PAPER 7 (HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS)
COMPARATIVE METHOD

For the pre-historic languages a surer method of defining change and determining earlier forms has been developed which is known as comparative method (family model-family tree-wave theory).

In using the comparative method we contrast forms of two or more related languages to determine their precise relationship. This relationship is indicated most simply by reconstructing the forms from which they developed.

The first useful model used in historical linguistics was the family model. After Sir William Jones called attention to the connection between Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Germanic, linguists set out to determine and represent the relationship between these languages. They did so by taking various languages to various members of a family.

The family model was useful in working out the alignment of languages, but gave way to the family tree, propounded by August Schezcher. The comparative method assumes that such branch and language bears independent witness to the forms of the parent language and that identifies or correspondences among the related languages, revealed features of the parent speech. Thus the comparative method assumes:

1. That the parent community was completely uniform as to the language and
2. That the parent community splits suddenly and sharply into two or more daughter communities which lost all contact with each other.
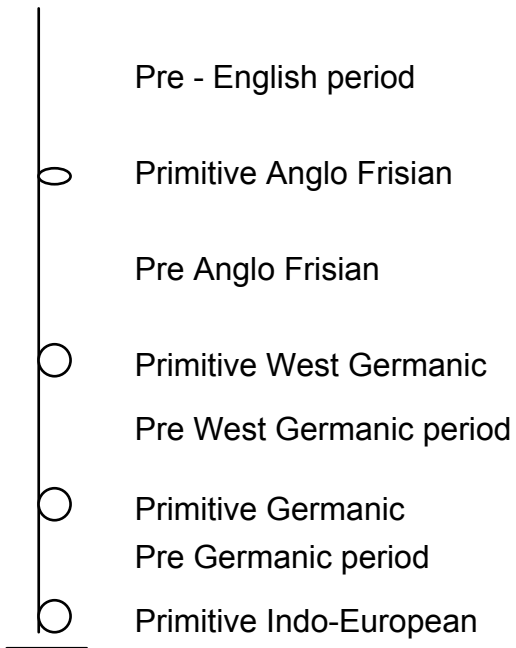
The Indo-European group and other such groups are known as language family. Greek and Latin and other Indo-European languages may be called sister languages.

LIMITATION: The comparative method has the serious limitation that it offers no means of reconstruction elements which are completely lost in the subsequent stages of the language.
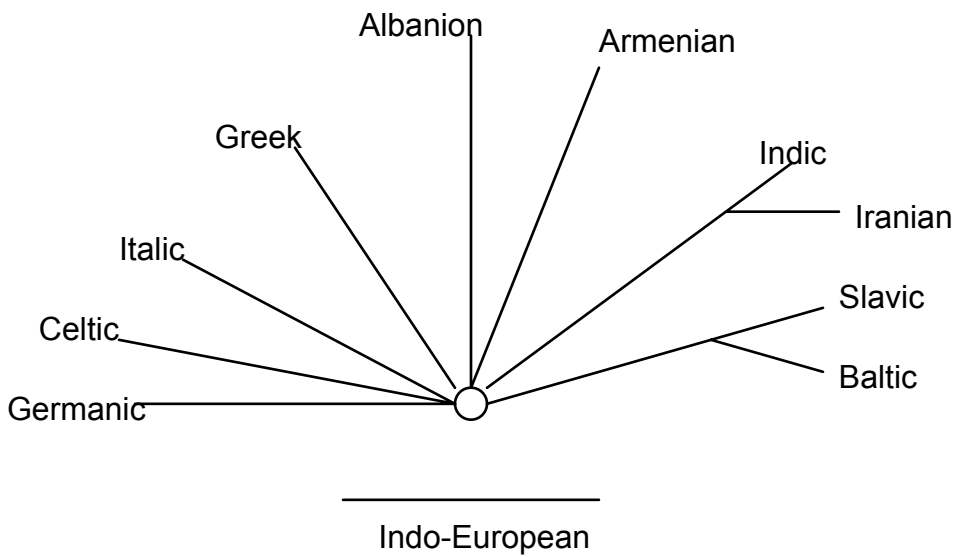
The comparative reconstructs uniform pattern languages existing at points in time and deduces the changes which took place after each parent language splits upto the next following parent language or recorded language. This method thus shows us the ancestry of languages in the form of a family tree with successive branching. The points at which branches separate are designated by the word 'primitive'. The branches between the points are designated by the prefix 'pre' and represent periods of linguistic change.

(1) The diagram given below shows the various stages in the history of English.

English (actual records)

Pre - English period

Primitive Anglo Frisian

Pre Anglo Frisian

Primitive West Germanic

Pre West Germanic period

Primitive Germanic
Pre Germanic period

Primitive Indo-European

The diagram given below is a family tree diagram and shows the relationship of the Indo-European languages.

Albanion

Armenian

Greek

Indic

Iranian

Italic

Slavic

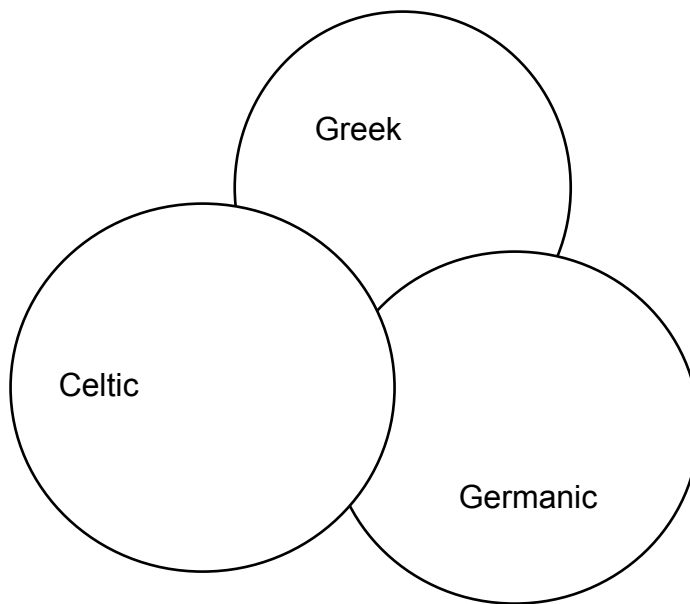Celtic

Baltic

Germanic

Indo-European

The earlier students of the Indo-European did not realize that the family tree diagram was merely a statement of their method; they accepted the uniform parent languages and their sudden and clear cut splitting as historical relatives. But in actual observation, however, no speech community is ever quite uniform. Though at times a sudden cleavage as assumed by the comparative method does actually happen, but this is not the general feature.

N.B. The Jutes, the Angles and the Saxon came to Britain, and their language developed independently from the parent language.

As more and more resemblances between languages were revealed, the older scholars who insisted upon the family tree diagram faced an insolvable problem.

The reason for these contradictions was printed in 1872 by Johnnes Schmiett. He showed that special resemblances are not numerous in the class of branches which lie geographically near each other.

Schmiett accounted for this by the so-called wave theory. Different linguistic changes may spread like waves over a speech area that does not coincide with the part covered by an earlier change, the result of successive waves will be network of isoglassis. Adjacent districts will resemble each other most in whatever direction one travels.

Greek

Celtic

Germanic

The diagram represents Indo-European languages as propounded by Schmiett. The wave theory is preferable to the family tree theory since it permits us to show flexible interrelationships between languages and changes affecting them. Both, however, share the defect of depicting language as a set composed of a single layer rather than multilayered phenomenon.

Modern linguists view the wave process and the splitting process merely as two types - perhaps the principal types of historical processes that lead to linguistic differentiation.