How Close Is Gothic to Old English: A Comparative Overview

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Faculty Introduction

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In her honor's contract thesis entitled "How Close Is Gothic to Old English: A Comparative Overview," Primrose takes a typological approach to look at the phonological and morphological similarities (and select differences) between two extinct Germanic languages: East Germanic Gothic and West Germanic Old English. The paper is an exploration into a challenging area of historical linguistics, rarely tackled by undergraduate students. Drawing from prominent scholars' work, which was based on surviving Gothic and Old English texts, Primrose underscores the key areas of similarities between these two related Germanic languages and shows that the similarities in the areas of the sound system and morphology are much more significant than the differences. The merit of Primrose's research is to show convincingly—and in terms accessible to a lay audience—how the typology of Gothic and Old English reflects their established genetic relationship.

Abstract

In an effort to expose linguistics to those outside of the field, this paper uses a more easily understood language to explore the similarities between Gothic, an Eastern Germanic language, and Old English (the ancestor to Present-Day English), a Western Germanic language. The following paper examines the Gothic language and Old English by creating an overview of both languages and then briefly comparing them to one another. The author analyzed several notable papers and handbooks, focusing on Dr. Gary Miller's most recent research. The studies examine the vowel and consonant system, phonology, morphology, and the representation of sounds in the Gothic Alphabet.

The Indo-European languages consist mostly of what we think today as the modern European languages; however, multiple Indian languages also belong to this language family. There are ten main branches in the language family tree for Proto-Indo-European, and each of these branches can have several more branches. The Germanic branch has three branches, which include North, West, and East subbranches. The North Germanic subbranch includes modern-day languages such as Swedish, Icelandic, Danish, and Norwegian, while it also contains extinct languages such as Ancient Norse and Old Norse, where Ancient Norse was spoken at an earlier time (Nedoma, 2017, pp. 876–878). The West Germanic branch includes languages such as Yiddish, German, Dutch, and Flemish, as well as Present-Day English (PDE). The ancestor of Present-Day English is Old English, which was spoken from ca. 450 to ca. 1100. Finally, the East Germanic branch of languages includes languages such as Burgundian, Vandalic, and Crimean Gothic, all of which are extinct (Nedoma, 2017, p. 880). The focus of this paper is on the Gothic language, which died out in the sixth century with the last remaining Ostragoths to be discussed subsequently.

My approach will be twofold: I will provide an overview of the Gothic language while simultaneously comparing it to Old English and, to a lesser extent, to other Germanic languages like Old Norse and Old High German (Nedoma, 2017, p. 883; see also the other sections on Germanic in Klein, Joseph, & Fritz, 2016, pp. 889–1027). This will include centering on the phonology and morphology of the Gothic language. The purpose of this article is to inform non-linguists about the Gothic language and its similarities to Old English. While most information on the Gothic language is from experts, and may hence be difficult for the lay audience to understand, this overview will provide an easier understanding for those who are interested in a few of the basics.

A Gothic Overview

According to Thomas O. Lambdin (2006) in *An Introduction to the Gothic Language*, the Goths were a Germanic tribe that may have originated in Scandinavia ca. 350. Following several migrations, the Goths appear to have settled in an area to the north and west of the Black Sea: the Visigoths then settled to the west and the Ostrogoths to

the east (Lambdin, 2006, p. ix). The extent of evidence for the Goths and their language is limited to nine manuscripts that constitute the Gothic corpus. The *Codex Argenteus*, which makes up most of the Gothic corpus, was created ca. 520; written in silver and gold ink on purple vellum, it is considered a "deluxe manuscript" (Miller, 2019, p. 9). There are the *Codices Ambrosiani*, which hold most of the translation of the Gothic Bible. In addition, there are the *Codex Carolinus*, *Codex Gissensis*, *Codex Taurinensis*, and *Gotica Veronensia* (Miller, 2019, pp. 9–10). Aside from these few texts, there are prior remainders of Germanic runic inscriptions (Bennett, 1960, p. 1) as well as a few Ostrogothic deeds and Crimean graffiti (Miller, 2019, p. 12).

