German ‘*Freund’*)
* **Comparative reconstruction**

Using information from these sets of cognates, we can embark on a procedure called **comparative reconstruction**. The aim of this procedure is to reconstruct what must have been the original or ‘proto’ form in the common ancestral language. In carrying out this procedure, those working on the history of languages operate on the basis of some general principles, two of which are presented here.

**Majority principle** is the choice of the form that occurs more often than any other form in the set of descendant languages. If, in a cognate set, three words begin with a [p] sound and one word begins with a [b] sound, then our best guess is that the majority have retained the original sound (i.e. [p]) and the minority have changed a little through time.

**Most natural development principle** isthe choice of older versus newer forms on the basis of commonly observed types of sound change.

* **Sound reconstruction**
* If we were faced with some examples from three languages, as shown below, we could make a start on comparative reconstruction by deciding what was the most likely form of the initial sound in the original source of all three.
* ***Italian Spanish French***
* *cantare cantar chanter (‘sing’)*
* *catena cadena chaîne (‘chain’)*
* *caro caro cher (‘dear’)*
* *cavallo caballo cheval (‘horse’)*
* **Language change**
* The reconstruction of proto-forms is an attempt to determine what a language must have been like before any written records. However, even when we have written records from an older period of a language such as English, they may not bear any resemblance to the written form of the language found in today’s newspapers.
* **Old English**
* The primary sources for what developed as the English language were the **Germanic** languages spoken by a group of tribes (Angles, Saxons and Jutes) from northern Europe who moved into the British Isles in the fifth century. It is from the name of the first tribe that we get the word for their language *Englisc* (now called **Old English**)and their new home *Engla-land.*
* From the sixth to the eighth century, there was an extended period during which these Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity and a number of terms from **Latin** (the language of the religion) came into English at that time.
* From the eighth century through the ninth and tenth centuries, another group of northern Europeans came first to plunder and then to settle in parts of the coastal regions of Britain. They were the Vikings and it is from their language, **Old Norse**, that many English words are originated.
* **Middle English**
* The event that marks the end of the Old English period, and the beginning of the **Middle English** period, is the arrival of the Norman French in England, following their victory at Hastings under William the Conqueror in 1066. These French-speaking invaders became the ruling class, so that the language of the nobility, the government, the law and civilized life in England for the next two hundred years was French. Yet the language of the peasants remained English.
* In the two hundred years, from 1400 to 1600 the sounds of English underwent a substantial change known as the ‘Great Vowel Shift’. The effects of this general raising of long vowel sounds (such as [oː] moving up to [uː], as in *mōna → moon*) made the pronunciation of Early Modern English, beginning around 1500, significantly different from earlier periods. Influences from the outside, such as the borrowed words from Norman French or Old Norse that we have already noted, are examples of **external change in** the language.
* In the following sections, we will look at some of these processes of **internal change.**
* **Sound changes**
* In a number of changes from Middle to Modern English, some sounds simply disappeared from the pronunciation of certain words, resulting in the ‘silent letters’ of contemporary written English.
* The sound change known as **metathesis** involves a reversal in position of two sounds in a word (*frist → first*).
* Another type of sound change, known as **epenthesis**, involves the addition of a sound to the middle of a word (*spinel → spindle*).
* One other type of sound change worth noting, though not found in English, occurs in the development of other languages. It involves the addition of a sound to the beginning of a word and is called **prothesis.** It is a common feature in the evolution of some forms from Latin to Spanish, as in these examples:
* *schola → escuela (‘school’)*
* *spiritus → espíritu (‘spirit’)*
* **Syntactic changes**
* Some noticeable differences between the structure of sentences in Old and Modern English involve word order. In Old English texts, we find the Subject–Verb–Object order most common in Modern English, but we can also find a number of different orders that are no longer used. For example, the subject could follow the verb, and the object could be placed before the verb, or at the beginning of the sentence. A ‘double negative’ construction was also possible.

However, the most sweeping change in the form of English sentences was the loss of a large number of inflectional affixes from many parts of speech. Nouns, adjectives, articles and pronouns all had different inflectional forms according to their grammatical function in the sentence.

* **Semantic changes**
* The most obvious way in which Modern English differs from Old English is in the number of borrowed words that have come into the language since the Old English period (as described in Lecture 6).
* Two other processes are described as ‘broadening’ and ‘narrowing’ of meaning. An example of **broadening** of meaning is the change from *holy* day as a religious feast to the very general break from work called a *holiday.* We have broadened the use of *foda (fodder for animals) to talk about all kinds of food.*
* The reverse process, called **narrowing**, has overtaken the Old English word *hund,* once used for any kind of dog, but now, as hound, used only for so*me* specific breeds. Another example is *mete,* once used for any kind of food, which has in its modern form *meat* become restricted to only some specific types.
* **Diachronic and synchronic variation**
* **Diachronic variation**: differences resulting from change over a period of time, in contrast to synchronic variation.
* **Synchronic variation**: differences in language form found in different places at the same time, in contrast to diachronic variation.