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Germanic Linguistics and Textile Words

Introduction

Languages are not static. They develop and change over time, and different languages in different areas develop in different ways. Languages are related to each other. A language has a group of speakers, and as long as this group of speakers stays in close contact most of the time, they will keep speaking the same language, though the language is constantly changing. However, if this group of speakers splits up, the once-common language will sooner or later start to develop differently, at first with different dialects and later different languages. This is how a language family tree

grows (Fig. 1). Of the different elements of language, sounds are the most consistent in their development. When a certain sound starts to change, it does not only change in one word, but in all words, and the change will be the same in all words. If, in some words, a given change does not happen, or another change occurs instead, the condition for the exception can usually be described, as well. A sound change without exceptions is called an unconditional sound law. In the opposite case, we talk about conditional sound laws. An example of a sound law, can be found by looking at Latin, Sanskrit, Greek and the Germanic language

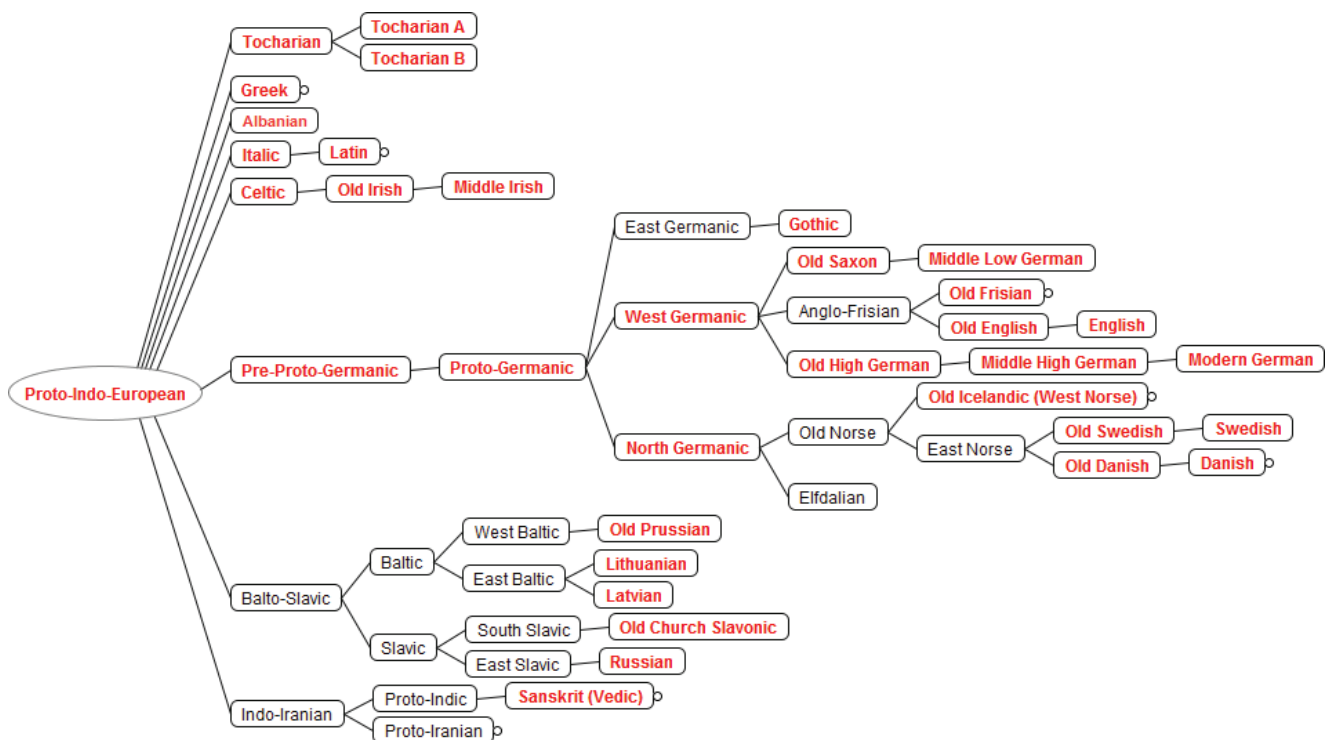


Fig. 1. Indo-European languages mentioned in this article are marked with red on the language tree (Graphics: Mikkel Nørtoft).



