

Germanic languages

Of the 4,000 to 6,000 languages presently spoken in the world, the Germanic languages form a very small subset. In terms of numbers of speakers, the Germanic group scores much better, for there are at least 450 million native speakers, which is approximately one twelfth of the world's population. Still, even within Indo-European, the Romance languages with an estimated 580 million native speakers rank higher. What the Germanic languages are unrivalled in, however, is their geographical distribution. While originally these languages were confined to a small part of Europe, colonizers and immigrants successfully implanted them, particularly English, in the Americas, Africa (e.g. South Africa), Asia (e.g. India), as well as in the Pacific (e.g. Australia). Moreover, English has become the world's most important international language, serving commerce, culture, diplomacy, and science, including linguistics.

It is customary to divide Germanic into **East Germanic**, with Gothic as its prominent member, **North Germanic**, with Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish, and **West Germanic** (sometimes 'South Germanic'), with German, Yiddish, Dutch, Afrikaans, Frisian and English. If we relate this variety to the one Common Germanic language of two thousand years ago, we face the question of how we got from the one parent language to the three branches and to the dozen or so descendant languages.

One factor to bear in mind is that every language is inherently variable. Thus some degree of dialectal variation must have prevailed in Common Germanic too, an assumption plausible also on purely linguistic grounds. Standard methods of linguistic reconstruction sometimes lead to two reconstructed forms rather than only one, suggesting that Common Germanic allowed both. Thus the inherent linguistic variation within Common Germanic itself may safely be taken as a partial explanation of later diffusion, in particular, of the distinction between North and West Germanic.

A second factor responsible for the variety in Germanic is migration. When speakers move away from their homeland and cut or strongly diminish communication with those who stay behind, the inherent tendency for dialect variation increases. The migrants, moreover, may come into contact with speakers of another language, which may alienate either language, in varying degrees, from the language of the previous generations.

East Germanic

The first of the Germanic tribes to migrate from the Danish Isles and southern Sweden were the Goths, who presumably departed from the Common Germanic area around 100 BC. After crossing the Baltic they were joined by the Rugians, the Vandals and the Burgundians. Together these tribes constitute the eastern branch of Germanic known to us primarily from biblical translations from around AD 350. These translations, the majority of which have been attributed to Wulfila, the Bishop of the Western Goths, were undertaken after the Goths had settled on the Black Sea and become Christians.

The manuscript fragments which have come down to us containing a translation of the Bible into Gothic are not contemporary with Wulfila but were transcribed in Italy around AD 500. The most important is the *Codex Argenteus* in the University Library in Uppsala (330 leaves, of which 187 are still preserved, of the four Gospels).

Due to the early migration of the Gothic tribes, the language of the Goths developed differently from that of the West and North Germanic peoples, and as a consequence of subsequent migration into Italy, France and Spain, the Goths gradually became absorbed by other tribes and nations, thus leaving us with little more than Wulfila's Bible translation as evidence of an East Germanic variety of the Germanic languages.

North Germanic

'Common Scandinavian' is a term often used for the Germanic language spoken in Scandinavia in the period after the 'Great Migrations' in which the organization of power was still local and tribal (c.550-c.1050).

Towards the end of the Viking Age we find a gradual splitting up of Common Scandinavian, initially into two branches: East Scandinavian, comprising the kingdom of Denmark and the southern two-thirds of Sweden and adjacent parts of Norway; and West Scandinavian, comprising most of Norway and the Norwegian settlements in the North Atlantic, in particular Iceland.

East Scandinavian

Danish

Danish (*danske*) is the official language of the kingdom of Denmark (comprising Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland), where it is native to the majority of a population of over 5 million.

Modern Standard Danish developed on the basis of the written language of

the Reformation, further influenced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the spoken language of the influential citizens of Copenhagen, the economic and cultural centre of the emerging nation state.

The history of the Danish language falls into three major periods: Old Danish (c.800-c.1100), corresponding roughly to the Viking Age; Middle Danish (c.1100-c.1525), corresponding to the Middle Ages; and Modern Danish (after c.1525), the period after the Reformation and up to modern times.

Danish is the Scandinavian language that has moved farthest away from its Common Scandinavian roots, primarily due to Denmark's geographic location, which forms a bridge between the Nordic countries and the European mainland.

Swedish

Swedish (*svenska*) is spoken as the official language of Sweden by a population of some 8.5 million inhabitants. It is also the first language of some 300,000 speakers in Finland (on the semi-independent Åland Islands and on the west and south coast) and the second language of various linguistic minorities, altogether up to a million, mostly recent immigrants but also indigenous Finns and Saamis (Lapps).

