

Indo-European Family of Languages



INTRODUCTION

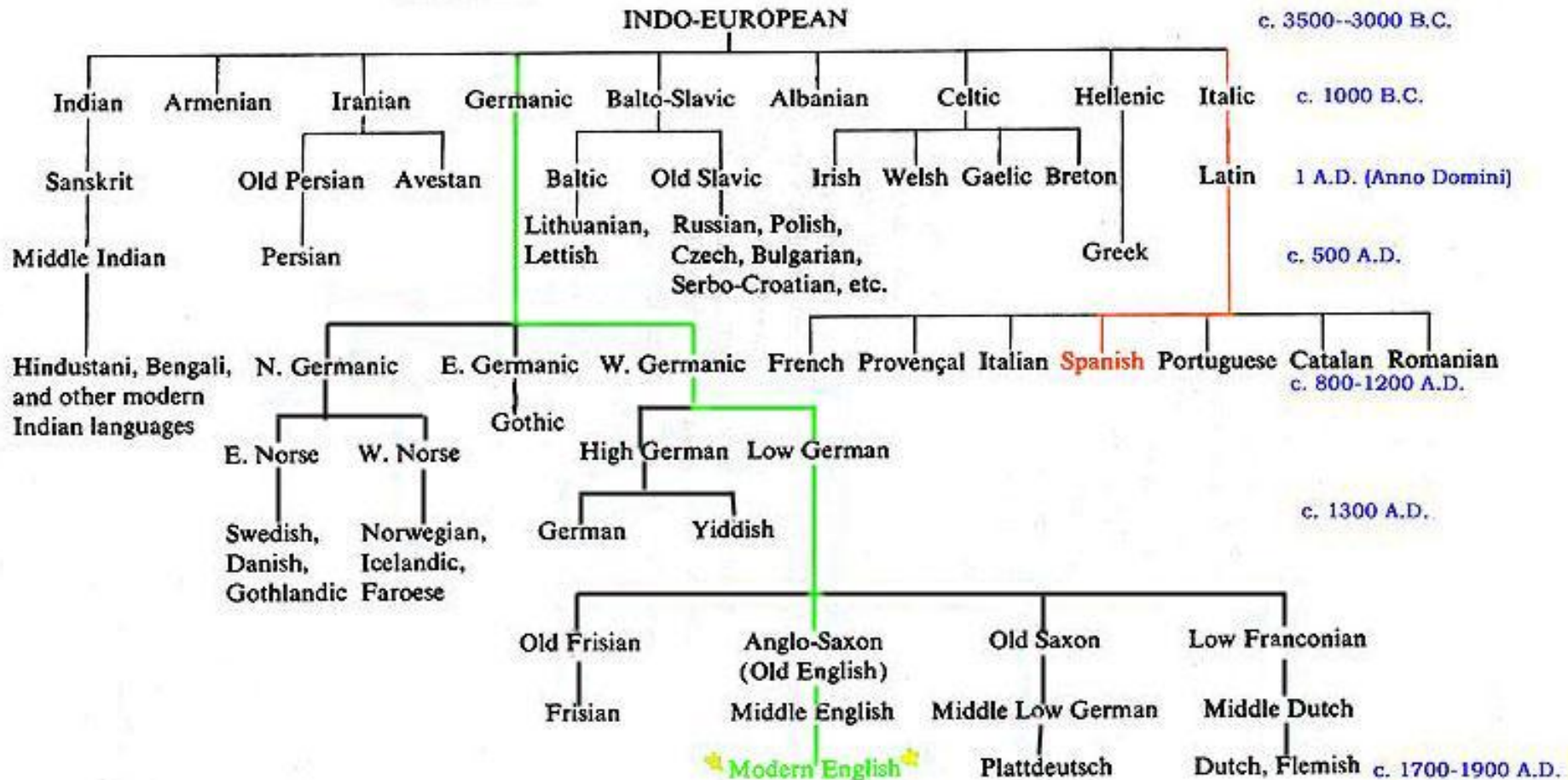
The Indo-European languages are a language family of several hundred related languages and dialects. There are about 445 living Indo-European languages, according to the estimate by Ethnologue, with over two thirds of them belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch. The most widely spoken Indo-European languages by native speakers are Spanish, Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu), English, Portuguese, Bengali, Punjabi, and Russian, each with over 100 million speakers, with German, French, Marathi, Italian, and Persian also having more than 50 million. Today, nearly 42% of the human population (3.2 billion) speaks an Indo-European language as a first language, by far the highest of any language family.

Branches of Indo-European Languages

The Indo-European languages have a large number of branches: Anatolian, Indo-Iranian, Greek, Italic, Celtic, Germanic, Armenian, Tocharian, Balto-Slavic, and Albanian.

THE INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES

INDO-EUROPEAN



Anatolian

During the first and the second millennia BC, present Asian Turkey, and Northern Syria spoke now extinct Anatolian languages, the best known of which was Hittite, the official language of the Hittite empire, flourished in the second millennial.

Before 1906, few Hittite texts were known.

Moreover, they were not interpreted as Indo-European until 1915.

The integration of Hittite into Indo-European comparative grammar was, therefore, one of the principal developments of Indo-European studies in the XX century.