Proto-Germanic	Old High German	Old Saxon	Old Frisian	Middle Low German	Old English	Albanian
* <i>flahsan</i>	<i>flahs</i> 'flax'	<i>flahs</i> 'flax'	<i>flax</i> 'flax'	<i>flas</i> 'flax' <i>ulas-arne</i> 'flax harvest' <i>ulas-bote</i> 'flax bundle' <i>ulas-jart</i> 'flax field'	<i>fleax</i> 'flax'; <i>fleax-æcer</i> 'flax field'; <i>fleax-hamm</i> 'enclosed area where flax is grown'; <i>fleax-līne</i> 'a string of flax'	<i>plëhurë</i> 'rough linen'; <i>plaf</i> 'woollen blanket, woollen sheet'

Table 1. Simplex and compound words from Proto-Germanic **flahsan* (related words outside Germanic separated with double line).

Sources: Pokorny 1959, 835; Lübben 1965, 482; Blum 1971-1986, 941; Orel 2003, 104; Bosworth-Toller Anglo Saxon Dictionary <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/>.

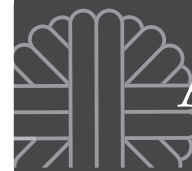
Danish. All these are Indo-European languages and are thus related. The modern Danish word *fader*, Latin *pater*, Greek, *patēr*, Sanskrit *pitár* all have the meaning 'father', but in Greek, Latin and Sanskrit the word is written with a *p*- whereas in Danish it is written with an *f*-. Another example is the modern Danish word *flette* ('to plait, braid'), Latin *plectō* ('I plait, twine'), Greek *pléktō* ('I plait, twine, wind, braid, knit'), Sanskrit *praśnah* ('wicker-work, wicker-basket'). Again, we observe that Latin, Greek and Sanskrit uses *p*-, whereas Danish uses *f*:- thus a pattern emerges. The non-Germanic languages listed here have preserved the Proto-Indo-European **p* (the asterisk (*) in front of a word or letter indicating it to be a reconstruction) whereas the Germanic languages have changed it into an *f*. This development in Germanic is part of what is known as 'the First Germanic Sound Shift', and there are hundreds of other words besides *flette* and *fader* which confirm this pattern.

The sound laws constitute the most important tool when it comes to reconstructing a proto-language. They tell us what the original sound was like and what developments took place in each daughter language. By understanding the sound laws, we can reverse the sound changes. For example, we know that Latin has preserved the original Indo-European *p*- whereas it developed into *f*- in Germanic. We also know that Indo-European *sk* and *i* is preserved in both Germanic and Latin. So if we take the Old Icelandic word *fiskr* 'fish', and compare it to Latin *piscis* 'fish', we can reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European root **pisk*-. The root **pisk*- is, however, only attested in Germanic, Celtic and Italic, so some will call it a west Indo-European word. If we choose to call a word Proto-Indo-European, it is often because the word is attested in both the western and eastern area of the Indo-European language continuum. A good example of this is the word *flette*, as mentioned above, which exist both in Sanskrit, spoken

in India, and in Danish, spoken in Scandinavia. It is not only because it is attested in both the east and the west, but also because the sound laws tell us that both languages have inherited it directly from Proto-Indo-European.

Phonetic changes are not the only changes a word can undergo. Processes such as analogy also have to be accounted for. An example of an analogy could be the English word *foot*, which in plural is *feet*, and the word *cat*, which in plural is *cats*, and then decided to make the word *foot* regular in a similar way by making up the plural form †*foots* (the dagger meaning that it is a constructed form never attested). This is indeed what happened to the word *brother*, which in plural most often occurs as *brothers*, but a more archaic plural form is *brethren*. This kind of change occurs all the time, but can often be sorted out, for example by looking at related languages which have no analogy for the same word. Of course neither analogy nor phonetic changes occur due to active decisions by a group of people. They often start out with a group of often young people starting to treat a word differently, and if the trend does not die out again, it will spread and become the new norm.

When it comes to semantics, we do not have anything similar to regular sound laws to rely on. The meaning of words also changes over time. Just as often as the meaning changes considerably, it is also often preserved or changed only a little. However, we do have some criteria for when we can reconstruct the semantics of a word. Just like reconstruction in general in comparative linguistics, i.e. if a word exists in both the eastern and western part, if we can see it is inherited, and if the meaning is identical or similar, we can reconstruct the meaning in the proto-language. It is also good, if the proto-language we are trying to investigate goes back to another proto-language which is well reconstructed. This is the case for Proto-



Germanic, which goes back to Proto-Indo-European. Hence, if a word can be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European and if it is attested also in the Germanic daughter languages, then we do have solid evidence for its meaning. In the following I will take a look at three words related to flax and a few other words related to plant fibre textile production.

