

*The Adventures of
Young Jacob, or
The Secret of Italian*
by *L. Lee McIntyre*

Once upon a time ...

...there lived a young boy named Jacob. Jacob was from Germany, and he spoke German very well. He actually really liked languages, and he also knew a lot about languages, especially about Italian. Italian wasn't anything like German, but he knew that it was spoken by 62 million people around the world, mostly in Italy.



Jacob also liked to eat. One of his favorite foods was a jelly-filled donut, called a Berliner.

One morning Jacob went for a walk in the woods by his house. In the woods he saw a wild boar. Now, when he wasn't eating Berliners, Jacob liked to eat wild boar. Jacob



had taken his bow and arrow with him that morning, so he that he could find and kill a wild boar for supper. Which he did.



Suddenly, an ugly, angry witch appeared in front of him. It turned out that the wild boar had been her favorite pet, and she was not happy with Jacob for killing the wild boar.

As punishment, she said she was going to turn Jacob into a frog. Jacob was not happy

about this, and as the witch prepared to transform him into a frog, he asked the witch if there was anything he could do to make her change her mind.

The witch thought about it and finally said, OK, I will give you one chance. Since you like languages, and since you like Italian, tell me what the secret is that binds German and Italian together.

If you can tell me that, then I will let you go free and not turn you into a frog.



Jacob protested that this was an impossible task, since there was no relationship between German and Italian - they were clearly two different, unrelated languages.



But the witch just smiled her evil smile and said, ah, but there is something that binds them together.

I will give you the first clue, and then you will have 3 days to visit 3 places in order to figure out the solution to the

my question. If, when the clock strikes midnight on the 3rd day, you have not told me the answer, you will become a frog.

The witch then said, here is a riddle that is your first clue:

Wo **Wein** „**vino**“ ist,
hören Sie aufmerksam
dem Anfang von
der **Feder** und
„**la penna**“
zu.

English: Where wine is *vino*, listen to the start of the sound of the *la penna* (the feather).

And then the witch vanished, leaving Jacob alone in the woods. Before she left, though, she did give him a special amulet that would magically whisk him to any place he desired in search of the answer to the riddle.

Now, Jacob was truly puzzled by both the witch's question and her riddle. But he knew that the word for wine was *vino* in Italian, so he decided to start his quest first in Verona, his favorite Italian city.

While standing in L'Arena in Verona, he thought about what he knew about Italian.

He knew that it was one of the Romance languages, which are daughters of Latin, their "mother" language. The Romance languages were Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, and Catalan. The word for wine in German, *wein*, was actually pronounced with an initial [v] sound, just like in the Roman languages.



Katalanisch	vi
Französisch	vin
Italienisch	vino
Portugiesisch	vinho
Rumänisch	vin
Spanisch	vino
Deutsch	Wein (W = [v])

So, could German be a secret daughter of Latin?

But just then a passerby said "good morning" to him in Italian, and his hopes were dashed as he realized that the words for "good morning" in all the Roman languages

were similar to each other, but that the the German way of saying good morning, *Guten Tag*, was nothing like the Romance languages.

Katalanisch	bon dia
Französisch	bonjour
Italienisch	buongiorno
Portugiesisch	bom dia
Rumänisch	bună dimineața
Spanisch	buenas dias
Aber!	
Deutsch	Guten Tag

So he dejectedly discarded his idea that German was a Romance language, and wasted the rest of the day wandering around Verona, wondering what to do. Suddenly



he heard the clock strike midnight and he realized he only had 2 days left.

Using his magic charm, he decided to go to Florence to see if he could find the answer

