

# 1st Assignment

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“Explain the phonetic processes known as “Grimm’s Law” and “Verner’s Law”. To what extent do they serve to explain apparent “anomalies” in the Old English lexicon and verbal system? To what degree have such anomalies been preserved in Present-Day English?.”

## Grimm's Law

Grimm's Law is an analysis of the first sound shift in the history of English and other Germanic languages. This sound shift, which is about changes in spoken consonants, has been dated as far back as 1000 BCE and may have lasted at least into the fifth century CE. The chronology, i.e. the sequence of the various changes, is uncertain. When linguistics was a young science and the discovery of Indo-European language 'family' was also recent (both dating from the late 18th century), the Danish scholar Rasmus Rask discovered some consonantal changes described in a publication in 1818. This was made more widely known by the German philologist, jurist and mythologist Jacob Grimm (in his *Deutsche Grammatik* in 1822) and became subsequently known as *Grimm's Law*, because papers written in German were more readily accessible to international scholarship.

Briefly summarized, Grimm's Law suggests: 1) Proto-Indo-European voiceless plosives [\*p, \*t, \*k] became voiceless fricatives [\*f, \*θ, \*h] in the Germanic languages; 2) Proto-Indo-European voiced plosives [\*b, \*d, \*g] became voiceless plosives [\*p, \*t, \*k]; and 3) Proto-Indo-European aspirates [\*b<sup>h</sup>, \*d<sup>h</sup>, \*g<sup>h</sup>] became voiced plosives [\*b, \*d, \*g] or fricatives [\*β, \*ð, \*γ] in Proto-germanic (depending on the contexts).<sup>1</sup>

## Verner's Law

It is more complicated. One of the factors involved is the change of stress from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic, which may have impacted consonant changes in some words but not in words where the stress-change happened after the consonant change (if any). In Classic Greek, the second syllable would be stressed in a word like *pa'ter*, but in Old English it became *ƿæder*, with stress on the first syllable, i.e. the root of the word instead of the suffix (or the prefix in some cases, when the stress would shift from the first to the second syllable).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Robert McColl, *Trask's Historical Linguistics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Hodder, Routledge, NY, 2007, p. 119; Lyons, John, *Language and Linguistics, an Introduction*, Cambridge, 1981, p.196

<sup>2</sup> Algeo, John and Pyles, Thomas, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Thomson Wadsworth, Boston, 2005, p. 78

## Verbal Anomalies

One impact of Verner's Law on Old English is the change of /s/ to /r/ in some cases. Many of these changes have not survived, like the past tense of the Old English verb *freosan*<sup>3</sup> ('to freeze'), which was *frore* ('frosty' or 'frozen'), which is obsolete. The Old English verb *forleosan* ('to lose completely') has however a survivor in the present-day adjective *forlorn*.

The verb *to be* is unique in the sense that its singular and plural preterit forms (*was* and *were*) have survived all the way into modern English.<sup>4</sup>

Nonstandard speakers have carried through the tendency that has reduced the preterit forms of all other verbs to a single form, and they get along very nicely with you was, we was, and they was, which are certainly no more inherently "bad" than you sang, we sang, and they sang -- for sung in the plural would be the historically "correct" development of Old English *ge, we, hi sungon*.<sup>5</sup>

This does not only apply to "nonstandard speakers" but also to one of the most distinguished songwriters of the 20th century, Paul McCartney:

Man, we was lonely, yes, we was lonely  
 And we was hard pressed to find a smile  
 Man, we was lonely, yes, we was lonely  
 But now we're fine all the while<sup>6</sup>

## Grimm's Law and Verner's Law

The Rask-Grimm data cannot be digested raw.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Grimm's Law was extensively discussed and criticized throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Arguably, it was redeemed, rescued, by Karl Verner in 1875. In a clever way, Verner cleared up some discrepancies in

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<sup>3</sup> At first glance, this word seems to have been preserved in the word *Freon*, a gas that was used as a cooling agent for refrigerators, air conditioners, aerosol propellants etc. from 1929 until it was banned because of its toxicity and contribution to ozone depletion. *Freon* is however a registered trade name of DuPoint, so it has nothing to do with the survival of old words.

<sup>4</sup> Algeo and Pyles 2005, p. 116

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Man We Was Lonely* From the album *McCartney* (Apple Records, April 1970)

<sup>7</sup> Collinge, N.E., *The Laws of Indo-European*, John Benjamin's Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1985, p.64

Grimm's Law, paying special attention to the change of stress from Indo-European (including Greek and Latin) and proto-Germanic, to account for exceptions to apparent expectations. A classic example frequently mentioned is the evolution of the words for "father" and "brother". The Latin words in question are "pater" and "frater". Verner noted that sometimes, in middle and final position of words, PIE /t/ became PGmc /θ/ and then OE /ð/.<sup>8</sup> The Old English word for the Latin "pater" is "fæðer"; the letter ð could be rendered as a voiced or voiceless fricative, or as a voiced plosive, /d/: "fæder".

Verner thought that the voicing of medial spirants in voiced environments was a natural linguistic process, i.e. not merely a phenomenon limited to the origins of Germanic. Collinge expresses full agreement with Prokosch's assessment of Verner's law, namely that it provides "not an exception... but an acceleration".<sup>9</sup> This would corroborate the argument made above, namely that Verner redeemed or rescued the Trask-Grimm theory, not by merely providing a corollary to it, which would only indicate an addition or annex so to speak, but an elaborate *enhancement*.

## Conclusion

If Verner was right about the historic phonetic changes he was investigating, and others as well for that matter, being part and parcel of natural processes, this would justify the applications and implications of the word *law* in "Grimm's Law" and "Verner's Law", in the same sense that we talk about Newton's laws of motion or Pythagoras' geometrical laws. It may be argued that at the present time, we are at a relatively early stage of partially self-directed (conscious) linguistic evolution, but such a hypothesis would be less plausible the further we go back in time. This would mean that humanity is subject to laws of linguistics evolving over time, similar to the laws of biological evolution. At the risk of lending support to the 19th century arguments for positivism (i.e. applying the principles of natural science to the humanities), the very notion that human speech is governed by natural laws nevertheless lends credence to such arguments.

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<sup>8</sup> Peters, Robert A., *A Linguistic History of English*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1968, p. 49

<sup>9</sup> Collinge, 1985, p.206

## **Bibliography**

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