

LIN 210: Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics

Princeton, Fall 2019

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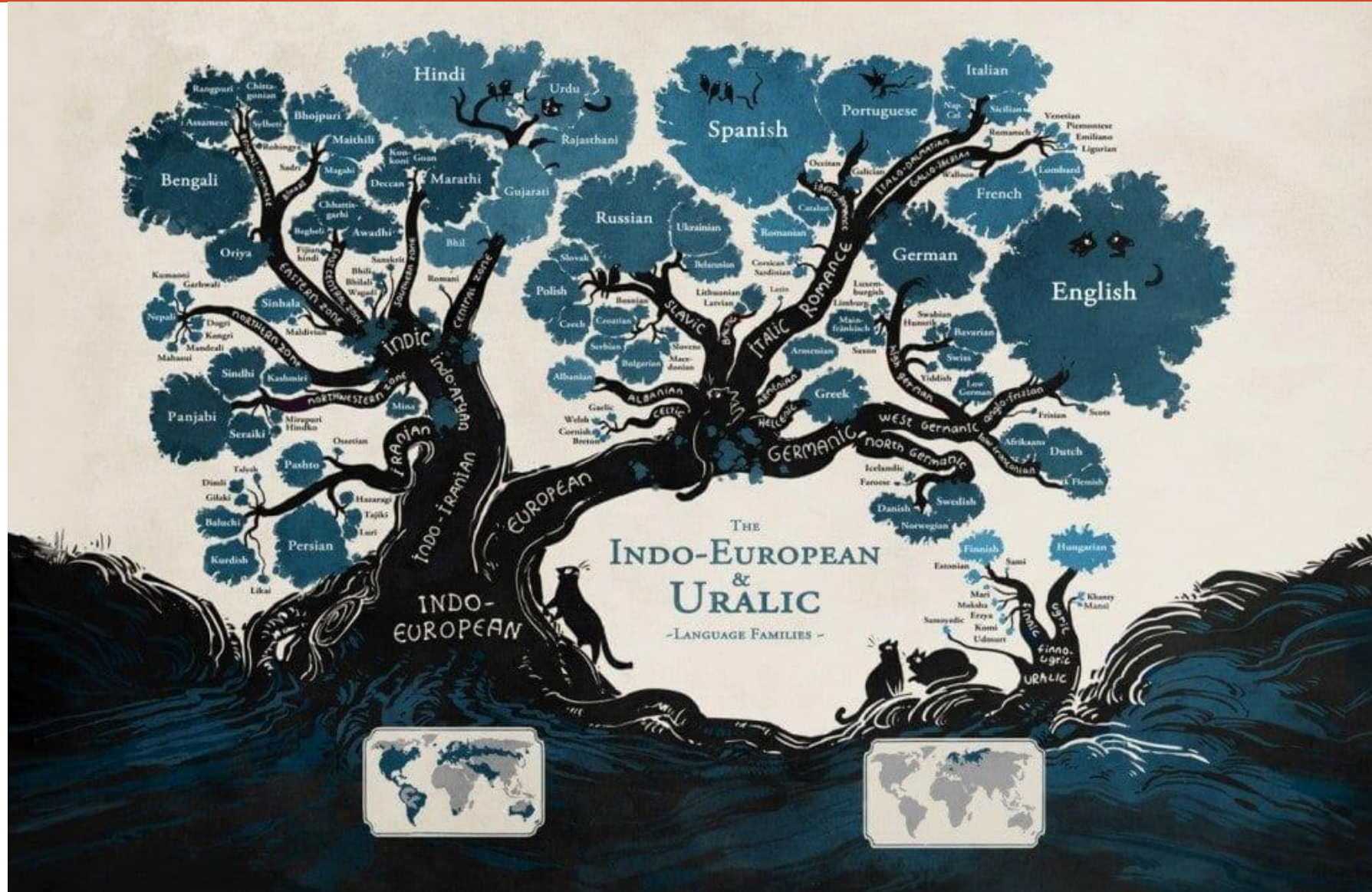
Class #2, 9/17/19

