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Old Germanic Languages

Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive overview of the early Germanic languages, focusing on their historical development, internal classification, and linguistic features. It examines key dialects such as Gothic, Old Norse, Old English, Old High German, and others within the broader framework of Proto-Germanic. The article discusses the challenges in reconstructing ancestral forms, dialectal groupings, and the influence of archaeological and linguistic evidence on Germanic classification. Special attention is given to phonological shifts such as Grimm's and Verner's Laws, vowel and consonant system developments, and morphological innovations like the weak verb preterite formation. Syntax and vocabulary are addressed through structural and semantic analyses, and the article also explores onomastics as a tool for tracing early phonological changes. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources, this study integrates traditional philology with modern linguistic approaches, making it a valuable resource for the historical study of Germanic languages.

Keywords: *Old Germanic Languages, Proto-Germanic, morphology, historical phonetics Syntax, Germanic dialects, Germanic lexicon, onomastics, language reconstruction, Indian-Europe, Germanic word order*

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Qədim german dilləri

Xülasə

Bu məqalədə qədim german dillərinin tarixi inkişafı, daxili təsnifatı və əsas dil xüsusiyyətləri geniş şəkildə araşdırılır. Qot dili, qədim şimal german dili (Old Norse), qədim ingilis dili, qədim yüksək alman dili və digər dialektlər Proto-German dili çərçivəsində tədqiq olunur. Rekonstruksiya olunmuş ilkin formaların və dialekt bölgülərinin müəyyənləşdirilməsi ilə bağlı çətinliklər, arxeoloji və dilçilik sübutlarının german dillərinin təsnifatına təsiri kontekstində təhlil edilir. Fonetika bölməsində Grimm və Verner qanunları kimi səs dəyişmələri, sait və samit sistemində baş vermiş dəyişikliklər, eləcə də zəif fellərin keçmiş zaman formasının (preterit) yaranması kimi morfoloji yeniliklərə xüsusi yer verilir. Sintaksis və lüğət məsələləri struktur və semantik aspektdən təhlil olunur. Eyni zamanda, antroponim və toponimlər vasitəsilə erkən fonoloji dəyişikliklərin izləri izlənilir. Məqalə klassik filoloji yanaşmaları müasir dilçilik metodları ilə birləşdirərək german dillərinin tarixi tədqiqi üçün dəyərli mənbə təqdim edir.

Açar sözlər: *qədim german dilləri, Proto-German dili, morfologiya, tarixi fonetika, sintaksis, German dialektləri, German leksikası, onomastika, dil rekonstruksiyası, Hind-Avropa; German söz düzümü*

Introduction

The category of Old Germanic languages includes Gothic, early North Germanic (known as Proto-Norse before it diverged into Old Norse dialects), and various West Germanic languages such

as Old English (OE), Old Frisian (OFris.), Old Saxon (OS), Old Low Franconian (OLF), and Old High German (OHG). Key linguistic investigations without strict regional or chronological boundaries were carried out by scholars like Carl Karstien ("Altgermanische Dialekte"), Victor Michels ("Deutsch"), and Wilhelm Horn ("Englische Sprachwissenschaft"), especially within foundational works such as *Stand und Aufgaben* (1924), *Götze et al.* (1934), and *Streitberg et al.* (1936).

Rather than focusing solely on individual attested languages, much of this scholarship deals with features that are common to multiple Germanic languages. Such shared traits are often attributed to an earlier, reconstructed linguistic phase. Early personal and place names, as well as some Runic inscriptions, often resist categorization into a single major dialect and instead point to a broader early Germanic stage. This section reviews works that include both direct attestations and reconstructions within the Germanic linguistic continuum.

