

GER E-371: Topics in Germanic Studies
VT: Language Evolution, Change, and Diversity in Central Europe

Professor Rex A. Sprouse
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This course makes use of examples from the languages and populations of Central Europe from prehistoric times to the present to examine the causes and implications of languages change and diversity and to approach the question of the origins of language in the human species.

The perspective adopted throughout this course will be the “biolinguistic” perspective associated with scholars such as Noam Chomsky, Lila Gleitman, Morris Halle, Daniela Isak, David Lightfoot, Charles Reiss, Tanya Reinhart, and many others. On this view, significant aspects of linguistic behavior are best understood and investigated, not as social phenomena per se, but rather as the manifestation of mentally represented grammars, best characterized as formal systems. It follows that instances of systematic language change are in fact systematic changes in formal systems represented in individual speakers’ brains. In the case of sound change (the primary area investigated in this course), those formal systems are largely built up of features grounded in the physiology of human speech articulation, but capable of taking on abstract behaviors not reducible to articulation (or perception).

Of course, there are social dimensions to linguistic evolution, change, and diversity. Children and adults require linguistic input from speakers of a target language for acquisition to take place, and this input comes through social interaction. Rules of usage in many speech communities reflect gender and age differences, social stratification, and geographically based diversity. As William Labov pointed out several decades ago, one can study diversity in contemporary speech communities as change in progress in order to gain insights on mechanisms of language evolution on the micro level. Assuming the biolinguistic perspective, it is important to identify and study these external factors because they are largely responsible for generating the variability in mentally represented formal systems of grammar on which language evolution operates.

In the last third or so of the course, we will consider whether it is reasonable to make predictions about the future course of linguistic diversity on the basis of the past and the present and consider how far into the past we can reasonably hope to see.

No textbook. The course will be taught on the basis of notes and readings available to students on Oncourse.

The language of instruction will be English. Most of the examples will be drawn from Germanic languages (and their hypothesized precursors), but no specific linguistic background in German, Dutch, or Scandinavian will be assumed.

Regular class attendance, preparation, and participation are required. There will be three problem sets, two 5- to 7-page written assignments, a midterm, and a final examination.

Week 1	A case study: The Rhenish Fan
Week 2	Introduction to the phonetics of consonants
Week 3	The Rhenish Fan and the Second Sound Shift. Problem set 1 due.
Week 4	Grimm's Law
Week 5	Introduction to the phonetics of vowels. Written assignment 1 due.
Week 6	Germanic languages and umlaut
Week 7	Strong and weak verbs. Problem set 2 due.
Week 8	Strong and weak adjectives; Midterm exam
Week 9	Case studies: (1) German and Yiddish (2) Icelandic and Norwegian/Swedish (3) Dutch and Afrikaans
Week 10	Apparent "simplification" and the "direction" of language change: Can we see into the future? Part I.
Week 11	Change and diversity in modern times: Can we see into the future? Part II
Week 12	The spread of Indo-European languages into Central Europe, linguistic archeology, and population genetics: How far back can we see? Part I. Written assignment 2 due.
Week 13	The Nostratic Hypothesis: How far back can we see? Part II
Week 14	The origins of language in the human species: How far back can we see? Part III. Problem set 3 due.
Week 15	Summation and synthesis
	Final examination