Course overview: *what is language change?*

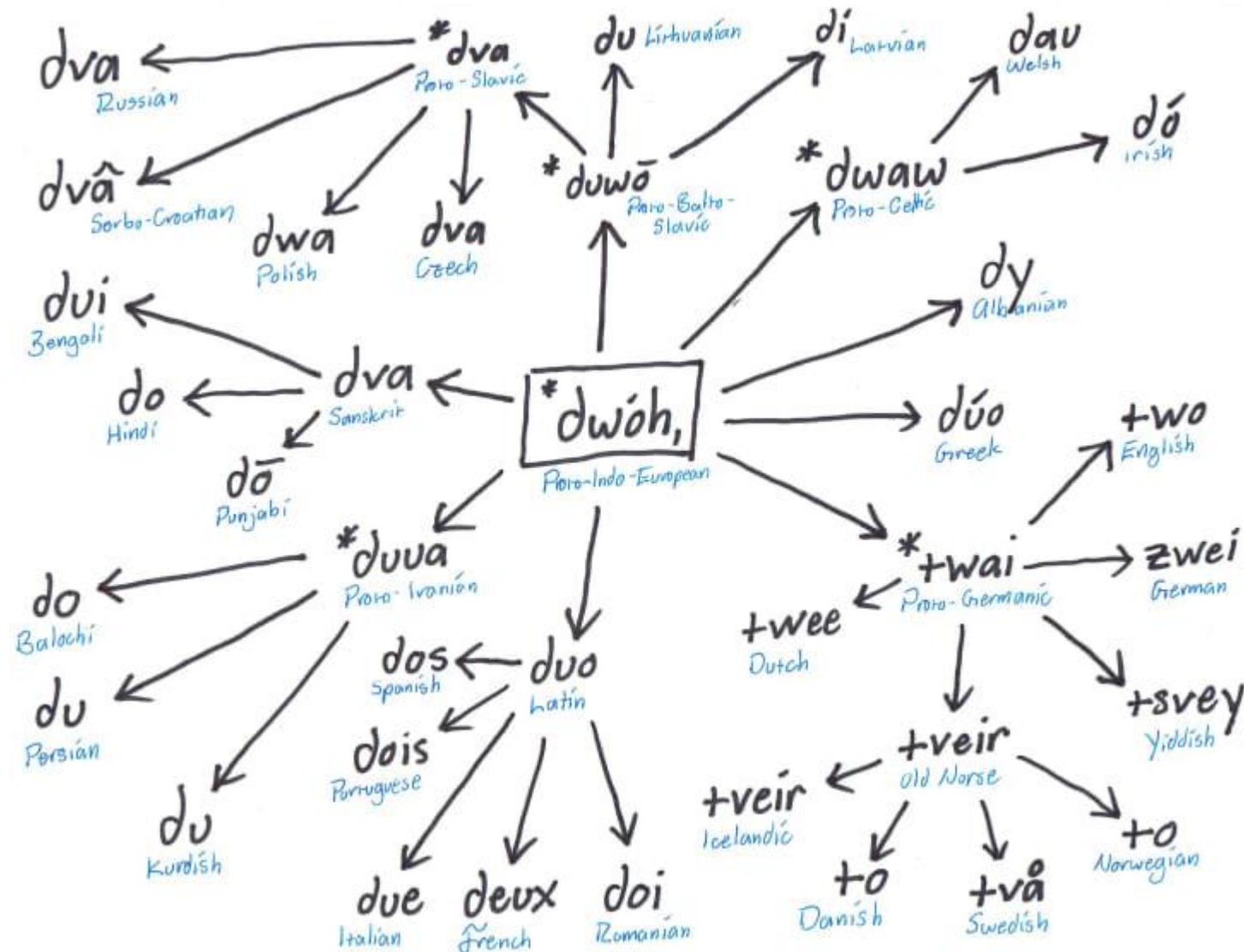
Language changes: Matthew 26:73 in “English” (Campbell p. 6)

