Although English has borrowed much vocabulary from non-Germanic languages, particularly French and Latin, it remains a Germanic language not just in its core vocabulary of everyday words, but in its sounds and in its structure. The Germanic roots of the language are nowhere plainer than in its phonology. In 1822, Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) demonstrated a regular phonological difference between the Germanic family of languages and the other Indo-European languages. In general, voiceless stop consonants such as /p, t, k/ in the other Indo-European languages appear as the corresponding voiceless fricatives in the Germanic languages: for example, Latin *pater, trēs* = Present-Day English (PDE) *father, three*. Likewise, voiced stops such as /b, d, g/ in the other languages correspond to Germanic voiceless stops /p, t, k/, as with Latin *dvo, gens* = PDE *two, kin*. And the Indo-European consonants reconstructed as the voice aspirated stops /bh, dh, gh/ appear in Germanic as voiced fricatives: to Sanskrit *madhu-, mabhā-,*, compare Icelandic *mjöð* 'mead', Old English *nifol* 'dark' (where f represents a voiced sound [v]), though at the beginning of a word or after a nasal consonant we find instead voiced Germanic stops, as in *bear* and *bind* (compare Sanskrit *bhrāṭi* and *bhrdbhāti*, respectively). The correspondences are the result of a phonological change, now referred to as “Grimm’s law,” that affected Proto-Germanic, the prehistoric Indo-European language from which the Germanic languages descend.

The law is charted in Table 13.1, where /p/ and /b/ represent the sound of PDE *th* in *think* and *this*, respectively; /t/ is a voiceless velar fricative (developing to *h* where preserved in PDE), like that in Scottish *loch* and German *Nacht*; /s/ is the voiced equivalent of this (as in Danish *kage*); and /Ø/ is similar to /v/ (to which it develops in PDE), but it is formed with both lips rather than with teeth and lips together (as in Spanish *cabo*).

So regular is the correspondence of sounds that it made a profound impression, inspiring the formulation of similar “sound-laws” and the reconstruction of protolanguages—in essence spawning Western linguistics as a science, since diachronic change and consistency of explanation were the preoccupations of nineteenth-century linguistics.
English shares with the other Germanic languages a number of further phonological innovations that differentiate it from the rest of the Indo-European family. The resonants /l, r, m, n/ could be syllabic in Proto-Indo-European (PIE) (as they are word-finally, for instance, in PDE *bottle, *mitten, etc.), with various results in non-Germanic languages; only in Germanic do the syllabic varieties regularly become /ul, ur, um, un/, as in *spur (compare Sanskrit śprüfati ‘wards off’) and Old English *wulf ‘wolf’. Among other vowel changes, PIE o became Germanic a, as expressed in the PDE spellings yard (= Old Icelandic garðr, compare Latin hortus, Greek ἄνθροο) and what (= Old Icelandic hvat, German was, compare Latin quod). Likewise, PIE ā became Germanic ā, spelt o in PDE mother (= Old Icelandic mōðir, compare Latin māter) and ēbrow (= Old Icelandic bógr, compare Doric Greek πόρους).

A certain prosodic (accentual) change had a more profound effect: in Proto-Germanic, the accent shifted to the initial syllable in most word classes, but to the root syllable in verbs. The regularity is less clearly observable in PDE than in some other Germanic languages, due to the later influx of foreign (chiefly Romance) vocabulary; but to the verbs undergō, outwēigh, uplīft, with unstressed prefixes, compare the nouns ūndertow, ūtbuilding, ūdpraft, with initial stress. A result of the shift of accent is that final and other unstressed syllables tended to weaken and disappear over time, making most native English words relatively short by comparison to their cognates (their near genetic relations in other Indo-European languages). For example, the monosyllabic verb melts is equivalent to trisyllabic Sanskrit mārdati, and young is cognate with trisyllabic Latin juvenĭs.