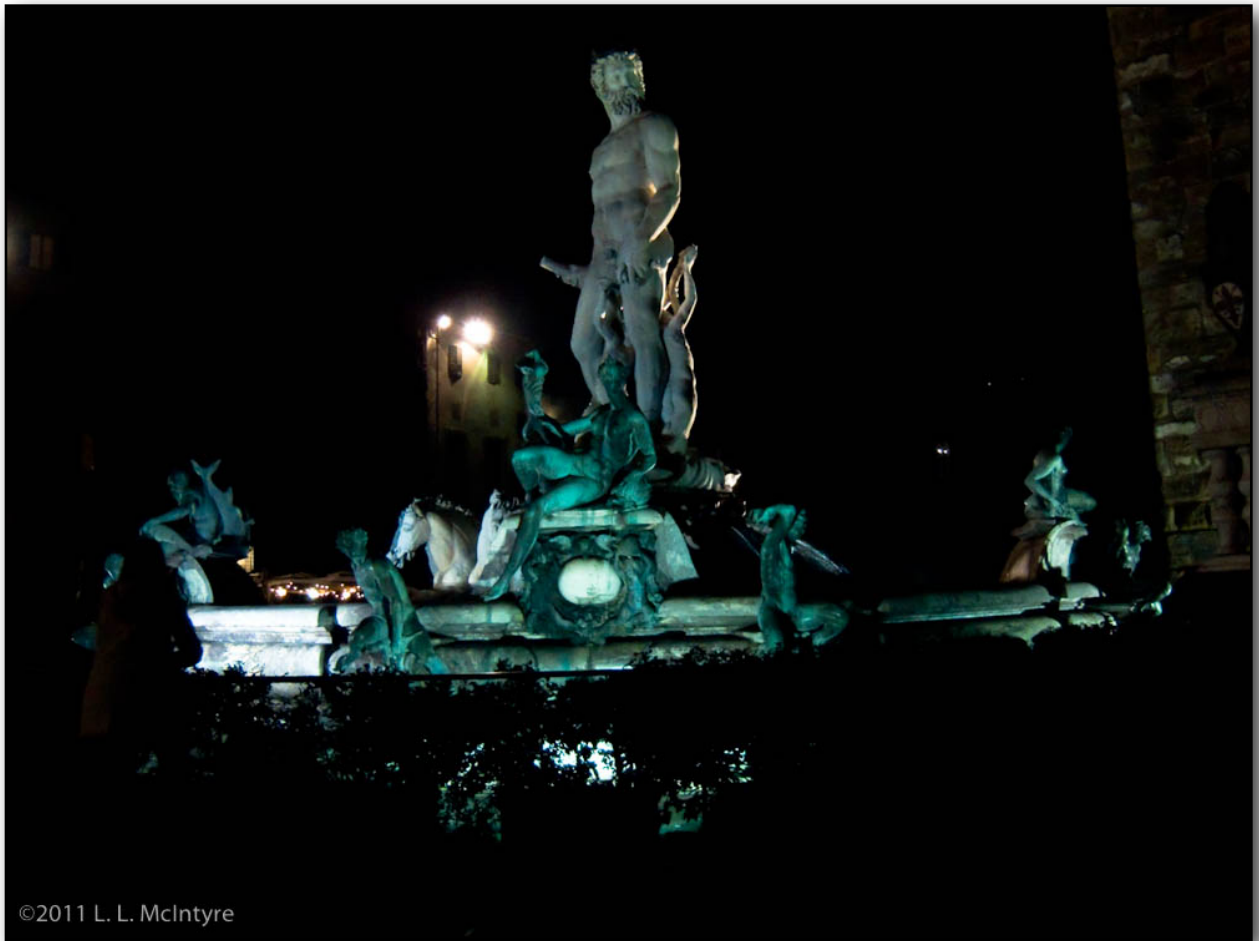


to the witch's challenge there. After all, Jacob knew that Italy became a unified country in 1861, there were many different varieties of spoken Italian, but the Italian spoken near Florence was the one that has become "standard Italian," which is the Italian that Jacob knows. So, he decided to make another chart to

compare many different words in German to Standard Italian (called “*Hochsprachliche*” *Italienisch* in German), so see if there are any patterns he could see.

Deutsch	„Hochsprachliche” Italienisch
Guten Tag	Buongiorno
Ich heiÙe Jakob	Mi chiamo Jakob
Wie geht es Ihnen?	Come sta?
Danke!	Grazie!

But looking at his chart, he didn't see anything similar between the two languages. He spent the whole day wandering around Florence, and at night he arrived in the Piazza dei Signori, where he saw a large fountain.



Suddenly he heard the statue of Neptune in the center of the fountain talking to him:

Die Katze / il gatto
isst
das Korn / il grano
mit
zehn Zähne /dieci Zahn

(English: "The cat eats the corn with 10 teeth")

Before he could wonder what that meant, he heard a clock strike midnight, and he realized he only had 1 more day to solve the puzzle. So, writing down what Neptune had said, Jacob used his magic charm to go to Venice.



In Venice, he realized that in addition to the standard Italian spoken near Florence, in areas like Venice, there are dialects that are similar to Italian, but not exactly the same. But unfortunately they are also not like German, either.

As Jacob wandered around Venice, he happened upon a statue of little boy with a frog.



This made him depressed, because it reminded him that the witch was likely to turn him into a frog soon.

Suddenly he heard the boy speak to him:

Der Vater / il padre
bringt
den Fisch / il pesce
mit
dem Fuß / suo piede

English: "the father brings the fish with the foot"

He stood for hours gazing at the statue, imploring him to explain what that riddle meant, but the boy never spoke again.