1. Modern English (*The New English Bible*, 1961): **Shortly afterwards the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you are another of them; your accent gives you away!’**
2. Early Modern English (*The King James Bible*, 1611): **And after a while came vnto him they that stood by, and saide to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them, for thy speech bewrayeth thee.**
3. Middle English (*The Wycliff Bible*, 1300’s): **And a litil aftir, thei that stoden camen, and seiden to Petir, treuli thou art of hem; for thi speche makith thee knowun.**
4. Old English (*The West-Saxon Gospels*, c. 1050): **þa æfter lytlum fyrste genēalæton þa ðe þær stodon, cwædon to petre. Soðlice þu eart of hym, þyn spræc þe gesweotolað.** [Literally: *Then after little first approached they that there stood, said to Peter. Truly thou art of them, thy speech thee makes clear.*]

Languages change a lot: Language families – Indo-European (...and Uralic?)



The Indo-European word for 'two'



Sir William Jones in 1798 and the idea of Indo-European

“The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the Old Persian might be added to the same family.” (Crowley & Bown, p. 6)

How do we know?

The Comparative Method

Not just random similarities, but **systematic correspondences** between languages (“**regularity of sound change**”)

- Languages share many words that have similar meaning matched with similar sound sequences (“**cognates**”)
- Every time you find sound X in language 1, you find sound Y in language 2, etc. (“**sound correspondences**”)
- Sound X and sound Y are phonetically similar

If you can find a large number of systematic correspondences between languages, that means **they are related.**

Cognates in the Romance languages (Campbell p. 110)

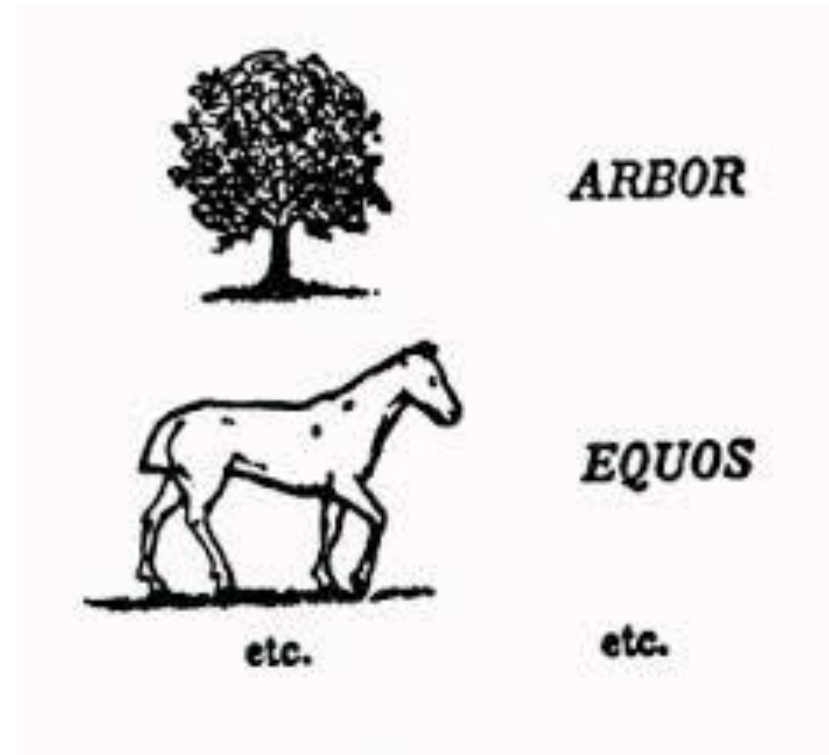
TABLE 5.1: Some Romance cognate sets

| | <i>Italian</i> | <i>Spanish</i> | <i>Portuguese</i> | <i>French</i> | <i>(Latin)</i> | <i>English gloss</i> |
|----|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|----------------|----------------------|
| 1. | capra /kapra/ | cabra /kabra/ | cabra /kabra/ | chèvre /ʃɛvr(ə)/ | capra | ‘goat’ |
| 2. | caro /karo/ | caro /karo/ | caro /karu/ | cher /ʃɛr/ | caru | ‘dear’ |
| 3. | capo /kapo/ ‘main, chief’ | cabo /kabo/ ‘extremity’ | cabo /kabu/ ‘extremity’ | chef /ʃɛf/ ‘main, chief’ | caput | ‘head, top’ |
| 4. | carne /karne/ | carne /karne/ | carne /karne/ | chair /ʃɛr/ (cf. Old French charn /čarn/) | carō/carn- | ‘meat, flesh’ |
| 5. | cane /kane/ | can (archaic) /kan/ | cão /kãw̃/ | chien /ʃjɛ̃/ | canis | ‘dog’ |

Why can languages change?