Three words related to flax

In Table 1 some simplex *flax* words and compounds from the same origin are given. The Proto-Germanic **flahsan* becomes in Old High German *flahs*, Old Saxon *flahs* and in Old Frisian *flax*, all meaning 'flax'. In Middle Low German we have *flas* ('flax') and the compounds *vlas-arne* ('flax harvest'), *vlas-bote* ('flax bundle') and *vlas-jart* ('flax field'). In Old English we have the simplex word *fleax* ('flax'), as well as the compounds *fleax-æcer* ('flax field'), *fleax-hamm* ('enclosed area where flax is grown') and *fleax-līne* ('a string of flax'). In Albanian we see the words *plëhurë*

('rough linen') and *plaf* ('woollen blanket, woollen sheet') which are cognates, i.e. derived from the same root, but in a separate language branch.

Further, in order to deduce the meaning of the Proto-Germanic word for flax, we can look at the context in which the words occur in the Old Germanic languages. From Old English we find the sentences of *ðære eorþan cymeþ ðæt fleax* ('flax comes of the earth'), *Swiðe hwit fleax* ('very white flax') and *Hē hēt bewindan heora handa and fēt mid gesmyredum flexe* ('He had bound her hands and feet with lubricated flax'). In Old High German, we have the sentences *so iz tar in lande sito ist, tar der flahs uuahset* ('as it is custom in the country, there the flax grows') and *diu selba Ysis lerta den flahs arbeiten, unde spinnen* ('Isis she taught herself to work and spin the flax').

In Table 2, words originating from the Proto-Germanic **harzwaz* are given. The word occurs in Old High German as *haro* ('flax') and the compounds *haro-bôz / hara-poz* ('flax bundle'), *har-luf* ('flax string'), in Modern

Proto-Germanic	Old High German	Modern German	Old English	Old Icelandic	Old Danish	Old Swedish	Latin	Proto-Indo-European
<i>*harzwaz</i>	<i>haro</i> 'flax' <i>haro-bôz</i> / <i>hara-poz</i> 'flax bundle' <i>har-luf</i> 'flax string'	<i>haar</i> 'flax'	<i>heorde</i> 'tow, the course part of flax' <i>heordan</i> 'hards of flax'	<i>horr</i> 'flax' <i>horr-dúkr</i> 'white linen cloth' <i>horr-skrýdd</i> 'linen clothing' <i>horr-týgill</i> 'string of hamp or flax' <i>horr-bil</i> , <i>-brekka</i> , <i>-fit</i> , <i>-gefn</i> <i>-gerðr</i> , <i>-nauma</i> , <i>-skorða</i> , <i>-veig</i> , <i>-þella</i> 'woman dressed in linen' <i>horrva-sleipnir</i> 'the flax horse (the gallows)'	<i>hør</i> 'flax'	<i>hør</i> 'flax'	<i>carrō</i> 'to comb'	<i>*korswo-</i>

Table 2. Simplex and compound words from Proto-Germanic **hazwaz*/**harwaz* (related words outside Germanic separated by double line).

Sources: Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 311; 312; Mayhew and Skeat 1887, 113; Söderwall 1925-1973, 342; Jacobsen and Maltras 1927-1928, 184; Pokorny 1959, 939; 585; De Vries 1962, 281-282; Wilhelm 1963, 633; Blum 1986, 723-724; Splett I,1 1993, 356; De Vaan 2008, 95; Beekes 2010, 682; Kroonen 2013, 213; Bosworth-Toller Anglo Saxon Dictionary, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/>.



German as *haar* ('flax'), in Old English *heorde* ('tow, the course part of flax') and *heordan* ('hards of flax'), in Old Icelandic *horr* ('flax') with some of the compounds *horr-dúkr* ('white linen cloth'), *horr-skrydd* ('linen clothing') and *horr-týgill* ('string of hamp or flax') (more words are given in Table 2). In Old Danish and Old Swedish we have the word *hør* ('flax') while outside the Germanic branch we have e.g. Latin *carrōa* ('to comb'). Altogether these cognates can be reconstructed to the Proto-Indo-European word **korswo-* which means 'to scratch, comb, hackle'.

Also, some sentences (Table 2) in Old High German enlighten the semantics of Proto-Germanic **harzwaz* further, e.g. *haro giu palkili habentan* ('already having a little flax ball'). In Middle High German it becomes *har*, and we find the word in the sentence *die plaffen santen ouch dar wol gezinnelohten har daz si in ze helfe spunnen* ('The Plaffe, they also sent them good and splendid flax, which they had spun to help them').