Table 13.1  Grimm’s law (somewhat simplified)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Indo-European</th>
<th>→ Germanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless stop</td>
<td>Voiceless fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kʷ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced stop</td>
<td>Voiceless stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gʷ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirated stop</td>
<td>Voiced fricative/stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bh</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dh</td>
<td>/ð/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gh</td>
<td>/θ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghʷ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aspirated voiceless /bh/ was thinned to /θ/ in Germanic, whereas voiced /bh/ became /ð/ in Germanic. A certain prosodic (accentual) change had a more profound effect: in Proto-Germanic, the accent shifted to the initial syllable in most word classes, but to the root syllable in verbs. The regularity is less clearly observable in PDE than in some other Germanic languages, due to the later influx of foreign (chiefly Romance) vocabulary; but to the verbs undergō, outwēigh, uplīft, with unstressed prefixes, compare the nouns ūndertow, ūtbuilding, ūdpraft, with initial stress. A result of the shift of accent is that final and other unstressed syllables tended to weaken and disappear over time, making most native English words relatively short by comparison to their cognates (their near genetic relations in other Indo-European languages). For example, the monosyllabic verb melts is equivalent to trisyllabic Sanskrit mārdati, and young is cognate with trisyllabic Latin juvenĭs.

The accent shift also is implicated in a change known as “Verner’s law” (named after the Danish linguist Karl Verner, 1846–96), whereby the fricative consonants /θ, 总书记在/ were voiced after originally unstressed vowels. This explains many seeming exceptions to Grimm’s law, for example Old English soden ‘boiled, sodden’ (instead of expected *soθen < PIE *sateóm). Alternations caused by Verner’s law were still found in Old English, but in PDE (where Germanic /sl/, voiced from /s/ by Verner’s law, has become /rl/) the only remaining alternations are between <s> and <r> in the spellings was:were and lose:forlorn.
The morphology of English and its Germanic relatives also differs from that of other IE languages in systematic ways. The verb system in PIE was particularly rich and complex, expressing two voices, four moods, and perhaps as many as six tenses. Aside from a few relic formations, the Germanic languages have reduced this system to one voice (active, though Gothic, the most conservative of the Germanic languages, also preserves the medio-passive voice), three moods (indicative, subjunctive, imperative), and two formal tenses (present and preterite [i.e., past], though English has subsequently developed further distinctions by the use of auxiliaries). More important, methods of forming verb stems in Proto-Indo-European were remarkably varied. For example, a present stem might be characterized by reduplication of the initial consonant and insertion of a vowel, creating an extra, initial syllable (e.g., Greek σις-σι-μι 'I give', root σι-σι- or by infixation of ŋ in the root (e.g., Latin frangō 'I break'; compare perfect frangit, without the ŋ; PDE has the similar relic stand: stood) or by the addition of a suffix such as *-sk- or *-yo- before the personal ending (e.g., Latin [ gestão ŋ-ic-ō 'I get to know': perf. [ gestō tô: Sanskrit nāb-yā-ti 'binds') or by use of the bare root (e.g., Sanskrit ē-ti 'goes') or root plus connecting vowel (e.g., Sanskrit bhār-a-ti 'bears'). In addition, in different moods and tenses the root might show "ablaut" – the term refers to the alternation of vowels in PIE itself – resulting in PDE series like ride, rode, ridden and grow, grew, grown. This complex PIE system was simplified considerably in Germanic, where stem types came to be characterized less by infixes and stem-forming suffixes than by a limited number of ablaut types (in essence, seven). Thus, for example, all verbs that resembled Proto-Germanic *rīdanan (PDE ride, like drive, rise, write, etc.) formed their tenses the same way. These seven classes of verbs correspond roughly to the PDE "irregular verbs," though the distinctions among the seven classes are much harder to discern in PDE than in OE, and now the principal parts of these verbs must for the most part be learned individually rather than deduced from comparison to similar verbs.