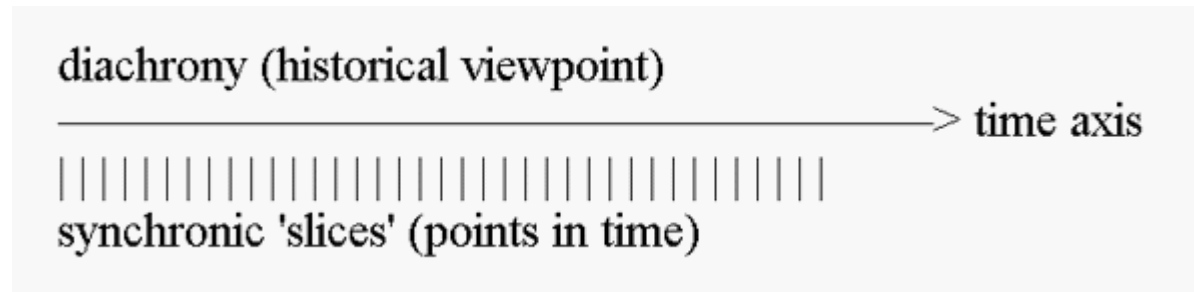
The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign

- A word ("linguistic sign") is the connection of a particular meaning to a particular sequence of sounds
- This connection is (in almost all cases) completely arbitrary
- Over time, both the sound and the meaning of a word can change, and they can change independently
- Such changes may occur in one part of an originally unified speech community.
- When enough different changes pile up, that originally unified speech community ends up being split into multiple different languages



Synchrony vs. Diachrony

- A language exists in one particular state at one particular point in time
 - **The description and analysis of these points in time is *synchronic* linguistics**
- A language naturally changes from one point to the next
 - **The description and analysis of these changes over time is *diachronic* linguistics**



Why do languages change?

Learning

- Children learn language by hearing what is spoken around them ("**language input**")
- A child's language input is the output of the adults' language systems ("**grammar**")
- 'Learning the language' means deducing and reconstructing the system that generates the adults' output
- Many factors can contribute to a child constructing a different system than the intended one

