

It's Alive!

The history of language

Languages are living things; they change over time.

- Words are added
- Words are forgotten and no longer used
- Word meanings change
- Sounds change
- Grammar rules change

All living languages change. Languages that do not change are **dead languages**, like Latin. They are no longer used by any group of people to communicate.

The English we speak in America today is not like the American English spoken by George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. The farther back in time we go, the less the English spoken resembles modern English. If we could hear someone speak Old English, the English spoken about 900 to 1500 years ago, we'd hear something that sounds more like German than English!

Languages have different **dialects**. People in Indiana sound different from people in Alabama. In Indiana we speak a northern dialect. In Alabama, people speak a southern dialect. Sometimes dialects are so different, they sound like different languages. Each dialect can change and they might become so different that they turn into different languages!

For example, imagine that Latin had two different dialects. They both changed so much that one turned into French and one turned into Spanish. The original "**parent**" language (Latin) disappeared. French and Spanish are related. They both did come from Latin.

Linguists study modern languages and trace their histories through the writings in the languages. If you wanted to trace the history of English, you would start with modern writing and then look at earlier writings to see what things changed.

By seeing what changed over time, linguists can tell which languages belong to the same **language family**. They can even begin to reconstruct what language was like 5000 years ago!