

Chamonikolasová, Jana

Proto-Germanic

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3 Proto-Germanic

3.1 The common ancestor of Germanic languages

Proto-Germanic, also referred to as Primitive Germanic, Common Germanic, or Ur-Germanic, is one of the descendants of Proto-Indo-European and the common ancestor of all Germanic languages. This Germanic proto-language, which was reconstructed by the comparative method, is not attested by any surviving texts. The only written records available are the runic Vimose inscriptions from around 200 AD found in Denmark, which represent an early stage of Proto-Norse or Late Proto-Germanic. (Comrie 1987)

Proto-Germanic is assumed to have developed between about 500 BC and the beginning of the Common Era. (Ringe 2006, p. 67). It came after the First Germanic Sound Shift, which was probably contemporary with the Nordic Bronze Age. The period between the end of Proto-Indo-European (i.e. probably after 3 500 BC) and the beginning of Proto-Germanic (500 BC) is referred to as Pre-Proto-Germanic period. However, Pre-Proto-Germanic is sometimes included under the wider meaning of Proto-Germanic, and the notion of the *Germanic parent language* is used to refer to both stages.

The First Germanic Sound Shift, also known as Grimm's law or Rask's rule, is a chain shift of Proto-Indo-European stops which took place between the Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Germanic stage of development and which distinguishes Germanic languages from other Indo-European centum languages. Grimm's law, together with a related shift entitled Verner's law, is described in greater detail in Chapter 7.

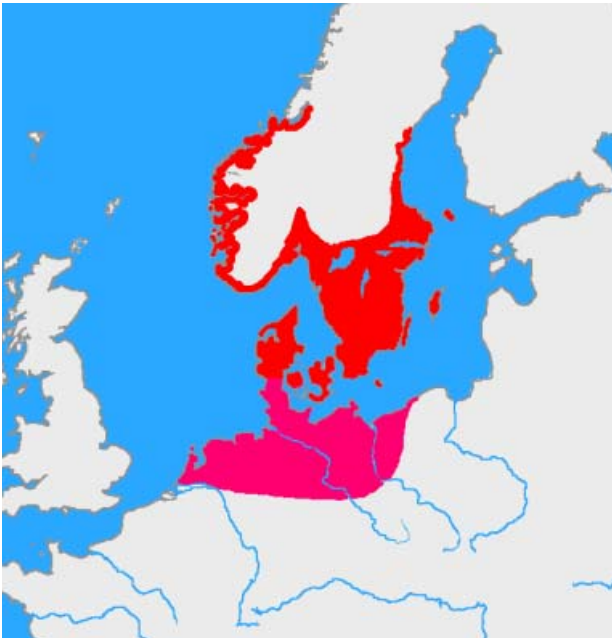
3.2. Branches of Germanic languages

Germanic languages are spoken as a native language by several hundred million people in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia. Germanic languages share many features with other Indo-European languages because they have developed from the same

reconstructed parent language. They therefore represent a branch of the Indo-European phylogenetic tree. However, the internal diversification of the Germanic subfamily is considered to be non-treelike, and the position of the Germanic branch within Indo-European is somewhat ambiguous due to the fact that from an early stage the individual Germanic languages (especially members of the West Germanic group) developed in close contact with neighbouring languages, adopting many features from them, which weakened the evidence of the genetic ancestry. (Nakhleh, Ringe and Warnow 2005)

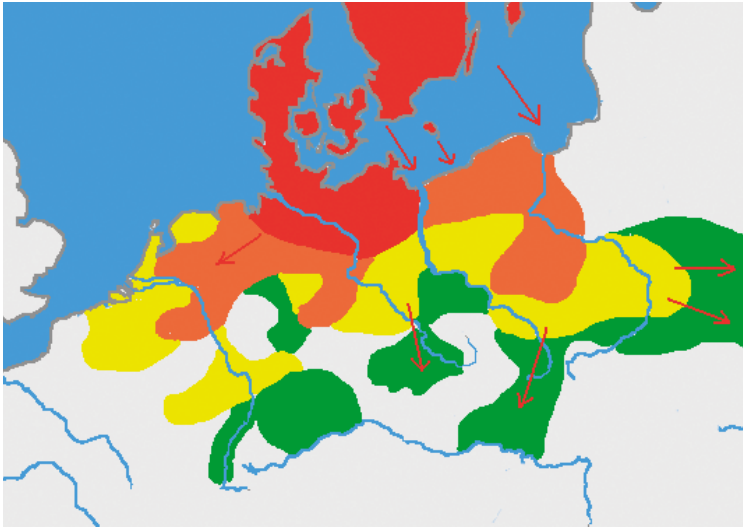
Although the history of Germanic languages has been studied by numerous scholars, many details of their earliest history are still uncertain. Archaeological research suggests that around 750 BC, Proto-Germanic speakers lived in southern Scandinavia and along the coast of the North and the Baltic Seas from the Netherlands in the west to the Vistula in the east. By 250 BC, Proto-Germanic had branched into several subgroups of Germanic languages. (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* “Languages of the World: Germanic languages”)