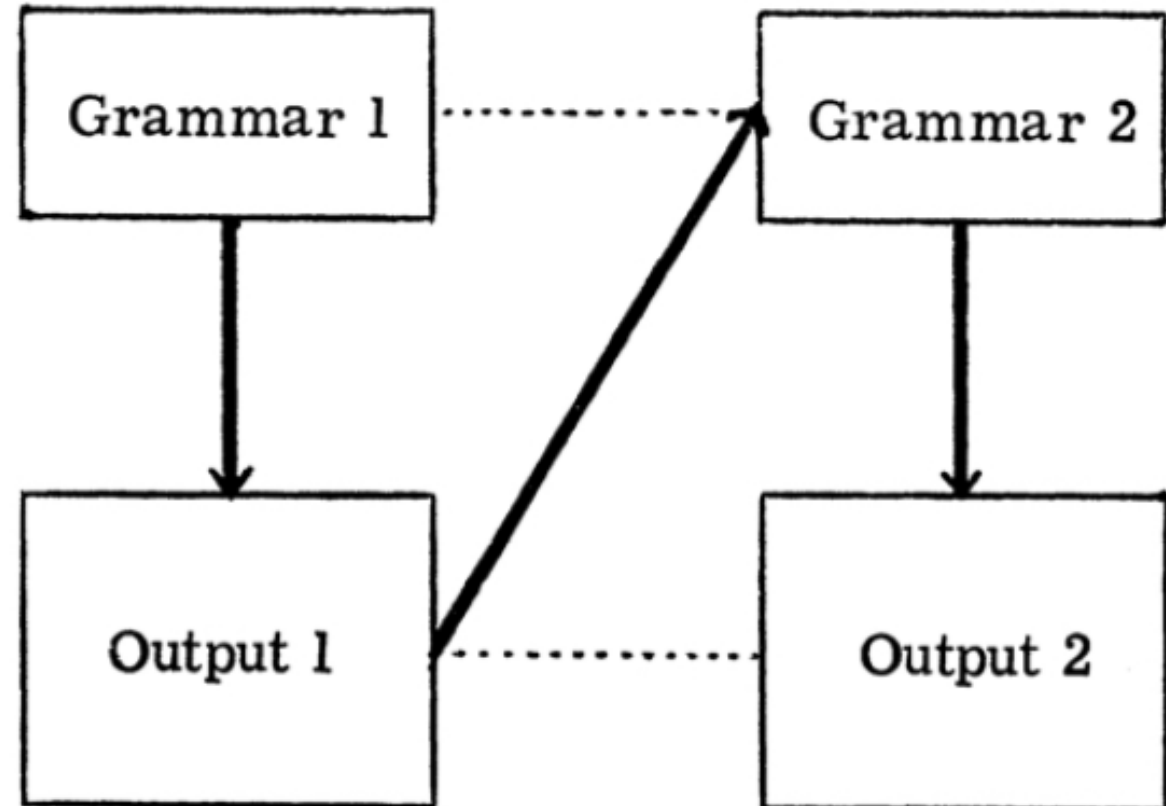


Figure 6: Indirect transmission (Andersen 1973, p. 767)

Why do languages change?

Social factors

- People attach social value to particular linguistic features, for example
 - a way of pronouncing a certain sound (phonological)
 - using a certain word in a certain way (morphological/lexical/semantic)
 - using a particular grammatical construction (syntactic)
- A spontaneous change in one individual's speech can spread through a community as a means of indexing membership in that community