The most ancient Hittite texts date from the 17th century BC, whereas the latest ones - from approximately 13th century BC.

Indo-Iranian

The second branch is Indo-Iranian.

It is subdivided into sub-branches: Indic and Iranian, predominant in India, Pakistan, Iran, and its vicinity, and also in areas from the Black Sea to Western China today.

Greek

Greek is more a group of dialects rather than a branch of languages.

More than 3,000 years of written history have Greek dialects that never evolved into mutually incomprehensible languages.

Greek was predominant in the Southern part of the Balkans, the Peloponnese Peninsula, as well as the Aegean Sea and its vicinity.

Mycenaean is the earliest surviving written evidence of a Greek language.

It belongs to the dialect of the Mycenaean civilization, mainly found on clay tablets and ceramic vessels on the Isle of Crete.

Mycenaean did not have an alphabetic written system but a syllabic script known as the Linear B Script.

Italic

This branch was predominant on the Italian peninsula.

The Italics, who crossed the Alps to enter Italy and gradually moved southward around 1000 BC, were not natives of Italy.

Latin, the best-known language of the group, was originally a somewhat minor local language, spoken by pastoral tribes that lived in small agricultural settlements in the center of the Italian peninsula.

The first Latin inscriptions appeared in the 7th century BC and then spread significantly by the 6th century BC.

CELTIC

This branch splits into two sub-branches: Continental Celtic and Insular Celtic. By about 600 BC, Celtic-speaking tribes had spread from what we know today as Southern Germany, Austria, and Western Czech Republic in almost all directions, to France, Belgium, Spain, and the British Isles.

Then, by 400 BC, they also moved Southward into Northern Italy and Southeast into the Balkans and even beyond.

During the early 1st century BC, Celtic-speaking tribes dominated a very significant portion of Europe.

In 50 BC, Julius Caesar conquered Gaul (ancient France), but, about a century later, the emperor Claudius conquered Britain.

Consequently, this sizeable Celtic-speaking area became Romanised, but Latin became the dominant language that caused the disappearance of the Continental Celtic languages, the main of which was Gaulish.

Germanic

The Germanic branch is divided into three sub-branches:

- 1) East Germanic that not extinct;**
- 2) North Germanic that involves Old Norse, the ancestor of all modern Scandinavian languages;**
- 3) West Germanic that includes Old English, Old Saxon, and Old High German.**

The earliest evidence of Germanic-speaking people dates back to the first half of the 1st millennium BC.

They inhabited an area, stretching from southern Scandinavia to the coast of the northern Baltic Sea.

During prehistoric times, the Germanic-speaking tribes contacted with Finnic speakers in the North and with Balto-Slavic tribes in the East.

Such an interaction caused borrowing several terms from Finnish and Balto-Slavic by the Germanic language.

Armenian

The origins of the Armenian-speaking people is a topic still unclear. The Armenians and the Phrygians are supposed to belong to the same migratory wave that entered Anatolia, coming from the Balkans around the late 2nd millennium BC.

The Armenians settled in an area around Lake Van, currently Turkey. This region belonged to the state of Urartu during the early 1st millennium BC.

In the 8th century BC, Urartu came under Assyrian control, and in the 7th century BC, the Armenians took over the region.

The Medes absorbed the region soon after, and Armenia became a vassal state. During the time of the Achaemenid Empire, the region turned into a Persian satrapy.

The Persian domination had a strong linguistic impact on Armenian, which misleads many scholars in the past to believe that Armenian belonged to the Iranian group.

TOCHARIAN

The history of the Tocharian-speaking people is still mysterious. One only knows that they lived in the Taklamakan Desert in Western China.

Most of the Tocharian texts with nothing about the Tocharians themselves involve just translations from well-known Buddhist works and dated between the 6th and the 8th BC.

Two different languages belong to this branch: Tocharian A and Tocharian B.

Remains of the Tocharian A language have only been found in places where Tocharian B documents have also been found, which would suggest that Tocharian A was already extinct, kept alive only as a religious or poetic language, while Tocharian B was the living language used for administrative purposes.

Balto-Slavic

This branch splits into two sub-branches: Baltic and Slavic.

During the late Bronze Age, the Balts' territory may have stretched from around western Poland all the way across to the Ural Mountains.

Afterward, the Balts occupied a small region along the Baltic Sea. Those in the northern part of the territory occupied by the Balts closely contacted with Finnic tribes, whose language was not part of the Indo-European language family.

Finnic speakers borrowed a considerable amount of Baltic words, which suggests that the Balts had an essential cultural prestige in that area.

Albanian

The last branch of Indo-European languages is Albanian that appeared in written form. The origin of Albanian involves two hypotheses.

According to the first, Albanian is a modern descendant of Illyrian, widely spoken in the region during classical times. Since linguists hardly ever know about Illyrian, no one can either deny or confirm it from a linguistic standpoint.

However, from a historical and geographical perspective, it makes sense. Another version makes Albanian be a descendant of Thracian, another lost language, spoken farther east than Illyrian. Today Albanian is spoken in Albania as the official language, in several other areas of the former Yugoslavia, and also in small enclaves in southern Italy, Greece, and the Republic of Macedonia.

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