Yet even in Proto-Germanic these seven classes of "strong" verbs came to be closed classes, in the sense that although they contained verbs that formed their principal parts the same way (the way PDE sing, sang, sung is analogous to ring, rang, rung), they were unproductive: new verbs could not be added to these classes. Rather, new verbs entering the language were added to the classes of "weak" verbs, a morphological innovation that distinguishes the Germanic languages from the rest of the Indo-European group. These are the verbs that in PDE add -ed in the past tense and the passive participle, along with any others that add an alveolar (dental) stop consonant in the past tense, such as bring, brought; have, had; and make, made (even though these are now treated as "irregular verbs"). Thus, like PDE nail, nailed are German nageln, nagelte, Danish nagle, naglede. The origin of the dental suffix used in the past tense is disputed, but one explanation often advocated is that it is a form of the verb do. If this is correct, then a past tense form like nailed could be said to derive from the Proto-Germanic equivalent of nail-did.

Another morphological characteristic of the Germanic group is the development of preterite-present verbs. Already in Proto-Indo-European some perfect forms had
present meaning, e.g. *woida ‘I know’, literally ‘I have seen’, a perfect form of the root *wid- (cf. Latin present video ‘I see’). In Germanic, because these verbs were perceived as expressing present-tense meanings, new preterites of the weak variety were developed for them, though the presents were still largely inflected like preterites — that is, they followed the ablaut alternations of preterite verbs and had preterite endings attached. For example, the Old English verb *scæl ‘shall’, inflected in the present tense like the preterite of a strong verb, has the preterite *scælde, inflected like a weak verb. In PDE, several of these verbs survive as modal auxiliaries, chiefly can, may (past might), must, and shall. These modal auxiliaries are set apart from other verbs in that they take no ending -s in the third person singular of the present (e.g., *she can vs. *she writes; this is a relic of preterite inflection in the present tense), they do not require the support of the verb do to form a question or a negative statement (e.g., Must they? vs. Do they know? and they must not vs. they do not know), and accompanying infinitives are not preceded by to (e.g., can go vs. wants to go). In addition to can, may, must, and shall, some other, moribund relics of the Old English preterite-present verbs are found, including some of the older uses of dare and need (as in Dare I say it? and Need this be a bad sign?).

In regard to the declension of nouns and adjectives — that is, the addition of endings to indicate grammatical relations within the sentence — PIE had a system of at least eight cases, as in Sanskrit. In Germanic the number was reduced, so that in Old English we find, really, four cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative, which are the cases of the subject, direct object, possessor, and indirect object, respectively), though there are scant remains of a fifth (instrumental, indicating means). With the loss of inflectional endings over the course of the medieval period, English relinquished all case endings in adjectives and all but the possessive ending -s (now spelt ‘s and ‘s’) in nouns, though a wider variety of case-forms survives in pronouns (I, me, my, mine, etc.). Germanic developed another “strong” and “weak” distinction, quite different from the one in verbs, in regard to the inflection of adjectives. Thus, for example, the adjective gôd ‘good’ is inflected as follows in the singular with strong masculine endings: nominative gôd, accusative gôdne, genitive gôdes, dative gôdum. With weak endings, however, the forms are nominative gôda, accusative, genitive, and dative gôdan. Nearly all early Germanic adjectives may bear either strong or weak inflections, depending on whether or not nouns they modify are definite. A noun is definite when it refers to a particular individual or item or subset of the totality of extant items. Thus, for example, in PDE, nouns preceded by the, this, that or a possessive pronoun like my or their are definite, while nouns preceded by a(n) or no article are usually indefinite (exceptions: Shakespeare, Chicago, outer space). In some Germanic languages, weak adjectives are still used with definite nouns and strong with indefinite ones, for example German der junge Mann ‘the young man’ vs. ein junger Mann ‘a young man’. This was the situation in Old English (compare se gôda mann ‘the good person’: gôd mann ‘a good person’), though the endings of all English adjectives were gradually lost in the course of the Middle Ages, resulting in elimination of the distinction. Even the definite article itself is an innovation in Germanic, since Proto-Indo-European had
no articles. PDE *the* developed from a PIE demonstrative pronoun whose reflex (resulting form) in OE might still be rendered ‘that’ or ‘this’, or not at all (as in *þæt lif habbæ* [for] the while that we have life’, i.e., ‘for as long as we live’). The rise of definite articles is clearly a late development in Germanic, as shown by the fact that the articles differ considerably from one Germanic language to another: in Icelandic, for example, the definite article derives from a source distinct from the source of PDE *the*, and it is commonly attached as a suffix, as in *bók-in* = *the book*.