The word for linen is well attested in Germanic (Table 3). We have the Gothic *lein*, Old English *līn*, Old High German *līna*, Old Icelandic *lín*. We also see different compounds like Old Icelandic *lín-brækr* ('linen breeches'), *lín-dúkr* ('linen cloth'), *lín-garn* ('linen yarn'), *lín-kyrtill* ('linen tunic'), *lín-klæði* ('linen clothing'), *lín-fræ* ('flax seed') and *lín-akr* ('flax field') while Old High German has the compounds *līn-bruoh* ('linen trousers, breeches, loin cloth') and *līn-bōzo* ('flax bundle/bundle of linen'). Outside Germanic we have Greek *línōn* ('anything made of flax') and the Latin *līnum* ('flax plant, linseed, linen'). In the Baltic branch we have the Old Prussian *lymno* ('flax as material'), in Lithuanian *linas* ('flax, plant') and *linai* ('flax fibres'), and in the Slavic branch the Old Church Slavonic *lъnъ* ('flax') and the Russian *lĕn* ('flax').

Comparing the meaning of the three flax words

When we look at the three words **flahsan*, **harzwaz* and **līnan* in the daughter languages, we do not see a clear distinction in the meaning of the three words. At first glance, it seems as if they can all denote the plant, textile and product. As in Old Icelandic where we have *línklæði* vs *horrskrydd* which both mean 'linen clothing'. In Old High German we have *līnbōzo* and *harobōz* which probably both mean 'bundle of flax'. When it comes to North Germanic and West Germanic languages, the earliest written sources beside runic inscriptions are dated from around AD 800 - 1000 and since Proto-Germanic is estimated to have been spoken around the 1st century AD at the latest (Fortson 2010, 338), the semantics could have changed and been mixed up.

Looking at **harzwaz*, we see that it goes back to the Indo-European root **korswo-* ('scratch, comb, hackle') while the Old English *heorde* means 'the coarse flax fibres', and the plural form *heordan* means 'hards of flax'. Hards of flax are processed by scotching, hackling and combing the fibres, and since **harzwaz* builds on a root which means 'scratch, comb, hackle', it is therefore likely that the original meaning of Proto-Germanic **harzwaz* is 'flax fibres'. Flax fibres are the raw material that are spun into yarn, and this fits well with the Middle High German sentence mentioned above: *die plaffen santen ouch dar wol gezinnelohten har daz si in ze helfe spunnen* ('The Plaffe they also send them good and splendid flax, which they had spun to help them').

The word **flahsan* is attested in Old English as *fleax-æcer* ('flax field') and *fleax-hamm*. Middle Low German has the word *vlas-arne* ('flax harvest') and *vlas-jart* ('flax field'). In Old English there is the sentence of *ðære eorþan cymeþ ðæt fleax* ('flax comes of the earth'), and in Old High German *so iz tar in lande sito ist, tar der*

Proto-Germanic	Gothic	Old High German	Old English	Old Icelandic	Greek
<i>*līnan</i>	<i>lein</i> 'linen'	<i>līna</i> 'linen, flax as material and plant' <i>līn-bruoh</i> 'linen trousers, breeches, loin cloth' <i>līn-bōzo</i> 'flax bundle / bundle of linen'	<i>līn</i> 'linen, flax as material and plant'	<i>lín</i> 'linen, linen cloth' <i>lín-brækr</i> 'linen breeches' <i>lín-dúkr</i> 'linen cloth' <i>lín-garn</i> 'yarn of linen' <i>lín-kyrtill</i> 'linen tunic' <i>lín-klæði</i> 'linen clothing' <i>lín-fræ</i> 'flax seed' <i>lín-akr</i> 'flax field'	<i>línōn</i> 'anything made of flax'

Table 3. Simplex and compound words from Proto-Germanic **līnan* (related words outside Germanic separated by language branches with double lines).

Sources: Lexer I 1872; 1923; Cleasby and Vigufsson 1874, 393; Orel 2003, 248; De Vann 2008, 344; Köbler 2013, <http://www.koeblergerhard.de/ahdwbhin.html>