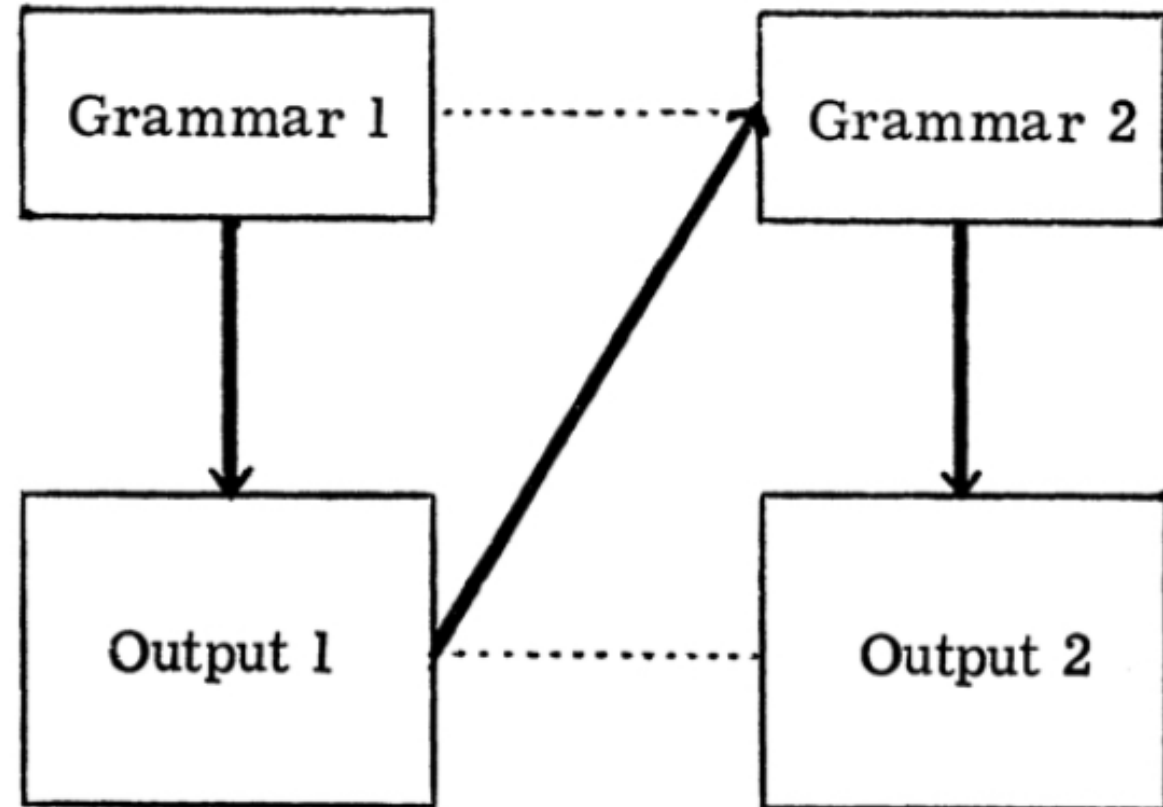


Figure 6: Indirect transmission (Andersen 1973, p. 767)

Why do languages change?

Borrowing and language contact

- When speakers of different languages are in prolonged contact, they frequently adopt features of each other's languages.
 - Most frequently these are words that refer to specific, culturally relevant objects or concepts
 - Can also be grammatical features (usually under more substantial multilingual situations)
- The addition of new features can sometimes change the internal workings of the system.

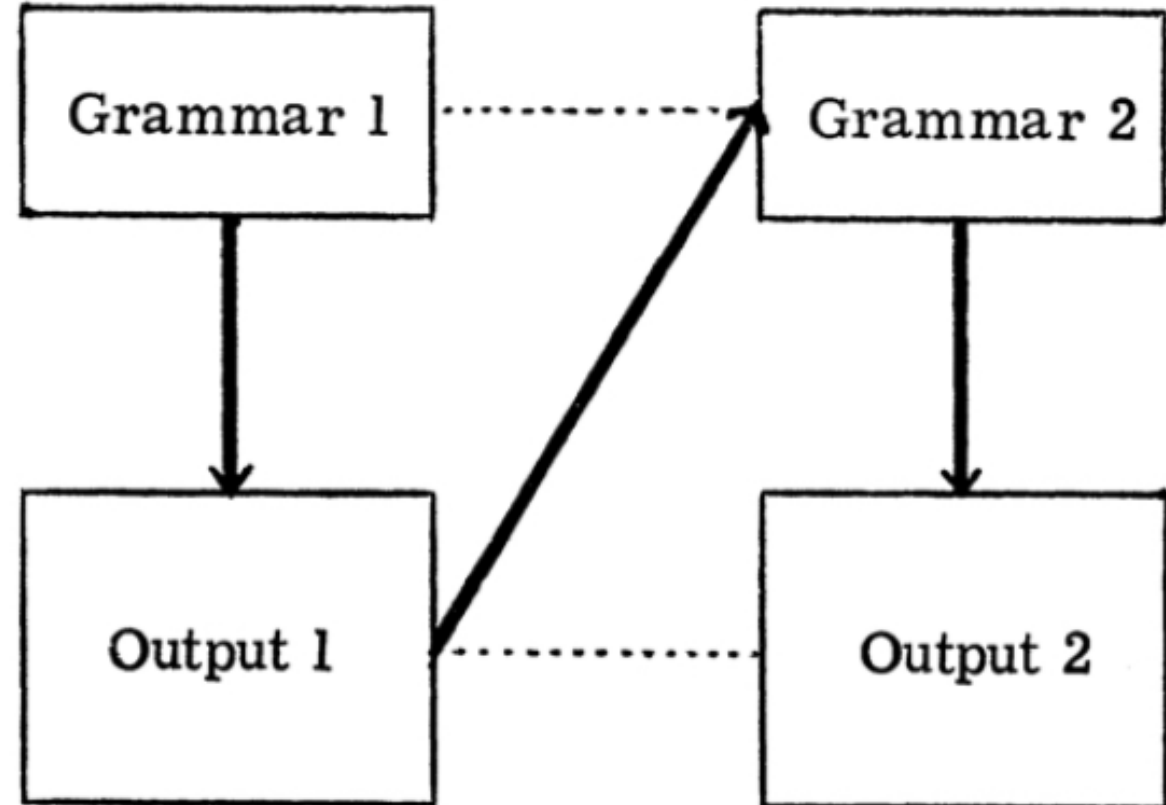


Figure 6: Indirect transmission (Andersen 1973, p. 767)

Why do languages change?