As for the order of elements in clauses and sentences, the most notable feature is the general tendency in the Germanic languages for finite verbs (i.e., verb forms other than infinitives and participles) to appear as the second constituent in independent clauses (so-called V2 order). The first constituent may be a word or a phrase, for example a prepositional phrase, as in *þy ilcan geforðde Carl Francena cyng* ‘[In] that same year died Charlemagne, king of the Franks’. In Old English, V2 order was a strong tendency rather than a firm rule (as it is in Icelandic and German). Element order in English has subsequently become fixed in the pattern subject-verb-object (SVO), but in PDE there survive relics of the older, less rigid system, with an element other than the subject before the verb, for example *In the tree lived two owls* and *Up jumped the prosecutor* and “Hello,” said the parrot. The Germanic languages are also innovative in respect to methods of forming relative clauses.

The differences between the Germanic languages and the rest of the Indo-European group – and only a few such differences have been described above – are thus fairly striking. There are similarly regular differences among the Germanic languages themselves, and although these differences are usually a bit subtler, they point to certain subgroupings within the Germanic family. The family can be sectioned into three subdivisions, East, North, and West Germanic. The East Germanic division is represented by Gothic only (hence it is extinct), the North Germanic by the Scandinavian languages (excluding Finnish and Lappish, which are not Indo-European), and the West Germanic by German (High and Low), Yiddish, Dutch, Flemish, Afrikaans, Frisian, English, and older varieties of these, such as Middle English and Old Low Franconian (a type of older Dutch). The relations among the three Germanic groups are debated, since there are certain features that East Germanic shares only with West Germanic (e.g., the form of the verb ‘have’: Gothic *haban*, German *haben*, etc., vs. Icelandic *eiga*, Swedish *äga*, etc.), and certain ones that it shares only with North Germanic (e.g., the ending *-i* in the second person singular preterite of strong verbs: Gothic and Old Icelandic *niat* ‘you took’ vs. OE *nīme*, OHG *nāmi*, etc.). But the most striking resemblances are those between North and West Germanic, leading most linguists to assume that the two groups descend from a common protolanguage, Northwest Germanic, from which East Germanic was separated at a fairly early date. This analysis is represented by the Stammbaum or genealogical tree in figure 13.1.

A few of the most obvious commonalities are these. Gothic retains the Proto-Indo-European method of reduplication (addition of an initial syllable that begins with the same consonant as the verb root, as explained above in regard to Greek *dî-i-do-us* to mark the preterite of certain verbs (those of the seventh ablaut class): for example,
Gothic baihtan ‘command’ has the pret. sg. baibait. In Northwest Germanic, although there are a few relic reduplicated forms, the system of forming the preterite of these verbs has been changed fundamentally, so that we find, for example, OE hæt ‘commanded’ beside the rare older, reduplicated behzt. A few of the other developments common to Northwest Germanic are loss of the medio-passive voice (mentioned above as preserved in Gothic); development of /z/ to /s/ (“rhotacism”), as in PDE more, Old Icelandic meira = Gothic maizā; retention of Verner’s law alternations (lost in Gothic); backing of Proto-Germanic ē to ā (to Gothic rēdan ‘advise’, compare Old Icelandic ráða, German raten); and the development of umlaut vowels, i.e., front varieties of back vowels when i or j followed in the next syllable (e.g., to German Brüder, Old Icelandic bröðir, PDE brethren, with front vowels in the first syllable, compare Gothic braþrus, with a back vowel). But chronological differences may be involved in the rise of some of these features, and linguistic changes may extend over wide swathes of territory, affecting more than one language group at once, so that the genetic or “Stammbaum” model of a language’s direct descent from a protolanguage, without horizontal contact among languages in a family tree, is an oversimplification of the way that languages actually develop. It may be, after all, that there never was a Northwest Germanic protolanguage.