Prior to the Viking Age it is difficult to distinguish Swedish from Danish, but after c.800 the East Scandinavian languages begin to separate, with a major cleavage taking place after extensive Danish innovations around 1300. Modern Standard Swedish developed in the Mälardalen region, the location of the chief centres of government and learning since the Middle Ages (Stockholm and Uppsala), but the standard language was also influenced by the dialect of the Götaland region immediately to the south. While the cultivated pronunciation of Stockholm enjoys considerable prestige, there are also strongly resistant regional norms, particularly those of southern Sweden (*skånska*) and Finland (*finlandssvenska*).

The history of the Swedish language falls into two major periods: an Old Swedish period covering the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, further subdivided into the runic period (c.800-c.1225), the classical period (c.1225-c.1375) and the younger period (c.1375-c.1526); and a Modern Swedish period with Older Modern Swedish from c.1526 to c.1732 and Younger Modern Swedish from c. 1732 to the present.

West Scandinavian

Icelandic

Icelandic (*islenska*) is the West Scandinavian language that has been spoken

on Iceland ever since the country was settled over a thousand years ago. Today Modern Icelandic is spoken by a population of close to 260,000.

Since the Icelandic settlers came from different localities along the extensive coastal stretch from northern Norway all the way down to the south, as well as from the British Isles, it is hardly possible that the early language was free of variation. In spite of this, Icelandic has never shown any real tendency to split into dialects. Today regional variation in pronunciation and vocabulary is so insignificant that it would be misleading to speak of Icelandic dialects.

The modern standard is a direct continuation of the language of the original settlers, most strongly influenced by the language of southwestern Norway. During the first 200 years there was no marked difference between Norwegian and Icelandic. Cultural ties between the two countries were strong, even into the fourteenth century. However, in the wake of the Kalmar Union, the political union of Denmark, Norway and Sweden between 1397 and 1523, Icelandic and Norwegian went their separate ways. While Danish became the official language of the State and Church in Norway, the Icelanders translated the Bible and other religious literature into their own native Icelandic.

Icelandic is the most conservative of the Scandinavian languages and represents a unique case of linguistic continuity in that it has retained its original inflectional system and core vocabulary relatively unaltered up to this very day. Various developments in pronunciation make it possible, however, to speak of Old Icelandic (up to c.1550) and Modern Icelandic periods (from C. 1550), less clearly also of Middle Icelandic (c.1350-c.1550).

Norwegian

Norwegian (*norsk*) in two varieties, Neo-Norwegian (*nynorsk*) and Dano-Norwegian (*bokmål*), is the language of over 4 million inhabitants of Norway, including somewhat more than 20,000 Saamis (most of them bilingual). Both Neo-Norwegian and Dano-Norwegian are official languages in Norway. Both are used by national and local officials, and citizens writing to a public institution have the right to receive an answer in the language of their own letter. School districts choose one of the official languages as the language of instruction and teach the parallel language in separate classes.

During the period in which Danish was the written language of Norway (1380-1814), most Norwegians spoke their local dialects and pronounced Danish using their own Norwegian sounds. The lack of a strong native norm explains in part why the Norwegian dialects were able to thrive on a much larger scale than in Denmark or Sweden. They are still very much alive and socially acceptable even outside the geographic area in which they are

spoken.

Since for historical reasons there was no standard Norwegian alternative, such a standard had to be created, either on the basis of the popular dialects or through gradual changes in the Danish norm in the direction of the spoken Norwegian of the urban educated classes. As a result two modern standards developed. The written standard of Neo-Norwegian was established on the basis of the local dialects by the linguist and poet Ivar Aasen in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was officially recognized in 1885 and spread rapidly through the western and midland regions, being taught today as a first language to somewhat less than one fifth of the Norwegian schoolchildren and as a second language to the rest. Dano-Norwegian, or 'book language', is the first language of the majority of the population. Linguistically it is the result of the gradual Norwegianization of the Danish standard which was inherited from the period prior to Norway's independence.

Although it was originally hoped that the two standards could be amalgamated into one 'United Norwegian' (*sammorske*), this seems farther away today than some years ago, the current solution being peaceful co-existence. The presence and daily use of two standard languages and numerous local dialects does not seriously affect communication in Norway, a country which is exemplary today when it comes to the question of linguistic tolerance.

Faroese

Faroese (*fOroyskt*) is the first language of the approximately 47,000 inhabitants of a small group of islands in the North Atlantic, midway between Scotland and Iceland (18 in all, of which one is uninhabited), and along with Danish it is one of the official languages of the Faroe Islands. The Faroes, previously under the Norwegian crown, officially became a part of Denmark in 1816, receiving semi-independent political status in 1948. Unlike Denmark proper, for example, they have not chosen membership in the European Community.

As a West Scandinavian language, Faroese is related to Icelandic and several of the West Norwegian dialects. It has developed into its present form from the language spoken by the Norwegians who colonized the islands in the early 800s. Although there is significant variation in pronunciation from island to island, there are no true dialects.

