

Typology I: Solution to Homework for Session 1

(The questions marked with (*) are research questions you can use to deepen your understanding, the others could be exam questions.)

1. **How many languages are there? What is the problem with this question?**

According to Ethnologue, there are about 7,000 languages currently spoken in the world. The problem is that there is no universally applicable definition of what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect.

2. **Do you expect the number of languages to increase or decrease in the future? Justify your answer!**

This question can be answered by considering the chief factors that contribute to the emergence and the disappearance of languages. New languages tend to arise whenever a language community is split up, usually by migration or political events. In our time, it is comparatively easy for members of a language community to maintain contact with each other over large distances, making it much less likely to split up. At the same time, the spread of modern education systems (which in most countries exclusively operate in a single national language) and economic pressure (better job perspectives with more commonly spoken languages) discourage parents from smaller language communities from teaching their children the inherited language, leading to a gradual language death within a few generations. Both effects together lead to a dramatic decrease in the number of languages spoken in the world. (It is believed that 90% of them will have become extinct by 2050.)

3. (*) **Name three languages that are extinct (in the sense that nobody speaks them as native languages any more). Briefly explain for each language why/how it died out.**

Latin: The official language of the Western part of the Roman Empire lacked standardization after the dissolution of the Western Empire around 400 AD, and the classical language fell out of use, leaving the colloquial Vulgar Latin as the only spoken language. By 700 AD, the different dialects of Vulgar Latin had become incomprehensible to each other, and written forms for some of these dialects emerged during the Middle Ages, giving rise to the modern Romance languages.

Livonian was a Balto-Fennic language of Latvia, closely related to Estonian. Once spoken in a much larger area, by the time of the reformation the language community of a few fishing villages was not important enough to get its own Lutheran church, leaving Latvian as the only liturgical language. As a result, the small community failed to develop a comprehensive written culture, making it unsuitable for higher education. The last native speaker of Livonian died on June 2, 2013. A few hundred ethnic Livonians are learning and trying to revive the language of their ancestors.

The **Tasmanian languages** were the indigenous languages of Tasmania, with unclear genetic affiliations. While a Pidgin variant survived until 1905, they were last spoken in everyday life in the 1830s. A combination of imported diseases and genocidal measures during the so-called “Black War” of 1828-1832 caused the Tasmanian Aborigines to become virtually

extinguished, with their culture and their languages getting lost in the process. Only a few wordlists remain.

4. **Why is it difficult to determine the number of languages in a given region at a given time? Name two problematic cases.**

The problem is that there often are no clear language boundaries. In a dialect continuum, inhabitants of any two neighboring regions do understand each other, so we would normally refer to their languages as dialects of the same language. However, speakers from regions which are further apart often cannot, which would mean that they speak different languages. A well-known example are the three Scandinavian languages Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, which are largely mutually intelligible, but are still considered different languages because of separate state traditions. By contrast, a large group of highly divergent West Germanic languages extending from Switzerland to the Baltic Sea are commonly considered dialects of a single German language.

5. **(*) Two important internet resources about the languages of the world are the World Atlas of Language Structures and Ethnologue. Find out and briefly explain what kind of information can be found at these sites.**

The **World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS)** is a typological database, providing information about a large number of phonological, grammatical and lexical properties for about 2,500 languages. On the webpage, the occurrence patterns for these properties can be inspected as map overlays, giving a quick visual impression of the geographic spread of interesting properties.

Ethnologue is the most comprehensive source of information about the world's languages. For more than 7,000 languages, Ethnologue contains information about the number of speakers, location, dialects and affiliations, and sociolinguistic status. Since the database is maintained by a Christian organization which studies minority languages with the goal of creating Bible translations, data on the availability of the Bible in each language is also given.

6. **(*) For a language of your choice (e.g. your native language), find out how it is classified genealogically.**

Standard High German is a West Germanic language, thus belonging to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family.

What are the closest relatives?

Its closest relatives are the Upper German dialects (Alemannic and Bavarian), the Central German dialects (Franconian and East Central German), and Yiddish. More distant West Germanic relatives include Low German, Dutch, and English. The North Germanic languages are more distantly related, and ultimately, Standard High German is related to most languages of Europe, Iran, and Northern India.

Is the classification disputed? No.

Are there any fringe theories about your language? What do these theories try to show? The most famous disputed theories about the Germanic languages as a whole are controversial claims by the German linguist Theo Vennemann. In his view, the Germanic languages have a

Punic (Semitic) superstratum. Punic, the language of classical Carthage, is supposed to have been brought to the North Sea region by Carthaginian colonists between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC. Vennemann uses the presence of strong verbs as well as similarities between Norse and polytheistic Semitic religions as evidence for this claim. He is also convinced that the Runic Alphabet, the earliest form of writing in Northern Europe, is derived directly from the Phoenician alphabet. While not a typical example of a fringe theory (Vennemann is a professor of German linguistics, and has a track record of much less controversial research), these views are widely rejected by the linguistics community, because the evidence is anecdotal and explainable by chance.

A much clearer case are the theories of Erhard Landmann, a layman who has published a book with the title “Weltbilderschuetterung: Die richtige Entzifferung der Hieroglyphenschriften”, about a “Theodic language” brought to our planet by aliens, which is suspiciously similar to Old High German, and is the ancestor of every language currently spoken on earth. Some parts of the book are freely available on the internet, providing ample examples of ill-applied methods which on the surface look similar to serious historical linguistics. The fragments are a both frightening and amusing read for any linguist interested in how extreme fringe theories can get (and how easy it is to publish complete nonsense), also giving a very good picture of the mindset of a fringe theorist.