

LING 118: Historical and Comparative Linguistics

Time: Monday 1–3

Location: Boylston 303

<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/37804>

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1 About this course

This course is an introduction to historical linguistics at the graduate level. There is no specific prerequisite other than a general familiarity with basic linguistic concepts. For students whose background is in the history or philology of a particular group of languages, the main utility of the course will be to help relate the history of “their” languages (e.g., Romance, Slavic, Chinese, Indo-European, etc.) to the study of linguistics and language change in general. For students whose interests are in linguistic theory, the main utility of the course will be to help them use historical data in their own work and evaluate historical data in the work of others.

2 Objectives

- Introduction to the basic concepts of historical-comparative linguistics and language reconstruction.
- Understanding the fundamental aspects of language change (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic), both internally (structurally) and externally (socially), both through “natural” language change and language contact.
- Investigating genetic relatedness among languages, and the principles of reconstruction.
- Overview of the various language families and of their academic tradition of reconstruction.
- Introduction to the history of writing and the various writing systems.

3 Requirements

Students are expected to do the following:

- **Attend and participate in all lectures (15%).** Attendance is mandatory. However, you are allowed 2 absences when you provide a written excuse before the beginning of the class. Students are asked to participate in the discussion of the textbook chapters, homework problems, etc. Sometimes, small-group practice will be conducted during classes and students will be expected to work together as a team.
- **Reading (10%).** Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each lecture as they complement the lectures and provide the necessary background. Every now and then, there will be a quiz at the beginning of the class with questions related to the reading assignments.
- **Problem sets (25%).** The homework assignments will be graded for content. They usually consist of problem sets based on the subject of the preceding lecture(s) to make sure students are fully capable of solving them. Homework is to be printed out (unless it is hand-written), stapled, and handed in at the beginning of class. Students are encouraged to work with colleagues in order to figure out the problem sets. All the work that is turned in must be in your own words, however. Late submissions will only be accepted under special circumstances.
- **Write a term paper (50%).** The paper should be on a specific historical problem or phenomenon in a specific language or language family. There are no other restrictions, provided the problem/phenomenon is investigable — i.e., that there is sufficient material in languages you can read to make it a feasible paper topic.

4 Textbook

- Hans Henrich Hock & Brian D. Joseph, *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship, An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics*, 2nd revised edition, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009.

(The book will be available on Canvas.)

- Readings from other sources will also be posted on Canvas.

5 Schedule

This schedule is a tentative outline of topics, readings, and homework by week. It may change depending on class progress and is thus subject to change.

Week	Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
1	1/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intro to historical and comparative linguistics; How does language change? 	H/J, ch. 1 (+ app.)	TBD
2	1/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The academic tradition of historical and comparative linguistics and language reconstruction 	H/J, ch. 2	TBD
3	2/5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sound change (I) 	H/J, ch. 4	TBD
4	2/12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sound change (II) 	TBD	TBD
5	2/19	President's Day – no class		
6	2/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Morphological change, analogy (I) 	H/J, ch. 5	TBD
7	3/5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Morphological change, analogy (II) 	TBD	TBD
8	3/12	Spring recess – no class		
9	3/19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syntactic change 	H/J, ch. 6	TBD
10	3/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semantic change Lexical change, borrowing, etymology 	H/J, ch. 7, 8, 9	TBD
11	4/2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Genetic relationship, principles of reconstruction, comparative method Language families, language trees 	H/J, ch. 16 + 17	TBD
12	4/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The invention(s) of writing, writing systems 	H/J, ch. 3	TBD
13	4/16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language contact, “Sprachbund”, Pidgins 	H/J, ch. 12, 13, 14	TBD
14	4/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical linguistics, history, and prehistory 	H/J, ch. 18	TBD