flahs uuahset ('as it is custom in the country, there the flax grows'). The meaning of Proto-Germanic **flahsan* is most likely 'flax in the form of a plant'. However, Old Icelandic shows the presence of *lín-fræ* ('flax seed') and *lín-akr* ('flax field'), but since the word **flahsan* is not preserved in North Germanic, the meaning 'flax in plant form' could have been transferred to the word *lín*. Therefore, Old Icelandic *lín-fræ* and *lín-akr* do not necessarily contradict that **flahsan* means 'flax of a plant form'. It is harder to say what the original meaning of *flahsan* was, because unlike **harzwaz*, which had a meaning of 'hackle, comb, scratch' related to flax in both Pre- and Post-Proto-Germanic, admittedly we only have evidence for the 'flax in plant form' in Germanic. Outside the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language tree, we have the Albanian *plëhurë*, ('rough linen') and *plaf* which does not mean flax textile but ('woollen blanket, woollen sheet'). Within Germanic we have Old English *fleax-līne* ('flax line'). On the other hand, I have only found clear evidence in Old English that **flahsan* can be a material made from the plant, and there is no reason to believe that Albanian *plaf* ('woollen blanket, woollen sheet') indicates the original Indo-European meaning of the word. Therefore, I suggest that the meaning of **flahsan* in Proto-Germanic was indeed 'flax in plant form'.

The word *līnan*: in the languages related to Germanic, we see various meanings. Greek *līnon* means 'anything made of flax', and Latin *līnum* means the flax plant, seed and material. Old Prussian *lynno* is flax as material, and Lithuanian has both *līnas* ('flax, plant') and *līnai* ('flax fibres'). We get the same understanding in Old English where it can be both the plant and other forms. And then there is Old High German *līn-bōzo*, where it is uncertain whether it means bundle of flax or bundle of linen, although there is within Germanic

a good handful of examples where it must be some kind of flax product as seen in the Old High German *līn-bruoh* ('linen trousers, breeches, loin cloth'), in the Old Icelandic *lín-brækr* ('linen breeches'), *lín-dúkr* ('linen cloth'), *lín-garn* ('yarn of linen'), *lín-kyrtill* ('linen tunic') and *lín-klæði* ('linen clothing'). The data presented here suggest that at least one meaning of *līnan* is 'linen' in the form of textile made of flax. Whether there are other meanings connected to the word I cannot tell.

Further, it is important to mention that the Proto-Germanic languages all have words for a flax field and words related to the cultivation of the plant. In Old Icelandic it is *lín-akr* ('flax field') and *lín-fræ* ('flax seed'), and in Old English *fleax-æcer* ('flax field') and *fleax-hamm* ('enclosed area where flax is grown'). In Middle Low German occur *vlas-arne* ('flax harvest'), *vlas-bote* and *vlas-jart* ('flax field'). Based on the data presented here, there is strong evidence in each daughter language of Proto-Germanic, that at least around AD 1000 specialised words for the task of growing flax were used in Europe. Since the languages do not have the exact same word etymologically, we cannot go further back in time through the linguistics comparative method, although we know from archaeological data that the cultivation and use of flax goes back to the Neolithic in Europe and even earlier outside Europe (Barber 1991).

Words related to plant fibre textile production

Finding words relating to tools specifically used for flax production is a difficult task, although it is not so hard to find words for tools in general. The problem is that most of these words are borrowed from Middle Low German into the other Germanic languages, which are apparent from the sound laws, and thus

Latin	Old Prussian	Lithuanian	Old Church Slavonic	Russian
<i>līnum</i> 'flax plant, linseed, linen'	<i>lynno</i> 'flax as material'	<i>līnas</i> 'flax, plant' <i>līnai</i> 'flax fibres'	<i>льно</i> 'flax'	<i>лѣн</i> 'flax'



Proto-Germanic	Old High German	Middle Low German	Proto-Germanic	Old Icelandic	Old Swedish
*rippilaz	riffila 'flax-comb'	repel, repe "flax-comb"	*rifilaz /	tan-refill 'tusk-chisel': rifa 'to bite asunder'	rīva 'to bite asunder'

Table 4. Simplex and compound words from Proto-Germanic *rifilaz/*rippilaz. Sources: Cleasby and Vigufsson 1874, 425; Pokorny 1959, 858; 859; Lübben 1965, 299.

Gothic	Old English	Old High German	Old Frisian	Middle Low German	Old Icelandic	Old Swedish	Tocharian A	Tocharian B	Lithuanian
spinnan 'to spin'	spinnan 'to spin'	spinnan 'to spin, make a thread'	spinna 'to spin'	spinnen 'to spin'	spinna 'to spin'	spinna 'to spin'	pänw- 'to spin'	pänn 'to stretch, reach out for'	spéndžiu 'to plait'

Table 5. Words related to English 'to spin' (related words in language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines). Sources: Söderwall 1891-1900, 466; Orel 2003, 364.