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An Old English Overview

The earliest known text of Old English, King Æþelberht's code of laws, comes from around 600 CE (Nedoma, 2017, 882). One of the most famous texts is "Beowulf," a poem that is considered the greatest work of Old English. The poem exemplifies a grandiose style that uses a vast amount of apposition and alliteration (Nedoma, 2017, p. 882). Old English continued to be spoken until about 1050, around the time of the Norman conquest by William the Conqueror in 1066, and it then began the shift into another variety of English, today called Middle English. Middle English is a West Germanic language whose relatives include Old Saxon and Old Frisian, though they remain closer to Old English. Middle English contains a large incorporation of Danish and French. Much of the Old English grammar is similar to the grammar of modern German (see, e.g., Hawkins, 1986).

The Gothic Alphabet and Representation to Sounds

Phonology is the study of distinctions and changes in sound patterns. I begin the phonological analysis of the Gothic language with its twenty-seven letter alphabet, which represents Gothic sounds. William Holmes Bennett (1960) in *An Introduction to the Gothic Language* took the twenty-seven letter alphabet and converted them from their original form into a numerical value associated with a Greek letter;

Miller takes the process one step further by providing a Roman translation for each Greek equivalent letter for the Gothic alphabet.

An example of this can be given with their first letter:

𐌰 → 1 → A → a → aza

The 23rd letter provides another example:[1]

𐍆 → 500 → F → f → fe

Many of these letters and their forms give suggestion to the earlier acknowledged runic variations, similar to early Old English and Old Norse. There are historians and linguists who argue about where the Gothic alphabet came from, even though it is evident that Gothic letters are similar to Greek letters in form. This similarity also shows possible influence from Latin (Miller, 2019, p. 22). Our understanding of the phonology of Gothic derives from the transcriptions of the proper names from Greek biblical texts, the phonetics of other Germanic languages—specifically Old High German, Old Norse, and Old English—as well as the different spelling variations within Gothic words (Lambdin, 2006, p. xii).

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The transcribed Gothic letters can be divided into consonants and vowels. Consonants transcribed with letters <*p*, *t*, *k*, *f*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*, *w*> and <*z*> correspond to the phonemes /p, t, k, f, l, m, n, s, w, z/, just as in modern English.[2] Letters with varying pronunciations include <*q*>, which stands for the initial sound in words such as *quick* and *queen*, representing [k^w]. Some others include 𐌾 or < þ> representing [θ] (as in *thick* or *think*). The grapheme <g> can represent the sound [ŋ] only in sequences *-gg* —which also has the value of [gg]— and the sequence of *-gk*. The letters <b, d, g> stand for voiced stops [b, d, g]

[1] In the Gothic alphabet the 𐍆 really corresponds phonetically to the Greek Φ. However, it looks nothing like the Greek phi, and the only language around that had a character ƒ with the sound [f] was the Latin—or runic. The actual source of the Gothic character had to be Latin or runic. For additional examples, see Appendix A.

[2] Symbols within angled brackets "< >" represent graphemes; symbols within slanted lines "/ /" represent phonemes; and symbols within brackets "[ ]" represent phones.

initially and medially when they precede a consonant. When preceded by a vowel, they represent voiced spirants [v, ð, ɣ]. The first two, [v, ð], act like the medial sounds in the words *heaven* and *heathen*. In the final position, while following a vowel, they represent the sounds [f, θ, x]. The graphemes <b> and <d> are usually, but not always, replaced with <f> and <þ> in spelling. This occurs because of what is known as the rule of devoicing in consonants. The letter <*x*> occurs only in borrowed proper names, mostly *Xristus* 'Christ.' It likely represents the sounds [k] or [x]. These are just a few examples of Gothic sounds and some of their variants (Lambdin, 2006, p. xiii).