Systemic (language-internal) factors

- Changes can obscure the logic of the system
 - E.g., sound changes can erode morphological information (i.e. reduction of affixes or function words)
- Learners of the language after the change may not have the right evidence to reconstruct the original system
- So they come up with a different system that explains the evidence that they do get

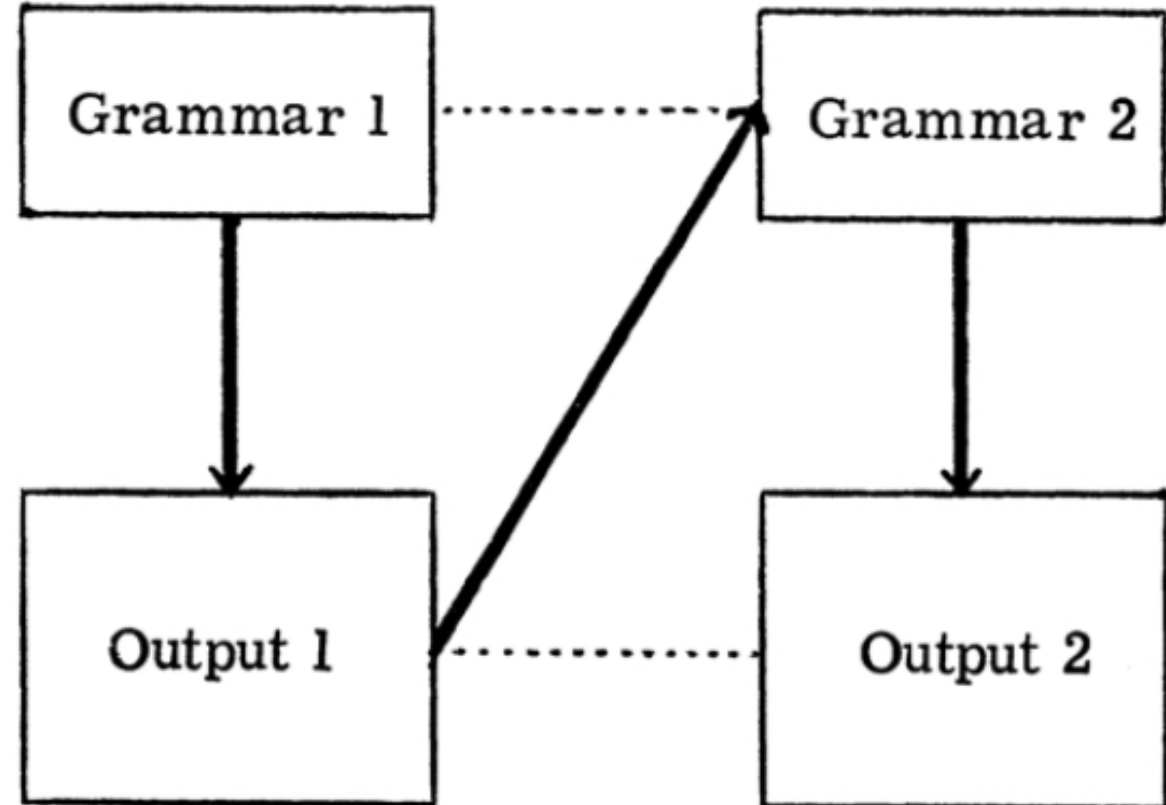


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Why do languages change?