Proto-Germanic	Old High German	Old Swedish	Old Icelandic	Old Irish	Latin	Greek	Sanskrit
*rukkaz 'distaff'	roc, rocko 'distaff'	rokker 'spinning wheel, distaff'	rokkr 'spinning wheel, distaff'	rucht 'tunic'	runcō 'to weed out, to root up'	orússō 'to dig up'	luñcati 'to pull, pluck'

Table 6. Words related to Proto-Germanic *rukkaz (related words from language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines). Sources: Hellquist 1826, 650; De Vries 1962, 451; Orel 2003, 308.

Proto Germanic	Old English	Old Saxon	Old High German	Old Frisian	Old Icelandic	Modern Swedish Dialect	Greek
*snāldiō / *spennilō(n) 'spindle'	spinel 'spindle'	spinnila 'spindle'	spinnala 'spindle'	spindel 'spindle'	snælda 'spindle'	snāld 'spindle whorl'	nēntron 'spindle'

Table 7. Words related to Proto-Germanic *snāldiō and *spennilō(n) (related words in language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines. Green words from *snāldiō and blue words from *spennilō(n)). Sources: Holtenhausen 1974, 310; De Vries 1961, 527.



Proto-Germanic	Old English	Old High German	Old Icelandic	Old Swedish	Tocharian A	Greek	Albanian	Sanskrit
*webanan 'to weave'	wefan 'to weave'	wewan 'to weave'	vefa 'to weave'	væva 'to weave'	wäp 'to weave'	huphē 'web'	vej 'to weave'	ubhnāti 'to lace up, to cover'

Table 8. Words from Proto-Germanic *webanan (related words from language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines).

Sources: Hellquist 1826, 1179, 1180, 1181; Orel 2003, 451.

Proto-Germanic	Old Saxon	Old High German	Old Icelandic	Old Swedish	Modern Swedish dialect	Danish
*wabjaz/ wubjaz 'loom?'	webbi 'loom'	weppi 'loom' wuppi 'loom'	vefr 'loom'	væver 'loom'	öv 'loom'	væv 'loom'

Table 9 Words from Proto-Germanic *wabjaz/wubjaz (blue words from *wabjaz and green words from *wubjaz).

Sources: Hellquist 1826, 1179-1181; Orel 2003, 451.

there is too little evidence to reconstruct them back to Proto-Germanic. A word which does not originate from Middle Low German is Old High German *riffila* ('flax-comb'), and the Old Icelandic *tann-refill* ('tusk-chisel') which could also be translated as "bone-comb". In Middle Low German we also have the word *repe* / *repe* ('flax-comb'), and the Old Icelandic *-refill* could have been borrowed from Old High German *riffila* or Middle Low German *repe*, *repe*, but that is not certain. Middle Low German *repe*, *repe* and Old High German *riffila* point to a Proto-Germanic *rippilaz, while Old Icelandic *-refill* points to a Proto-Germanic *rifilaz (Table 4). Both of the Proto-Germanic forms build on the Indo-European root *reip-, which is also the base for Old Icelandic *rifa* ('to bite asunder'), Old Swedish *rīva* ('to bite asunder'). Even though the word could have been borrowed into the North Germanic languages from Middle Low German, there is nothing to confirm this, and the sound laws show that the word could be inherited in all the languages mentioned here. The semantics of the word is clear and straightforward in West Germanic. In Old Icelandic the meaning diverges in the compound *tann-refill*, a *-refill* for tusk. Nonetheless, the semantics of Old Icelandic *rifa* ('to bite asunder') and the Old Swedish *rīva* ('to bite asunder') fits well with a flax-comb, because combs have teeth. Thus I suggest reconstructing

*rifilaz/*rippilaz for Proto-Germanic with the meaning 'a tool for combing'.

Word meaning 'to spin' are also well-attested in Indo-European languages (Table 5), where we see it in both Tocharian, which was spoken in western China in the Xinjiang province, and in Europe. The meaning 'to spin' is only found in Tocharian A *pānw-*, and in Germanic. Within Germanic the meaning of the word is, however, very consistent. The Proto-Germanic word can be reconstructed as *spenwanan, which goes back to the Indo-European root *spen-w-. Since the Germanic daughter languages all agree about the meaning, it is very safe to conclude that the meaning of *spenwanan is also 'to spin'. In the Middle High German sentence *die plaffen santen ouch dar wol gezinnelohten har daz si in ze helfe spinnen* ('the Plaffe they also send them good and splendid flax, which they had spun to help them'), and the Old High German *diu selba Ysis lerta den flahs arbeiten, unde spinnen* ('Isis she taught herself to work and spin the flax'), we see the words *to spin* and *flax* together. In the Old High German sentence *haro giu palkili habentan* ('already having a little flax ball') the 'flax ball' probably is 'a ball of flax yarn'. Consequently, we can see a combination of the words for flax and 'to spin', and as there is linguistic evidence that flax was spun like wool, the Proto-Germanic *spenwanan was most likely also used for processing flax.