As the above examples indicate, there is no one-to-one correspondence between Gothic letters and their phonemes. However, they fall into a clear phonological system. There are four voiceless stops represented by the labial /*p*/, the coronal /*t*/, the velar /*k*/, and the labiovelar /*k*^*w*/. Corresponding to the voiceless stops, there are four voiced stops: labial /*b*/, coronal /*d*/, velar /*g*/, and labiovelar /*g*^*w*/. Gothic also has the voiceless continuants: /f, θ, s, x, h^w/ and /h or χ/. The best evidence for this is that *h* was [h] in all positions. In addition, the Gothic phoneme (allophonic) inventory includes the following voiced continuants: /β, ð, z, ɣ/. There are far fewer sonorants, with three nasals: /m, n, ŋ/; two liquids: /r, l/; and two glides /j, w/.

According to Prokosch (1939), "new tendencies set in that led to consonant changes in new directions," with Gothic and especially in Old Norse. In both Gothic and Old Norse, the Germanic phoneme /ʒ/ was a spirant in all positions except after nasals. This, however, is an assumption. In Old English, the /ʒ/ acted as medial and final spirants, while in Old High German it was probably an initial spirant, but in later Old English, this initial sound was used before consonants and back vowels (Prokosch, 1939, p. 76).

Furthermore, voiceless stops after vowels ended up becoming voiceless spirants, and then voiceless stops that initially came after consonants changed to corresponding affricates (Prokosch, 1939, p. 81). There were other consonant shifts like with the dental [θ], represented by the grapheme <þ>, the thorn, in writing. Gothic preserved this in all positions, initially, medially, and finally: *þu*, *wairþan*, *brōþar*, and *warþ*. With Old English and Old Norse, this sound initially remained

voiceless, but in a voiced environment it became the voiced allophone [ð]. The Old Norse words *þing* and *bróðir* illustrate this; similarly, in Old English, the initial sound *þing* was a voiceless interdental fricative, but in the medial position, as in the word *brōðor*, the voiced allophone would appear. The letter symbols of the two languages are used interchangeably. The phoneme /*h*/, however, (represented by the letter <h>) remained a uvular fricative [h] in Gothic (Miller, 2019). In Old English, it disappeared between voiced sounds, and in Old Norse, it remained only in initial positions (Prokosch, 1939, p. 75). Besides this consonant shift, there was also a vowel shift that affected Gothic.

The vowel system for Gothic can be represented by the letter symbols <*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*>. In the vowel charts for Indo-European (see, e.g., Meier-Brügger, 2003) *i* and *ī* are front high vowels; *u* and *ū* are back high vowels; *e* and *ē* are front middle vowels; *ɔ* is a central middle vowel; *o* and *ō* are back middle vowels; and *a* and *ā* are back low vowels. The difference in the variants (indicated by the macron), is the length of the vowel: they can be either short or long. Prokosch (1939) states that the "most outstanding characteristic of early Germanic vowel development is the rigid adherence to the contrast between short and long vowels […] But the early Germanic languages not only preserve, but in fact emphasize the contrast," and with Germanic long vowels it is generally addressed with [ā] to [ō] and the [ē] to the long [æ] (with the macron). In Gothic—which branches from Proto-Germanic and then East Germanic—a different process of change can be seen: the æ (with a macron) reverts to ē by tensing, but in Old English [æ] (with the macron) is developed secondarily (Prokosch, 1939, p. 99). Miller acknowledges Gothic vowels could have remained long; they just would not have done so in root syllables. A contrary idea is that the contrast was not between long and short vowels, but between various tense and lax vowels.

With the vowels came diphthongs, specifically the greatly debated diphthongal *ai* and *au*. A diphthong is formed by two vowels creating one syllable, and these sounds start off as one vowel that glides into another vowel. According to Prokosch (1939), Gothic still had the diphthongs *ai* and *au* (p. 106). Miller (2019) claims that the main alternative to the vowel system was the following, observed by Wulfila: diphthongs *ai* and *au* were monophthongized; that is, they became vowels that have only

one quality of sound (p. 39). There are some textual differences that the scribes could have introduced at the time, but it is likely that the texts were changed very little by copyists and translators through the period in focus (Miller, 2019, p. 42).