Suddenly, Jacob heard a clock strike,



and he realized he was running out of time.

Quickly he used his magic charm to go to visit Bolzano, in the north of Italy.



He knew that in Bolzano, people spoke both Italian and German, and he realized if there was any place he could find the answer to the secret that binds German and Italian, it was probably in Bolzano.

Jacob wandered all over Bolzano that third day, without coming up with any answers. Discouraged and disheartened, he went to Piazza Walther, where he stood in front of the statue of Walther von der Vogelweide.

Suddenly he heard Walther say to him:





Wo **Wein** „vino“ ist,
hören Sie aufmerksam
dem Anfang von
der **Feder** und
„la **penna**“
zu.

Which was just a repeat of what the witch had said at the beginning of all of this.

Jacob sank down at a cafe table near Walther and ordered a glass of wine to console himself, since he didn't know the answer to the riddle, and therefore knew that when the clock struck midnight he was going to become a frog.



As he gazed into the wine glass, he heard a street performer nearby playing a tune.



Jacob listened to the sound of the music and gazed into the glass some more.

And suddenly - he had an idea!

What if it were the **sound** at the beginning of the word that was important in order to find the relationship between the words in the Italian and German, and *not* the spelling of the words?

Quickly, Jacob made another chart of all the Italian words from the riddles and their corresponding German words. Then he added to the chart all the initial sounds of the words in each language:

Der anfänglichen Laut			
padre	[p]	Vater	[f]
pesce	[p]	Fisch	[f]
piede	[p]	Füß	[f]
penna	[p]	Feder	[f]
gatto	[g]	Katze	[k]
grano	[g]	Korn	[k]
dieci	[d]	zehn	[tz]
denti	[d]	Zähne	[tz]

He then made a new chart with just all the initial sounds:

[p]	>	[f]
[g]	>	[k]
[d]	>	[tz]

And he realized that even though the initial sounds in these words were not the same, the sounds in Italian had a **regular relationship** with the sounds in German, e.g. an initial [p] in Italian was always a initial [f] in German, and so on. The relationship

between the first sounds in Italian words and first sounds in German words was both regular and predictable!

That was the secret that bound German and Italian together!



Suddenly Jacob found himself back in the woods near his house, and the witch was standing in front of him with the witch.

Although she was not happy that Jacob had discovered the secret of the relationship between Italian and German, a deal was a deal. And since he had successfully found the answer to the question, the witch did not turn him into a frog.

And if the people did not die in the story, then they live still today.



Author's note:



Jacob Grimm was a really famous linguist who, working from an idea first posited by a Danish linguist, discovered a regular sound change relationship between Germanic languages and the Latin language family in the 19th century. Prior to his discovery, linguists had thought that the Germanic languages and the languages that came from Latin were not at all related. In English, Grimm's discovery is referred to as "Grimm's law". This discovery led to the development of the idea that many European languages can be traced to a common ancestor, called "Indo-European", based on the regular sound change correspondences between them.

