

'Every animal knows to communicate. Even insects, such as bees and ants, know how to inform one another of the whereabouts of food. [...] Many animals, including all ape and monkey species, use vocal signs. For example, green monkeys use calls of various kinds to warn each other of danger, Zoologists have identified one call that means, 'Careful! An eagle!' A slightly different call warns, 'Careful! A lion!' When researchers played a recording of the first call to group of monkeys, the monkeys stopped what they were doing and looked upwards in fear. When the same group heard a recording of the second call, the lion warning, they quickly scrambled up a tree, Sapiens can produce many more distinct sounds than green monkeys, but whales and elephants have equally impressive abilities. A parrot can say anything Albert Einstein could say, as well as mimicking the sounds of phones ringing, doors slamming and sirens wailing, Whatever advantage Einstein had over a parrot, it wasn't vocal. What, then, is so special about our language?'

Sapiens, Yuval Noah Harari

Historical Linguistics¹

Linguistic typology: The study that characterize the various languages we know based upon their structural properties. Language families

A family is a set of languages that all descend from one shared, common ancestor.

An isolate is a language that can't be demonstrably related to any others.

Comparative method of historical linguistics

This method assumes that the principle of language change applies to all languages, rather than just to a specific language family. One of the underlying rationales lies in the similarity of oral apparatus and the physiology of which determines what sounds we produce.

Exercise Time

1 Lithuanian

Look at the following words in Vedic Sanskrit, a language spoken more or less 3500-3000 years ago: devas 'God' cognate with Latin deus, Engl. Tues-day

dā- 'to give' cognate with Latin do, dare 'give' etc. (cf. data 'what is given')

dant- 'tooth' cognate with Latin dens, dentis (cf. dental)

dhānā 'grain'

And now look at the following proverb in Lithuanian – a modern language, spoken nowadays:

¹The questions are adapted from the handout by Marek Majer, TF for Ling 108 Fall 2013 unless the otherwise indicated.

“Dievas davē dantis, Dievas duos duonos”

Notes: -ē in davē is the third-person singular past tense ending

-s in duos is the third-person singular future tense ending both forms belong to the same verb

Can you figure out the meaning of the proverb?

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2 Reconstruction

Some basic exercises in reconstruction:

	Italian	Spanish	Portuguese	French
‘healthy’	sano [sano]	sano [sano]	são [sõ]	sain [sɛ̃]
‘dog’	cane [kani]	can (archaic) [kan]	cão [kõ]	chien [ʃjɛ̃]
‘bread’	pane [pani]	pan [pan]	pão [põ]	pain [pɛ̃]
‘hand’	mano [mano]	mano [mano]	mão [mõ]	main [mɛ̃]

Can we reconstruct the proto-Romance together?

Can we try the form a family tree?

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