Morphology of the Languages

Morphology, the study of the structure of words and their forms, also provides us with information about the differences between Gothic and Old English. In Gothic, there are two inflections of numbers: singular and plural. The nouns show five cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and vocative. Just like in Old English, and similarly to the German of today, Gothic nouns belong to three genders: masculine, feminine, or neuter. These three genders sometimes determine the inflection of the noun (what follows pertain only to the vocative case forms) except in *-u*-stems that show the form of accusative or are syncretized with the nominative (Miller, 2019, p. 58). Adjectives are also inflected but, in addition, they further have strong and weak forms. Furthermore, "[p]ersonal pronouns of the first and second person are inflected for singular, plural, and dual and have no gender distinction," while "the third person pronoun has all three genders but only singular and plural number" (Miller, 2019, p. 58). The determination of the grammatical class is placed on the suffixes. In Gothic, the *-a*-stem of the masculine word *day* had the singular nominative form *dags*; the singular vocative form was the same as the singular accusative form (*dag*); the singular genitive form was *dagis*; and the singular dative form was *daga*. In contrast, Old English had only a four-case system, with a rare form called instrumental. The main Old English cases were nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative (Smith, 2009, p. 22).

Similar to Gothic, Old English also held the three-gender system, which has been mostly preserved in many Indo-European languages. There are several languages across the world that have abolished grammatical gender or have more than these three. The gender of a noun is mostly determined by its inflection, but gender can also be determined by meaning (Lambdin, 2006, p. 1). It should be noted that the gender of the word is independent of sex, or biological gender, in Gothic, as well as in early stages of Old English. When it comes to the neuter forms, the nominative and accusative are identical in Gothic and every other

older Indo-European language. For example, the Gothic word for the Present-Day English word *knee* is *kniu* in nominative and accusative, with genetive *kniwis** in genitives and dative *kniwa**, but the word lacks the vocative form (Miller, 2019, p. 59).[3]

The Gothic verb system also needs to be addressed. As with Old English, Gothic has strong and weak verbs. Gothic verbs are inflected in first, second, and third person, and then singular, dual, and plural in number. The third person pronouns lost the dual form, and it no longer exists with the nouns. Strong verbs have seven classes (1–7), and they contain four principal parts. It is worth mentioning that Gothic alone in Germanic kept a verb system without a future tense.

There were also strong and weak adjectives that were inflected in all genders, cases, and the two numbers. According to Miller, the strong forms of these adjectives outnumbered the weak nearly four to one (p. 67). Old English verbs were also strong and weak, with seven strong types and two weak. The difference between the verbs comes with the existence of the passive voice that remained in Gothic, where the "passive morphology [lagged] behind the development of a syntactic passive" (Miller, 2019, p. 215). The lag was given from the English progressive; Gothic preserves the inherited mediopassive as passive, and developed a periphrastic passive in the preterite. "Apart from relics like OE *hātte* 'am/is called', Gothic alone preserves the inherited mediopassive as a synthetic passive," which is important to Gothic because it appears in all forms of the verbs (Miller, 2019, p. 215). Just as Old English, Old Norse, and Old High German, Gothic had no indefinite article. For Old English, this developed later, after Gothic was already extinct. Had it survived, Gothic may have developed an indefinite article, similarly to the later development of the indefinite article in Old English.

Conclusion

Many of the differences between Gothic and the other languages in the Germanic branches of Indo-European are the results of the early split of East Germanic from Proto-Germanic. This leads scholars to believe that North Germanic (like Old Norse) and West Germanic (like Old

[3] This is perhaps for pragmatic reasons, as this word is highly unlikely to be used as an address term.

English and Old High German) are far closer to each other than to East Germanic, which Gothic represents. While Gothic and Old English still hold similarities, there are quite a number of differences. These differences are indicated throughout the areas of phonology and morphology in the surviving Gothic texts. The consonant and vowel systems are good examples of contrast between Gothic and Old English. There are also similarities and differences between these two Germanic language in their nominal class, number, and gender systems, realized in their nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