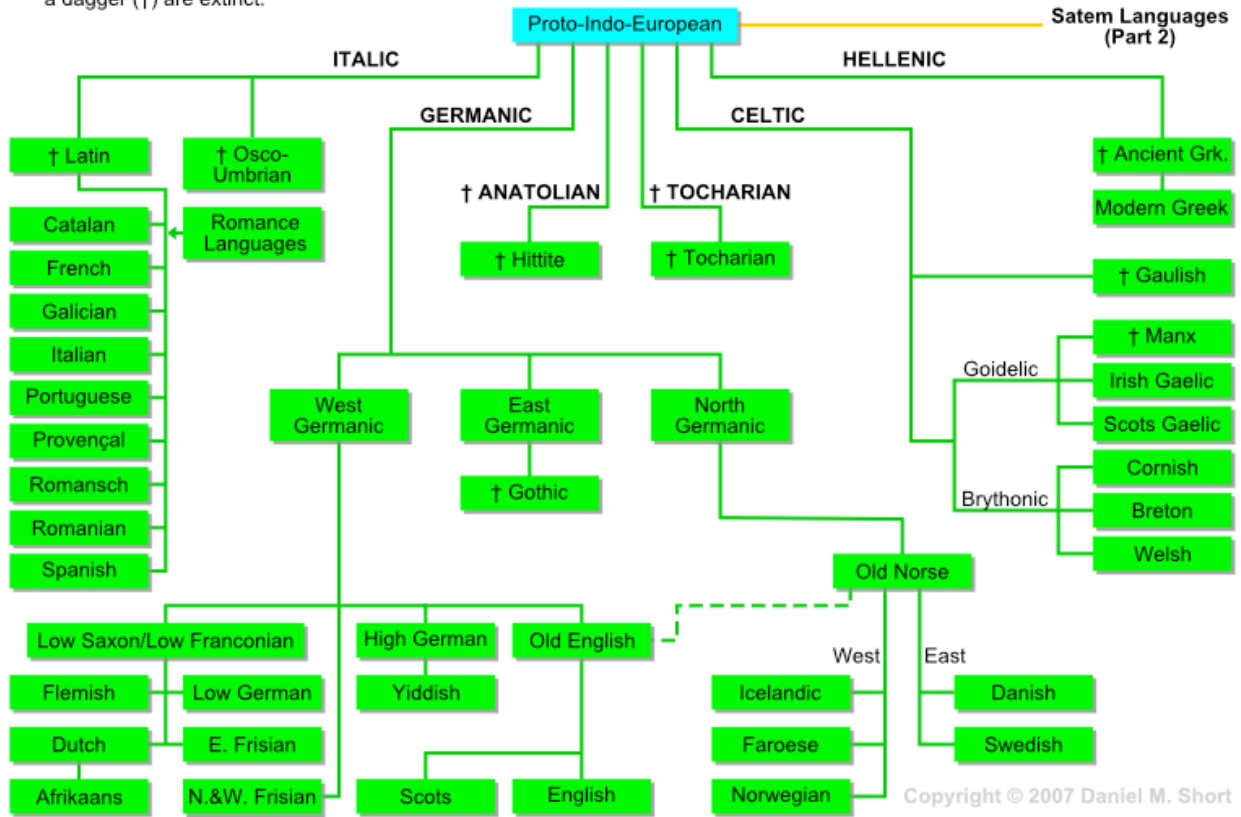
Grimm's Law:

[p]	>	[f]
[g]	>	[k]
[d]	>	[tʰ]

Indo-European Languages

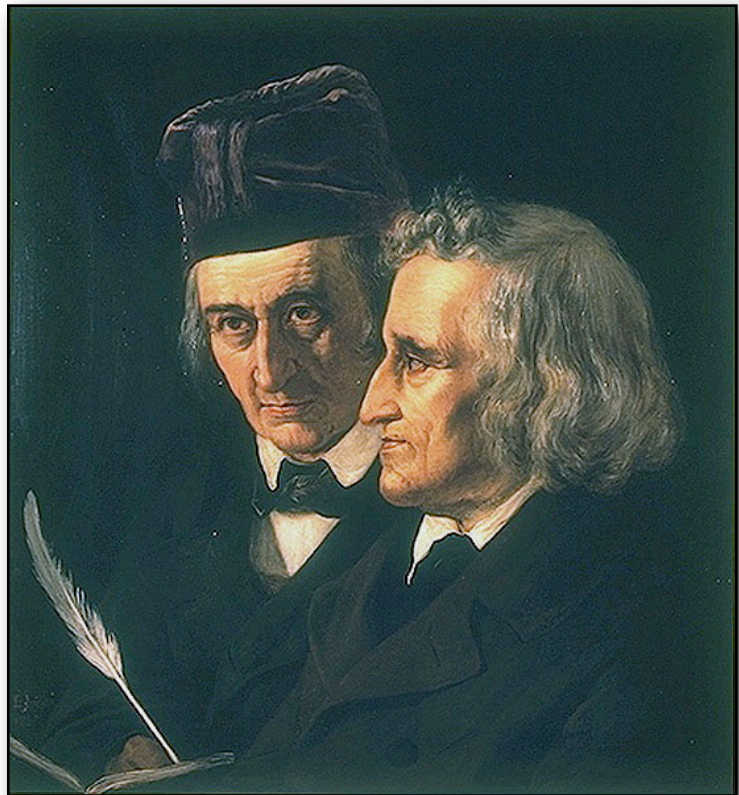
Part 1: Centum Languages

Languages marked with a dagger (†) are extinct.



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Jacob Grimm, along with his brother Wilhem, also published collections of fairy tales, the first book being published in 1812.



Now, did Jacob actually meet a witch when he was young and worry that he was about to be turned into a frog?

I have no proof of that, of course.

However, consider that the very first story in every edition of the Grimm Brothers collected fairy tales book is always the story of the prince who was turned into a frog.

Coincidence? You be the judge.

Credits:

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Except for the images of the Grimm Brothers, as well as the Indo-European chart, which were taken from Wikipedia.