Research

While the concept of reconstructed languages such as Proto-Germanic (also referred to as Primitive Germanic or Urgermanisch) and Common Germanic (Gemeingermanisch) was typically accepted, debates focused more on intermediate proto-languages and sub-groupings. Pisani (1955) and van Coetsem (1969), for example, refrained from using the term 'Proto-Germanic'. Sparnaay (1961) was critical of the idea that the proto-language lacked dialectal variation. Maurer (1943), emphasizing tribal and archaeological data, questioned the notion of West Germanic as a unified areal and ethnic entity; this view was supported by H. Arntz (Götze et al. 1934:41–4). Schwarz (1951), based on isogloss analysis, found merit in subdivisions such as Maurer's Elbgermanen, Nordseegermanen (which stem from Ingvaeonic), and Weser-Rhein-Germanen. His term Südgermanisch, initially used by Neckel (1927), simply replaced the traditional term Westgermanisch but without implying a uniform proto-language. Kuhn (1955), however, questioned Schwarz's Gotonordisch, calling it problematic. Rosel (1962), through meticulous study, rejected any genealogical (Stammbaum) model for Germanic and viewed West Germanic as a transitional realignment between North and South Germanic. Rosenfeld (1954) disputed the inclusion of 'North-Sea Germanic' within the North Germanic group (Carr, 1939).

This debate has helped refine the classification and positioning of languages like Old Saxon, Old Low Franconian, and Old Frisian, contributing to a more flexible understanding of West Germanic. While Wrede's (1924) earlier theory of an Ingvaeonic expansion into Upper Germany was eventually discredited, it generated productive discussion (Gutenbrunner, 1936).

Meillet (1937) highlighted how Germanic differs from other Indo-European languages, suggesting these differences emerged because non-IE speakers adopted Indo-European. Similar ideas have been applied in substratum theories of the Germanic consonant shift. Extensive comparative analyses of Germanic phonology and morphology can be found in Boer (1918), Hirt (1931–34), and Krahe (1967). Streitberg's 1896 Proto-Germanic grammar remains a key reference, reprinted without changes in 1963. Van Coetsem (1969) offers a modern perspective, particularly focusing on phonemic structures (Coetsem, van., 1964).

Phonology

German researchers reassessing how Germanic languages are related and grouped have shown that dialect geography remains highly influential in their findings. This is equally true for 20th-century investigations into the historical phonology of the Germanic language family (cf. Bretschneider, 1930). Eduard Sievers once proposed a system called *Schallanalyse* (sound analysis), suggesting it could unlock the acoustic elements preserved in ancient texts, as though frozen in time. However, when applied to Old English (OE), Old Saxon (OS), and Old High German (OHG), it became evident that Sievers' method relied more on interpretive intuition than on concrete data. His ideas about the connections between spoken and written language, and between pitch and phonetic change, were ultimately found to be flawed. Despite this, *Schallanalyse* had considerable influence in the 1920s (see Karg in *Streitberg-Festschrift*, *Stand und Aufgaben*, 1924:112–25).

Linguists soon began advocating a systemic view of vowel and consonant patterns, with sound changes examined within structural frameworks. Streitberg (Streitberg et al., 1936:291), for instance,

dismissed Max Müller's teleological notions about a natural human urge to distinguish sounds, calling such explanations obsolete. Jellinek later referenced Karl Luick's work to demonstrate changing scholarly views. Pfalz (1918) introduced the idea of *Reihenschritte*—parallel sequences of sound change—offering a helpful lens for both historical and prehistoric analysis. Martinet (1955) built upon this with the theory of chain reactions in phonemic transformation. J. Fourquet and van Coetsem (1964) also supported this structural understanding of phonological evolution, while Benediktsson (1967) analyzed the Proto-Germanic vowel system through Jakobson's theory of *distinctive features*. East German scholars like Motsch (1967) began applying American transformational grammar to historical material, such as in the case of verbal ablaut (Coetsem, van., 1956).

The famous Germanic consonant shift, known as *Grimm's Law*, was reconstructed as a shift from an Indo-European (IE) set of consonants to those of Proto-Germanic. Despite being just one phonemic development, it was often treated as if it held the key to all sound change theories. The explanation required assumptions about exact consonant values in both IE and Proto-Germanic, including how so-called *media aspirata* (aspirated voiced stops) and *tenues* (voiceless stops) were pronounced. Steinhauser (1930) and Kretschmer (1932), following Franck, posited voiced stops [b d g] in Proto-Germanic replacing the IE sounds *bh dh gh* in certain contexts. However, this was contested by Lessiak (1933) and others. Seebold (1967) analyzed how IE *gtih* was reflected in Germanic forms. A key point of debate was whether Proto-Germanic's voiceless stops were aspirated—a detail drawn into question by their Finnish renderings in borrowed words (Streitberg et al., 1936:279).

