Summary Article: Swadesh, Morris
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Morris Swadesh (1909-1967) came of age when American linguistics was a wholly owned subsidiary of American anthropology. The founders and early disciples—Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Alfred Kroeber, Leonard Bloomfield, and Robert Lowie—were firmly in control of the directions that anthropology and linguistics would take in North America.

Swadesh was born in Massachusetts to immigrant Jewish parents. As with his teacher the great Edward Sapir, Yiddish and other Eastern European languages swirled about in the family ether, a fact that disposed him toward anthropology and linguistics.

Precocious, slightly insufferable, Swadesh attended the University of Chicago, where he came under the influence of Sapir's charm (Sapir, whom Leonard Bloomfield called "the witch doctor"), following Sapir to Yale in 1930. He completed his PhD dissertation (The Internal Economy of the Nootka Word) under Sapir's supervision in 1933.

Swadesh had what we would call today an "attitude." This complicated things throughout his life. Trying to help Swadesh get a teaching position at Berkeley, Sapir wrote to A. L. Kroeber saying that he recommended him highly despite a "certain asperity of temperament." Swadesh eventually got a position at City College of New York, which he lost in 1949 as America moved into what now is called the "McCarthyite" period. Swadesh, whose politics were well left of center, emigrated to Mexico, where he finished out his career at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the National School of Anthropology and History.

In Swadesh's formative years, the 1920s and 1930s, linguistics was a "big tent" discipline in which all kinds of the "scientific study of language" flourished, something that is no longer true. If it had anything to do with language, it was fair game for the linguist. And since social constructs are language bound, anything in anthropology was fair game as well.

Swadesh, following the master's lead (Sapir wrote elegant poetry and became seriously involved in psychoanalysis and the movement for an international auxiliary language), luxuriated in the freedom and anarchy of the early days. His range of interests and research remains remarkable even today. The bibliography of his published works comes to some 234 items. (This bibliography is taken from the most useful account of Swadesh's work in anthropology and linguistics we have: Morris Swadesh, in The Origin and Diversification of Language, edited by Joel Sherzer.)

Fieldwork was the ruling ethos in early American anthropology and linguistics, and Swadesh worked either firsthand or secondhand on scores of American Indian languages: Nootka, Chitimacha (Louisiana), Northwest Sahaptin, Tarasca, Inuit, Unaalic, Zapotec, and Otomi, and on and on. In addition, he published on Mandarin, Basic English, the phonology of American English, translation, semantics, and (again) on and on.

Swadesh's great triumph in the early days was his missionary dissemination of the then revolutionary concept of the phoneme—the idea that a sound could have "meaning" quite apart from its phonetic structure. Swadesh's early article "The Phonemic Principle" (1934) helped put the phoneme on a
theoretical pedestal where it remained until the 1960s.

What Swadesh remains best known for, however, is the subject of his last book, *The Origin and Diversification of Language* (1971). When did spoken language arise, and how did languages become different? *When* did they split off from each other? Swadesh believed that that *when* could be quantified, and to that end he invented what is known as glottochronology: the study of the rate of change occurring in the vocabularies of languages for the purpose of calculating the length of time (time depth) during which two related languages have developed independently.

To conduct a glottochronological analysis you start with a list of culturally neutral universal words (known now as the “Swadesh 100-Word List” or for greater precision the “Swadesh 200-Word List”). On either list would be *man*, *woman*, *bird*, *one*, *all*, for example, words almost always present as lexical items in any language. *Computer*, *nerd*, and *mosh pit* would not be on the list. Take two languages that you believe to be genetically related, calculate the percentage of cognates they share from either of the Swadesh lists, and apply a formula similar to the one devised for Carbon-14 dating, and in principle you will get a number that tells you when the two languages diverged.

There are too many problems with glottochronology, both mathematical and practical, for it to be relied on in the way an archaeologist can rely on Carbon-14 dating. For example, varieties of spoken Arabic remain lexically close because of the authority of the *Qur'an*, and Afrikaans is farther from Dutch than we know it to be—there was all that borrowing in South Africa from the languages on the ground. Swadesh’s assumption that basic vocabulary is replaced at a constant rate—about 19% per 1,000 years—is shaky. But glottochronology works about as well as many things taken for granted in linguistics, and if you have nothing else to use to establish time depth of divergence and not a lot of time to take a trip to the field, you could do worse than start with glottochronology.

Glottochronology is in its particulars flawed, but its underlying questions about the origins and diversification of languages seem eerily prescient at a time when historical linguistics has been revolutionized by DNA. We know more now than ever before about the prehistory of languages, thanks to mitochondrial DNA. We know, for example, that everything started out in Africa. We know how and when language traveled from Africa to Australia. We know that Etruscan had origins in the Middle East. Pre-DNA, we could only guess at such things.

When the history of the modern revolution in historical linguistics is written, Morris Swadesh will have a well-deserved if modest footnote in the early goings-on of that history. He didn’t get everything right, his enthusiasms knocked him off the rails again and again, and DNA wasn’t available, but he deserves credit for asking the right questions. And he asked the most interesting question there is: “When and why did *Homo sapiens* start talking?” Not, on the whole, a bad legacy!

**See also** Althusser, Louis; Asad, Talal; Benjamin, Walter; Bourdieu, Pierre; Derrida, Jacques; Foucault, Michel; Hegel, Georg W. F.; Husserl, Edmund; Lacan, Jacques; Marx, Karl; Saussure, Ferdinand de

**Further Readings**


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