

## 2. How Grimm’s Law Separated Germanic Family from Indo-European

Jacob Grimm was a German linguist (philologist) who identified and documented the **systematic** sound **similarities** and **differences** the Germanic languages (Proto-Germanic) and other Indo-European (Proto-Indo-European) languages. Extending the work of the Danish linguist Rasmus Rask<sup>1</sup> (who had earlier, in 1814, identified and recorded the relationships among cognates from several Indo-European languages), Grimm was able to explain the relationships among these cognates as “**sound shift**, the systematic modification of a series of phonemes.”

Grimm catalogued the series of consonant sound shifts that distinguished Proto-Germanic from other Indo-European languages. He identified the innovation that the Germanic languages share, specifically, a fair number of consonant shifts that distinguished Germanic language from other Indo-European languages. Where Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, for example, had a /p/, the Germanic languages had an /f/.

Grimm’s Law			Examples			
Voiceless stops > Voiceless fricatives			English	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin
p	>	f	foot	pād-	pod-	ped-
t	>	θ	thin	tanu-	tanaós	tenuis
k	>	h (underwent add’l sound change from /x/)	hundred	catam	hekatón	centum
Voiced stops > Voiceless stops						
b	>	p	slippery	-	-	lūbricus
d	>	t	ten	daca	déka	decem
g	>	k	acre	ajras	agros	ager
Voiced aspirated stops > Voiced unaspirated stops						
b <sup>h</sup>	>	b	brother	bhrātā	phrater	frater
d <sup>h</sup>	>	d	widow	vidhavā	eitheos	vidua
g <sup>h</sup>	>	g	goose	hansas	khen	hānser

However, there were some cognates in Indo-European that didn’t conform to Grimm’s Law. For example:

Latin	Expected per Grimm’s Law	Old English	English
stō	sθandan	standan	stand
spuō	sfiwan	spiwan	spew

Grimm was aware of the discrepancies, but he had postulated that the sound changes were “general tendencies.” But decades later, Karl Verner found a better reason for the variance than mere chance: It had to do with stress (or lack thereof, actually) on the preceding vowel. Verner’s law stated that when the preceding vowel was unstressed, an *f*, *θ*, and *x* underwent a further change to *b*, *d*, and *g*. From a higher level, this can be stated as “in cases when Grimm’s Law generates a voiceless fricative but the accent (stress) on the original Proto-Indo-European did not precede that sound, the voiceless fricative would become voiced.”

Proto-Indo-European	Sanskrit	Grimm’s Law	Verner’s Law	Gothic	English
*t	bhrata	*t > θ	-	[bro: θ ar]	brother
*t	pita	*t > θ	θ > ð	[fa ðar]	father

<sup>1</sup> Rask also established the baseline methodology for the emerging field of historical-comparative linguistics in the process of identifying the cognates.