

**Historical linguistics and language change:
Fundamental problems and how to deal with them.**

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Abstract

Language constantly changes, at all levels of the system (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, ...). The core interest of Historical Linguistics is to understand (a) how languages looked at earlier stages, (b) by which steps they changed, and (c) how to explain those changes, and understand their causes. The answer to these questions not only informs our understanding of the history of individual languages, but also of how human language works, more generally, and of how languages are related to each other. More than other branches of linguistics, however, historical linguistics faces a number of epistemological and methodological problems: Based on what kind of data can we address these questions? In case there are written sources, how reliably do they represent past stages of a language? In case there aren't, what other options do we have? Further questions arise, for instance regarding the relation between language variation and language change, the role do different forms of language acquisition, or of different socio-linguistic contexts. Based on selected empirical case studies, this course will give an overview of the ways Historical Linguistics addresses these questions and fundamental problems.