Verner's Law, which accounted for the split of non-initial spirants such as IE *t* > *Gothic fadar, bropar*, was generally accepted to occur after the earlier transformation of voiceless stops into spirants. Boer (1918:123) linked this to the IE pitch-accent system rather than stress. Multiple efforts were made to explain *Verner's Law* phonetically (cf. Russer, 1931:95–107). The resulting voiced spirants *[b d g]* (from *p t k*) merged with the outcomes of the voiced aspirated stops (*bh dh gh*). Additionally, *z* emerged as a phoneme distinct from *s*, as the Germanic accent shifted to the root syllable, eliminating the earlier influence of pitch on allophone formation: Proto-Germanic *-/s/, -/z/*.

The chronology of these consonant shifts was analyzed early on, revealing a connection between the change in voiced and voiceless stops. Georg Curtius (1853) and Wilhelm Scherer (1870) noted this link (Streitberg et al., 1936:291). More recently, scholars like Pisani (1955), Kretschmer (1932), Fourquet (1948), and van Coetsem (1969:4.224) emphasized the systematic nature of these transformations, which preserved IE phonemic contrasts in Proto-Germanic. Some proposed a non-IE substratum to explain the shift, including Karsten (1928a:120ff.), Güntert (1927), Meillet (1937), Sparnaay (1961:22), and earlier, Sigmund Feist (see Streitberg et al., 1936:292–301). Russer (1931:204) explored physiological and articulatory mechanisms potentially driving Grimm's Law (Frings, 1966).

In the vowel system of Common Germanic, special focus was given to elements such as *e1* (from IE *e*; cf. Gothic *nemum*, OHG *nämum*; *gebum*, OHG *gäbum*) and *e2* (e.g., Gothic *her*, OHG *hier*). Hirt (1931) proposed deriving *e2* from IE *ei*. Van Coetsem (1956) argued that IE *ei* split into Germanic *z* and *e2*, depending on the following vowels (also van Coetsem, 1969:4.216). Lüdtke (1957) supported the view that *e2* originated through contraction of prefixal *e* and the vowel in reduplicating verbs—a position initially put forth by Streitberg (Streitberg et al., 1936:367–9). In West and North Germanic, the merger of *e1* and *ä* (from nasalized long *a*) was also linked to the formation of *e2* (cf. Fourquet).

Morphology

The morphological features shared across Common Germanic have been analyzed in detail not only by Boer (1918), Streitberg (1963), and Krahe (1967), but also in comparative studies focusing on individual Germanic languages—especially Gothic. Rosel (1962) structured his classification of Germanic based on the analysis of morphological isoglosses found in extant material. Specific grammatical forms across the Germanic group have been examined from a comparative perspective. For example, Flasdieck analyzed feminine o-stem nouns (§5.7), Wissmann (1932) discussed o-verbs, and Flasdieck (1935) further explored e-verbs. Strong verb classes were studied in-depth by van Coetsem (1956) and Stutterheim (Stutterheim, 1960), while Karstien (1921) addressed reduplicating

verbs. The development and treatment of numerals were investigated by Rosenfeld (1956), and from a different angle, by Szemerenyi (1960).

One major morphological innovation in Germanic that has received considerable attention is the creation of the preterite tense in weak verbs, which typically features a dental suffix. Several scholars have proposed that this development arose from a periphrastic construction involving a compound of a deverbative noun and the Indo-European verb *dho-/*dhe-* 'to do'. Boer (1918:229), Sverdrup (1929), Hirt (1932:124), Krahe (1967:II.90), and Wisniewski (1963) supported this theory. Bech (1963) suggested the preterite endings may have resulted from the merger of endings from *dhe-* with a noun form that included a *-i-* suffix. Hammerich (1921) proposed an alternative: a compound consisting of a nominal stem and the auxiliary verb *es* 'to be', citing the presence of *i* in some preterite optative forms as evidence (Hammerich 1959). Others, however, argue for internal development within Indo-European, positing that the dental suffix may originate from isolated IE forms or morphemes already containing a dental element (Bech 1963:61). Hirt (1932) added that the verbal adjective with *-to* may have contributed to the formation of the first weak verb class.