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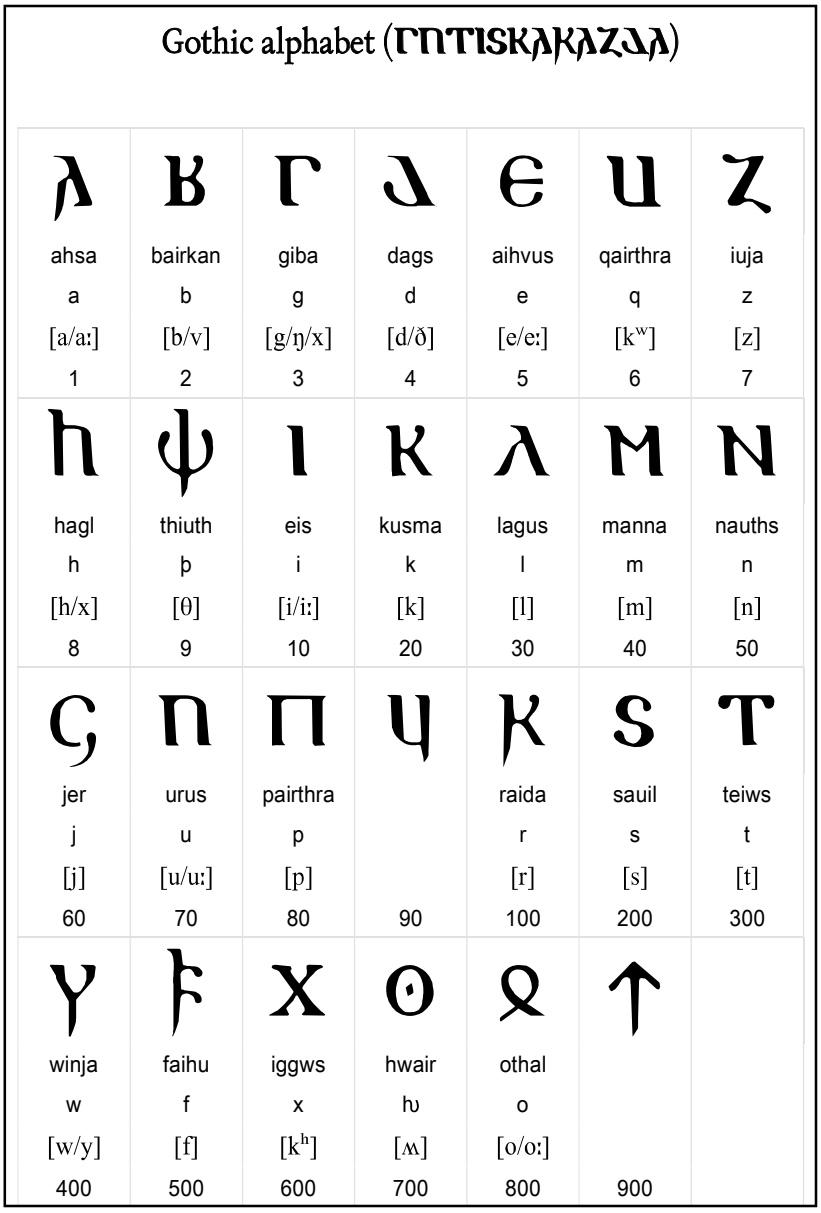
Much of the scholarship available of Gothic and Old English is extremely technical and may be challenging to understand for non-linguists. For this reason, my paper provides a relatively accessible overview of what scholars have found about these two extinct languages—the two related varieties of Germanic. I have here highlighted a few of the major known differences between Gothic and Old English, focusing on the areas of phonology and morphology. Other linguistics may be similarly interested but unsure where to start in their studies, and hopefully this has provided significant encouragement for those researchers to take a plunge into this field of study. ■

I wish to acknowledge Professor D. Gary Miller for his help in the preparation of this article. He not only made a pre-publication version of his most recent book, The Oxford Gothic Grammar, *available to me, but he also commented extensively on an early version of my work.*

Appendix A



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Student Biography

Rebekah Primrose is a graduating senior in English at Sam Houston State University. She began her interest in linguistics and ancient languages when she took a course over the history of the English language. The course briefly discussed the Gothic language, and in the following course, Introduction to Linguistics, she began to further her research. With guidance from Dr. Halmari, a professor in linguistics, she began to delve deeper into the knowledge and linguistics of this dead language. Rebekah graduates in summer 2019 and plans to pursue graduate studies in English and creative writing.