Proto-Germanic	Old English	Old Saxon	Old High German	Old Frisian	Old Icelandic	Old Danish	Sanskrit	Lithuanian
<i>*seujanan</i> 'to sew'	<i>siwian</i> 'to sew' <i>seowian</i> 'to sew'	<i>siuwia</i> 'to sew'	<i>siuwen</i> 'to sew'	<i>sīa</i> 'to sew'	<i>sýja</i> 'to sew'	<i>syj</i> 'to sew'	<i>śīvyati</i> 'to sew'	<i>siuti</i> 'to sew'

Table 10. Words from Proto-Germanic **seujanan* (related words from language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines).

Sources: Sejersted and Torp 1911, 1224; Pokorny 1959, 916; Bjorvand and Lindeman 2000, 895, 896.

Proto-Germanic	Gothic	Old English	Old Saxon	Old High German	Old Icelandic	Old Swedish	Old Danish
<i>*nēplō</i> 'needle'	<i>nēpla</i> 'needle'	<i>nēðl</i> 'needle' <i>næðl</i> 'needle'	<i>nādla</i> 'needle' <i>nāthla</i> 'needle'	<i>nādala</i> 'needle' <i>nālda</i> 'needle'	<i>nāl</i> 'needle'	<i>nāl</i> 'needle'	<i>nāl</i> 'needle'

Table 11. Words from Proto-Germanic **nēplō* (related words from language branches outside Germanic separated by double lines).

Sources: Pokorny 1959, 973; Bjorvand and Lindeman 2000, 679-680; Orel 2003, 287.

At first glance there does not seem to be much connection between the semantics in Germanic and the other Indo-European Languages, except in the word related to the part of the spinning process where the fibres are pulled out. The Sanskrit word *luñcati* ('to pull, pluck') is not that far away when it comes to semantics. The Greek word *orussō* with the meaning 'to dig' is a little similar to 'pluck' in Sanskrit *luñcati*, and Latin *runcō* ('I weed out, to root up') is similar in the same way. The Old Irish *rucht* is 'made by spinning'. In Germanic we see the meanings of both 'spinning wheel' and 'distaff', while the Proto-Germanic word can be reconstructed as **rukkaz*, which goes back to the Indo-European root **h₃rewk-* (Table 6). Since the semantics are very similar in Germanic, and relatable in other Indo-European languages, I would say it is safe to reconstruct the meaning 'distaff' for **rukkaz*.

I have now looked at the verb for spinning, the word for distaff, and now turn towards the word for a spindle. The Swedish word *snåld* ('spindle whorl'), the Old Icelandic *snælda* ('spindle') and the Greek *nēntron* ('spindle') go back to the same word etymologically, but also in other Germanic languages, e.g. the Old High German *spinnala* ('spindle'), Old Saxon *spinnila* ('spindle'), Old English and Old Frisian *spindel* ('spindle') agree very well with each other. Thus, it seems that Proto-Germanic had two words for 'spindle' and they can be reconstructed as **snāldiō* and **spennilō(n)* (Table 7).

All words related to the process of weaving go back to the Indo-European root **webh-*, and the Proto-Germanic word can be reconstructed as **webanan* (Table 8). The semantics of this word are all more or less the same in the Indo-European languages, except Sanskrit *ubhnāti* ('to lace up, to cover') and the Greek *huphē* ('web'), which are not that different from weave. The meaning 'to lace up' in *ubhnāti* has something to do with a string. Because we find the same semantics in the languages outside Germanic and the same semantics throughout the Germanic daughter languages, it should be safe to reconstruct the meaning of Proto-Germanic **webanan* as 'to weave'.

The semantics of Proto-Germanic **wubjaz* and **wabjaz* is most likely a 'loom' (Table 9). However, in Old High German *wuppi* and Swedish dialect *öv* point to a Proto-Germanic **wubjaz* while the semantics of the Danish word *væv*, Old Swedish *væver*, Old High German *weppi* and the Old Saxon *webbi* all meaning 'loom' are exactly the same, and points to the Proto-Germanic **wabjaz*.