The development of a native literary tradition has been slow, but today there exists a sizeable body of Faroese poetry, fiction, educational material and journalism.

West Germanic

Whereas the origin of the modern North Germanic languages can be traced back to one relatively homogeneous North Germanic parent language, the case for a similar parentage of the West Germanic languages is less clear. It has been suggested instead that ancient West Germanic only existed as a conglomerate of three dialect groups, sometimes referred to after Tacitus as 'Ingwaeonic', 'Istwaeonic' and 'Herminonic' or, in modern terms, 'North Sea Germanic', 'Rhine-Weser Germanic, and 'Elbe Germanic'. This tripartite division bears no direct relation to the division of the modern descendant languages, however. Thus standard (High) German is related to two of these hypothetical dialect groups, namely Istwaeonic and Herminonic. English, Frisian, and to a lesser extent Low German and Dutch, can arguably all be traced back to Ingwaeonic, but because of the geographical discontinuity and because of the Viking and Norman French invasions in the ninth to eleventh centuries and resulting language interference, English developed in an idiosyncratic way such that modern English is strongly estranged from both its Anglo-Saxon ancestor and its modern continental Ingwaeonic counterparts. Interestingly, in the case of English insularity lacked the conservative effect it had for North Germanic, Romance (cf. Sardinian as the most conservative Romance language), Celtic (cf. the fact that Celtic, once spoken over vast areas of continental Europe, now only survives on islands - Britain, Ireland - and a peninsula - Brittany) and, within Germanic, for the conservative insular variety of North Frisian.

English

The most important predominantly English-speaking areas are the United States (240 million), the United Kingdom (56 million), Australia (17 million) and New Zealand (3.2 million). It is the second language in Canada (24 million), alongside French and South Africa (nearly 3 million), alongside Afrikaans. Furthermore, English is an official language in a number of countries that lie, or used to lie, in the British colonial or United States' spheres of influence. There are many national variants of English, differing primarily in pronunciation and less so in grammar and spelling. British English has a standard that originated in the London dialect area, but has now become a sociolect, associated with the educated upper classes and often heard on radio and television.

German

German (*Deutsch*) is spoken as an official language of the Federal Republic of Germany, as of 1990 united with the former German Democratic Republic (close to 80 million native speakers), Austria (7.5 million), Liechtenstein (15,000), the larger part of Switzerland (4.2 million out of a total of 6.4

million), South Tyrol and a few isolated villages further south in Italy (270,000), Luxembourg, which recognizes both the non-indigenous Standard German and the native *Lëtzebuergesch* (360,000).

Yiddish

Yiddish (*yidish* 'Jewish') is a Jewish language. The origin of Yiddish is traced back to medieval Germany, where Jewish settlers adopted the local German as well as adapted it, mixing it partly with elements of Hebrew and Aramaic, which were kept for religious purposes. In 1908, at a Conference for the Yiddish Language in Czernowitz (today in the Ukraine), Yiddish was accepted as 'a national language of the Jewish people'.

On the verge of the Second World War, North America probably had at least three million speakers of Yiddish, while more than seven million had stayed in Eastern Europe. This meant that more than half of the total Jewish population of the world spoke Yiddish. But then came the Holocaust of six million Jews, subsequent dispersion of the survivors over both the typical immigration countries and western Europe, and linguistic assimilation, partially to Russian in the former Soviet Union, to English in North America, and to Hebrew in the state of Israel, which was founded in 1948 with Hebrew as its official language.

Dutch

Dutch (*Nederlands* 'Netherlands') is the official language of the Netherlands, where it is native to the majority of a population of some fourteen million. It is also an official language of Belgium, where it is the native language in the Flemish community counting up to six million native speakers, thus forming the majority of the population.

Afrikaans

Afrikaans is one of the two official languages of the Republic of South Africa, where it has some 5 million native speakers, i.e. 14 per cent of the total population of 36.5 million. A little less than half of them are whites, called *Afrikaners*, formerly *Boers* 'farmers'.

As an official language, Afrikaans is in competition with English. Afrikaans is also the second language of the majority of Afrikaners and many Blacks. Afrikaans and English coexist with several indigenous languages, especially Sotho (9 million), Zulu (7 million) and Xhosa (7 million), all of them Bantu.

South Africa is the result of Dutch and British expansion into the interior of southern Africa from Cape Town, founded in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company. Cape Town is now the legislative capital of the republic as well as of the Cape Province, the largest of the country's four provinces.

Frisian

Modern Frisian is spoken in the northern Dutch province of *Fryslân* (*Friesland*) by four hundred thousand people, half of whom have it as their mother tongue. Most of the speakers of Frisian are bilingual in Dutch.