

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF GERMANIC LANGUAGES

Preliminary Remarks

§ 50. All the Germanic languages of the past and present have common linguistic features; some of these features are shared by other groups in the IE family, others are specifically Germanic.

The Germanic group acquired their specific distinctive features after the separation of the ancient Germanic tribes from other IE tribes and prior to their further expansion and disintegration, that is during the period of the PG parent-language. These PG features inherited by the descendant languages, represent the common features of the Germanic group. Other common features developed later, in the course of the individual histories of separate Germanic languages, as a result of similar tendencies arising from PG causes. On the other hand, many Germanic features have been disguised, transformed and even lost in later history.

PHONETICS

Word Stress

§ 51. The peculiar Germanic system of word accentuation is one of the most important distinguishing features of the group; it arose in PG, was fully or partly retained in separate languages and served as one of the major causes for many linguistic changes.

It is known that in ancient IE, prior to the separation of Germanic, there existed two ways of word accentuation: musical pitch and force stress. The position of the stress was free and movable, which means that it could fall on any syllable of the word—a root-morpheme, an affix or an ending—and could be shifted both in form-building and word-building (cf. R *дóмом*, *домá*, *домовни́чать*, *дóма*).

Both these properties of the word accent were changed in PG. Force or expiratory stress (also called dynamic and breath stress) became the only type of stress used. In Early PG word stress was still as movable as in ancient IE but in Late PG its position in the word was stabilised. The stress was now fixed on the first syllable, which was usually the root of the word and sometimes the prefix; the other syllables—suffixes and endings—were unstressed. The stress could no longer move either in form-building or word-building.

These features of word accent were inherited by the Germanic languages, and despite later alterations are observable today. In Mod E there is a sharp contrast between accented and unaccented syllables due to the force of the stress. The main accent commonly falls on the root-morpheme, and is never shifted in building grammatical forms. The following English and German words illustrate its fixed position in grammatical forms and derived words:

English: *be' come, be' coming, over' come; 'lover, 'loving, be' loved;*

German: *'Liebe, 'lieben 'liebte, ge' liebt, 'lieberhaft, 'Liebling.*

(Cf. these native words with words of foreign origin which move the stress in derivation, though never in form-building: *ex'hibit v, exhi'bi-tion n*).

§ 52. The heavy fixed word stress inherited from PG has played an important role in the development of the Germanic languages, and especially in phonetic and morphological changes. Due to the difference in the force of articulation the stressed and unstressed syllables underwent widely different changes: accented syllables were pronounced with great distinctness and precision, while unaccented became less distinct and were phonetically weakened. The differences between the sounds in stressed position were preserved and emphasised, whereas the contrasts between the unaccented sounds were weakened and lost. Since the stress was fixed on the root, the weakening and loss of sounds mainly affected the suffixes and grammatical endings. Many endings merged with the suffixes, were weakened and dropped. Cf., e.g., the reconstructed PG word 'fish', with its descendants in Old Germanic languages:

PG **fiskaz*, Gt *fisks*, O Icel *fiskr*, OE *fisc*.

(The asterisk * is placed before reconstructed hypothetical forms which have not been found in written records; the words may be pronounced exactly as they are written; spelling in Old Germanic languages was phonetic).