In the Germanic languages we see the Old Danish word *syj*, Old English *siwian* and *seowian*, the Old Saxon *siuwia*, the Old High German *siuwen*, Old Icelandic *sýja* and Old Frisian *sīa* which all mean 'to sew'. From these forms we can reconstruct a Proto-Germanic **seujanan* (Table 10). The meaning of the word is very consistent in Germanic, and in other Indo-European languages with the Sanskrit word *śīvyati* ('to sew'),



	Old Church Slavonic	Russian	Greek
	<i>šiti</i> 'to sew'	<i>šitъ</i> 'to sew'	<i>humēn</i> 'thin skin, membrane'

	Latvian	Middle Irish	Latin	Greek
	<i>snāju</i> 'to twine loosely together, to spin'	<i>snūd</i> 'to twist, to bind'	<i>nēre</i> 'to spin'	<i>něj</i> 'to spin'

and in the Slavic branch Old Church Slavonic *šiti* ('to sew'), Russian *šitъ* ('to sew') and in the Baltic branch Lithuanian *siuti* ('to sew') where the semantics are the same. One exception is Greek *humēn* 'thin skin, membrane'. From the data presented here, there can be no doubt that of Proto-Germanic **seujanān* is 'to sew', and the other branches also point to a Proto-Indo-European **syewH-*.

Finally, the Germanic words for needle can be reconstructed as Proto-Germanic **neþlō*, and since the semantics in the Germanic languages are identical, there can be no problem in reconstructing the meaning 'needle' for Proto-Germanic **neþlō* (Table 11). The suffix **-þlō* in Proto-Germanic is a well-known instrumental suffix in the Indo-European languages typically reconstructed to Proto-Indo-European **-tlo-*. Thus the formation **neþlō* in Proto-Germanic could be analysed as 'a sewing tool' when looking at the root of the word in the other Indo-European languages: Latvian *snāju* ('to twine loosely together, to spin'), Middle Irish *snūd* ('to twist, to bind'), Latin *nēre* or *něj* ('to spin'). All of these words go back to the Indo-European root **sneh₁- / *sneh₁i-*, which can sometimes also appear without initial **s-* as **neh₁- / *neh₁i-*, a phenomenon normally referred to as *s-mobile*, with the meaning of 'to sew together, to web, to spin'.

Conclusion

In this text I have gone through some words related to the cultivation and processing of flax. Linguistic evidence of flax occurs as fields, combing flax, tools and words for spinning, weaving and sewing. The results and conclusions reached are of mixed character, which is primarily due to the quantity of data I managed to gather about each word I have examined, in order to reconstruct Proto-Germanic forms and semantics of the words in question. In general, the reconstruction of the word forms is easy on account of the sound laws which function as a guide. It is much harder to reconstruct semantics, because it depends much more on the number of examples in different related languages, and how much the semantics in each language have changed and diverged from each other. When it comes to reconstruction, especially when we try to reconstruct semantics of words, we work with degrees of possibility, and the more attestations in different related languages we have, and the more similar the semantics are in the different attestations, the higher degree of possibility we have. For a correct interpretation of a word the best results can be obtained by using the comparative linguistic method in combination with the archaeological data we have when investigating dead languages, in which nothing is recorded. In this study, I have only presented a few examples, but there can be no doubt the comparative method can indeed increase our knowledge about the past by showing what words were used for different textile processes. Similar studies could be made with other materials, such as leather, fur, wool and nettle, and a more thorough investigation of tools and the technology of textile production is also desirable. In other words, the linguistic investigation of textile terminology continues, and this study serves only as one example of how comparative linguistics can contribute to our understanding of the past.

Comparative linguistics has many advantages, compared to archaeological remains. Many objects which were a part of our ancestors' lives decompose over time and leave no trace. But just because the object fades away, it does not mean that the word for the object fades away too. However, better results are obtained through cooperation between different disciplines and it is important to compare the results obtained through comparative linguistics with the results obtained from other disciplines, for example archaeology, history and biology, in order to get a better, wider and more detailed picture of the different textile technologies.

Languages are related to each other. They go back to a common language, commonly called a proto-language, which again is related to other languages. In



related languages we see reoccurring correspondences in their phonetic system, morphology, vocabulary and semantics. Even though we have nothing written down in the proto-language, a lot can be reconstructed by looking at its daughter languages. The most important method used to reconstruct an unattested language stage is called the comparative method. It is important to think of what words are. They are the tool we use to describe our world, what we imagine, talk and think about. If we can reconstruct words and their meanings for a proto-language, we can get a good deal of information about the culture and technology of the speakers of that proto-language. In this study, the comparative method has been applied to the Germanic languages, to see what we can tell about flax, both in the form of plant and textile.

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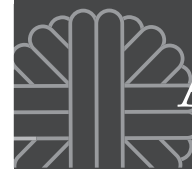
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