



TITLE

LANGUAGE FAMILIES

KEY IDEA

Some languages are grouped in families

CONSPECTUS

1. Introduction: we can group together human languages in families
2. Key idea: a language family is a group of genetically linked languages.
3. Reasons: language families come from a common ancestral language.
4. Consequences: languages belonging to a family present resemblances.
5. Conclusion: Some languages present resemblances because they are related just like the members of a family

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OBJECTIVES

You can **identify** family language

You can **list** the features languages belonging to a language family have in common.

You can **select** different types of similarities between languages.

FULL TEXT

1. Introduction

We can group together the human languages in families.

2. Key idea

A language family is a group of genetically linked languages.

3. Reasons

Language families come from a common ancestral language (they are like every family with children, siblings, parents, grand-parents, etc.)

All languages belonging to a language family have resemblances because they have genetic relationships just like people belonging to the same family have resemblances between each other.

Family languages (vocal languages) have resemblances in sounds, in the way words are constructed and in the way of constructing phrases.

These resemblances exist because these languages have a common ancestor that gave them a common shape.

But these resemblances may also have a different cause:

- the contact between languages (languages in contact may make loans between them).

The science of linguistics uses the comparative method to prove that two languages belong to the



same family. The comparative method searches for regular sound correspondence. For example:

Italian k- (kapra); Spanish k- (kabra); Portuguese k- (kabra).

European vocal languages belong to the Indo-European family.

As for sign languages, it is difficult to create a category for sign languages similar to those for vocal languages. We cannot compare the birth of new sign languages with the birth of “new” vocal languages.

We know very little of sign languages birth and migration so we know a little of the present sign languages ancestors. We need to know more about the history of sign languages.

We really should not speak of a sign language family because only few of them are genetically related. Instead we should speak of an «undeniable family air». This «undeniable family air» is much more than their common use of the same visual-gestural modality.

4. Consequences

Resemblance of words between five vocal languages belonging to the Indo-European family: to say ‘tree’, in Latin we say ‘arbor’; in Italian, ‘albero’; in French, ‘arbre’; in Spanish ‘arbol’ and in Portuguese, ‘árvore’.

As for sign languages, we know that:

- there are signing communities living very close to each other and have unrelated sign languages;
- there are signing communities living far apart from one another and have related sign languages.

FrancoSign Language family includes French Sign language and American Sign language. Other European sign languages are related with French sign language but they are not family (they have no genetic relationship).

5. Conclusion

Some languages present resemblances because they are related just like the members of a family are.

As for sign languages we need more research on the past of these languages, birth of new languages, migration of signers and contact with vocal languages.