Another point of interest concerns the second-person singular ending in the strong preterite, which varies across dialects—e.g., Gothic *namt*, Old Norse *namt*, Old High German *nami*. This has been widely studied, including by Schroder (1921). In West Germanic, this ending is believed to reflect the thematic aorist forms of Indo-European (Hirt 1932:122). Rosel (1962:39–44), however, rejected Schwarz's (1951:264f.) view that the survival of the perfect ending *-t* supports the theory of a unified Gotho-Nordic stage in early Germanic.

Syntax

In contrast to the early and thorough attention given to Germanic phonology and morphology, syntax remained relatively underexplored for a long time. As Helmut Arntz aptly noted (Götze et al., 1934: 60), it was treated as the "stepchild" (*Stiefkind*) of Germanic studies (*Stand und Aufgaben*, 1924: 419). The first truly comprehensive analysis of Germanic syntax came with Hirt's 1934 work. Even so, Behaghel's earlier monumental series *Deutsche Syntax* had already provided a wealth of comparative material on Germanic sentence structure.

Behaghel (1929) paid special attention to the position of the verb within Germanic sentence construction. The issue of word order was further examined in studies by Schneider (1938), Fourquet (1938), and Kuhn (1933), all of whom investigated the syntax of clause constituents and the behavior of finite verbs across early Germanic dialects (Szemerényi, 1960).

One particularly significant syntactic development was the emergence of periphrastic constructions made up of forms of the verb "to be" combined with a present participle. These phrases laid the foundation for what later became the progressive tense in English. Mosse (1938) provided a detailed account of this syntactic evolution.

Other areas of Germanic syntax were the subject of focused studies as well. Heinrichs (1954) examined the definite article, highlighting its unique development within Germanic languages. Schmidt (1962), in a dissertation from Berlin, analyzed adverbial usage. Rompelman (1953) addressed how the preterite tense was employed semantically. Mattsson (1934) studied the present subjunctive in conditional clauses, while Wagner (1956) focused on the dual number. Italy's Mittner (1939) contributed a semantic analysis of the Germanic passive construction, further broadening the scope of syntactic inquiry in the field.

Vocabulary

The only comprehensive and systematic collection of early Germanic vocabulary to date remains Hjalmar Falk and A. Torp's *Wortschatz der germanischen Spracheinheit* (1909). A concise but informative summary of Proto-Germanic lexicon was later provided by Stroh (see Maurer and Stroh, 1959:1–49). Several specialized lexical domains have also been addressed in individual studies. For instance, Wessen (1927) concentrated on Christian terminology as it entered Germanic, tracing how theological and ecclesiastical vocabulary developed.

Frings (1966) dedicated a monograph to examining the influx of Latin loanwords into early Germanic, particularly within the West Germanic branch. His work reveals how contact with Latin-

speaking Romans affected Germanic vocabulary at various stages, especially in religious, military, and administrative contexts.

Gamillscheg (1934) focused on Germanic elements that survived in Romance-speaking territories—either through proper names or loanwords—which provide critical evidence for early Germanic influence outside the Germanic sphere.

The transmission of Germanic words into Slavic languages was studied by Stender-Petersen (1927), while Finnish scholar Kiparsky (1934) contributed insights into the same topic. Additionally, the earliest Germanic borrowings into Finnish were explored by Wiklund (1918), Karsten (1928b), Collinder (1932), and Fromm (1958). These linguistic loans have also been used as indirect data sources for reconstructing early Germanic, although drawing phonological conclusions from them has often proved controversial and complex.

Conclusion

The study of Old Germanic languages offers significant insights into the historical development and internal classification of these languages, providing a rich understanding of their phonological, morphological, and syntactical evolution. By examining key dialects such as Gothic, Old Norse, Old English, and Old High German, this research sheds light on the intricate processes of language change and reconstruction. The contributions of earlier scholars, combined with modern approaches in historical linguistics, allow for a more nuanced understanding of the Germanic linguistic continuum. Key phenomena like Grimm's and Verner's Laws, the development of weak verb preterites, and the formation of periphrastic constructions illustrate the dynamic shifts that shaped these languages. The integration of archaeological evidence, Runic inscriptions, and onomastics provides additional layers of context, allowing for the reconstruction of phonological changes across time. By synthesizing traditional philology with contemporary linguistic theories, this study enriches our knowledge of the early Germanic languages, their development, and their influence on subsequent linguistic traditions.

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