As for developments specific to West Germanic, distinguishing it from both Gothic and the Scandinavian languages, a simple difference is the development of ð to d: to Icelandic riða, glaður compare PDE ride, glad. But the most significant phonological development characterizing West Germanic is consonant gemination (doubling) between a short vowel and a resonant consonant, particularly /j/: to Gothic satjan, Old Icelandic setja ‘set’, compare Old English settan, Old Saxon settan; and to Old Icelandic æpli ‘apple’, compare Old English appel, Old Frisian appel. Before /j/, only /e/ is not so geminated; hence Gothic nasjan, barjōs = Old English nerian ‘save’ (with rhotacism), herias ‘armies’.

![Figure 13.1 One version of a genealogical model (Stammbaum) of the descent of the Germanic languages](image-url)
The West Germanic group comprises three divisions, Anglo-Frisian, Low German, and High German, often said to correspond roughly to the tripartite division of Ingaevones, Istaevones, and Herminones asserted by the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus in his *Germania* (ca. 98 CE). (The term “Ingvaeonic,” assuming Tacitus’ *Ingaevones* is a spelling error, is often applied in the literature to all the West Germanic languages excluding High German, though now it tends to be employed less usefully as a synonym for “Anglo-Frisian.” The Low German varieties in question show Ingvaeonic features to varying degrees.) The Anglo-Frisian group includes English and Frisian, a language now restricted to about 300,000 speakers in the northwestern Netherlands, including coastal islands, though formerly the Frisians occupied the entire coast from the Zuider Zee to southern Jutland. English and Frisian share several features that set them apart from the other West Germanic languages. For example, both show fronting of long and short West Germanic *a* (to German *Saat*, *Sack*, the latter with the sound [a], roughly as in *father*, compare PDE *seed*, *sack*, Frisian *sied*, *sek*); monophthongization of Germanic *ai* (to German *breit*, compare PDE *broad*, Frisian *broad*); and palatalization and affrication of velar consonants adjacent to certain front vowels and glides (to German *gelten*, *Kirche*, with initial stop consonants, compare PDE *yield*, *church*, Frisian *jilde*, *tsjerke*). Frisian is thus the language most closely related to English. The similarities between the two have sometimes been overstated in the popular literature, but a Frisian rhyme puts the matter succinctly: *Buuter, breea, in griene tjiiz / is goe Ingels in goe Fries* ‘Butter, bread, and green cheese / is good English and good Frisian’.

Among the West Germanic languages, English and Frisian are the most clearly differentiated from High German; languages like New Low German and Dutch show High German features in varying degrees. One High German feature is preservation of the postvocalic consonant clusters *mf*, *ns*, *nþ*. In Anglo-Frisian and in some Low German varieties, the nasal consonant in these groups is lost, with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel: to PDE *soft*, *five*, *us*, *mouth*, with loss of the nasal consonant, compare Old High German *samsto*, *finst*, *uns*, *mund*. But the feature that most markedly sets off the High German dialects from the rest of the West Germanic group is the High German Consonant Shift, a systematic change of consonants comparable to Grimm’s law. Word-initially, the stop consonants /p, t, k/ become affricates: to PDE *pipe*, *tide* compare German *Pfeife*, *Zeit*. Elsewhere in the word they become fricatives: to PDE *ship*, *water*, *make* compare German *Schiff*, *Wasser*, *machen*. And voiceless geminate stops become affricates: to OE *æppel*, *settan* compare German *Apfel*, *setzen* ‘apple, set’. Of some further developments in this consonant shift, those still attested in the modern standard language are the change of initial /d/ to /t/ (to PDE *drink*, compare German *trinken*) and of /b/ to /d/ (to PDE *thank*, compare NHG *danken*).

Thus, already in the Old English period, English occupied a relatively peripheral position in the West Germanic division. This is because the features that most clearly define the Anglo-Frisian group are consistently linguistic innovations, evidencing evolution away from the remainder of the West Germanic group, such as fronting of /a/ to /æ/ (as in *hat*, *thatch*) and affrication of original /k, g/ (as in *church*, *singe*).
peripheral status of English becomes even clearer when changes specific to Old English and to the later language are taken into account (on which see PHONOLOGY: SEGMENTAL HISTORIES).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