The migration of Germanic tribes and the spread of their languages are illustrated on the charts below.



Map of the Pre-Roman Iron Age culture(s) associated with Proto-Germanic, ca. 500 BC

Source: Wiglaf. Map of the Nordic Iron Age and the Jastorf culture. Wikimedia Commons [online] 15. 8. 2005. [accessed 2014-07-11]. Available at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pre-roman_iron_age_\(map\).png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pre-roman_iron_age_(map).png)



The expansion of the Germanic tribes 750 BC – AD 1

- Settlements before 750 BC
- New settlements until 500 BC
- New settlements until 250 BC
- New settlements until AD 1

Source: Berig. The expansion of the Germanic tribes AD 1 – AD 100 (after the Penguin Atlas of World History 1988). Wikimedia Commons [online] 17. 2. 2009. [accessed 2014-07-11]. Under the license CC BY-SA 3.0 (see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>). Available at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Germanic_tribes_\(750BC-1AD\).png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Germanic_tribes_(750BC-1AD).png)

Germanic languages are traditionally divided into three branches: East Germanic, North Germanic, and West Germanic. These branches are further subdivided into groups as illustrated in the table below.

Germanic languages	East Germanic	Gothic
	North Germanic	Eastern Group: Swedish, Danish Western Group: Icelandic, Norwegian
Parent language: Proto-Germanic	West Germanic	Anglo-Frisian Group: English, Frisian Low Germanic Group: Flemish, Dutch, Afrikaans High Germanic Group: German, Yiddish

3.3 Main grammatical features of Proto-Germanic

The reconstructed Proto-Germanic grammatical system resembled the grammatical systems of Greek or Latin of about 200 AD. It included six or more different cases, three numbers, three genders, two voices, and three moods.

Within the inflectional system of nouns, the following cases were distinguished: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, and instrumental. The Proto-Indo-European ablative and locative cases merged into other cases, though traces of the two cases were probably preserved in some pronominal and adverbial forms. Pronominal declension included the same cases as nouns except the vocative. In addition to singular and plural forms, pronouns occurred in dual forms. Verbal, nominal, and adjectival dual forms disappeared before the earliest records, though verbal dual survived in Gothic.

The nominal inflectional system included paradigms distinguished according to *stems* inherited from Proto-Indo-European. (For more details see subchapters 2.3 and 4.2.1.) The most productive paradigms were probably the a-stems, \bar{o} -stems and n-stems, followed by u-stems and i-stems. Variants of the first two paradigms were ja-, wa-, j \bar{o} , and w \bar{o} -stems; subclasses of the n-stems were $\bar{o}n$ -, an-, and $\bar{i}n$ -stems. In addition, there were several smaller classes of nouns: athematic nouns (root nouns), and nouns ending in -er, -z, and -nd.

Proto-Germanic verbs can be divided into a small group of *athematic* verbs and a large group of *thematic* verbs. Thematic verbs were further divided into seven classes of *strong* and five classes of *weak* verbs, according to their preterite forms. (Only four of the five classes of weak verbs survived in attested languages.) Strong verbs formed the preterite (originally Proto-Indo-European perfect) form by means of ablaut or reduplication while in weak verbs, a dental suffix was added to the root of the verb. Within the thematic verbs, there was another small group of *preterite-present* verbs, whose present tense forms correspond to the preterite forms of strong verbs and preterite forms to the preterite forms of weak verbs. (For more details on the distinction between the different classes and their later development see Chapter 4.2.2.) The tense system of Proto-Germanic consisted of only two tenses (present and preterite), while Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit had six or seven different tenses.

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