Naturalness and learning biases

- There are certain inherent **biases** in language learning and language production
- Some linguistic structures are easier to produce/perceive/comprehend/etc. than others
- Learners are *biased* not to hypothesize that those structures are present in their language; learners need robust evidence to overcome this bias
- If they don't receive enough evidence, the language may change to eliminate those structures

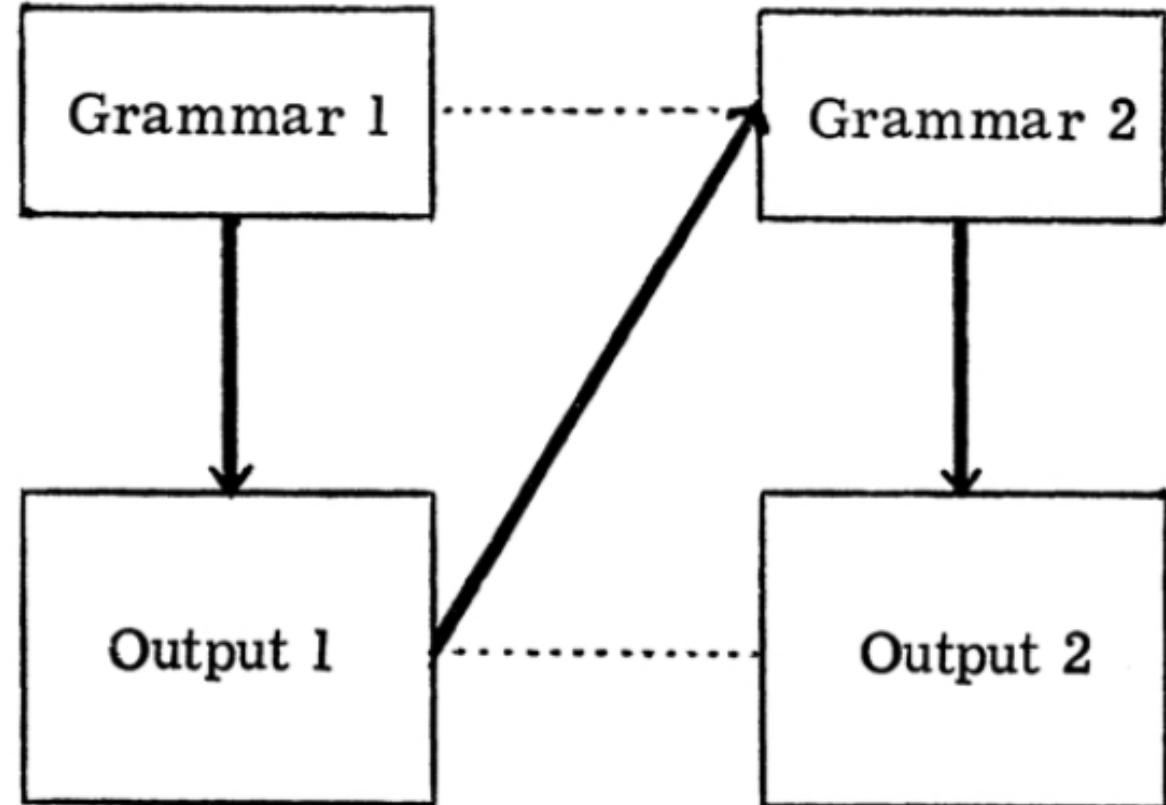


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The goals of historical and comparative linguistics

- Describe the sets of changes that have occurred.
 - Identify the types of changes that can occur vs. those that cannot.
- Understand why particular changes did occur.
 - (Understand why they occurred when they did and didn't occur when they didn't.)
 - Identify the set of explanatory factors for language change.
- Determine what languages are related to another.
 - Identify "sub-groupings" among related languages.
- Deduce facts about (unattested) prior stages of languages and sequences of changes ("**relative chronology**").

The Comparative Method

- Compare (modern/ancient) languages that (you think) are related
- Reconstruct the **proto-language** (the hypothesized ancestor language of the languages under consideration)
- Reconstruct the changes that took place, and their chronology
- Deduce from that the internal structure of the language family

Now let's try some of this out!