# Facets of Hebrew and Semitic linguistics

Yale, week 3, September 12, 2013

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The North-West Semitic languages

Ancestors, relatives or "just" neighbors?

A language continuum

# Semitic languages: a (simplified) standard approach (*pace* Hetzron)

East Semitic: Akkadian (and Eblaite?)

West Semitic:

South Semitic: Modern SA, Epigraphic SA, Ethiopian

Arabic: *goes to NW (Central Semitic = Arabic + NW)? or goes to South? or separate branch?*

Northwest Semitic: Aramaic (older names: "Chaldean", "Syrian")

Canaanite, Ugaritic,
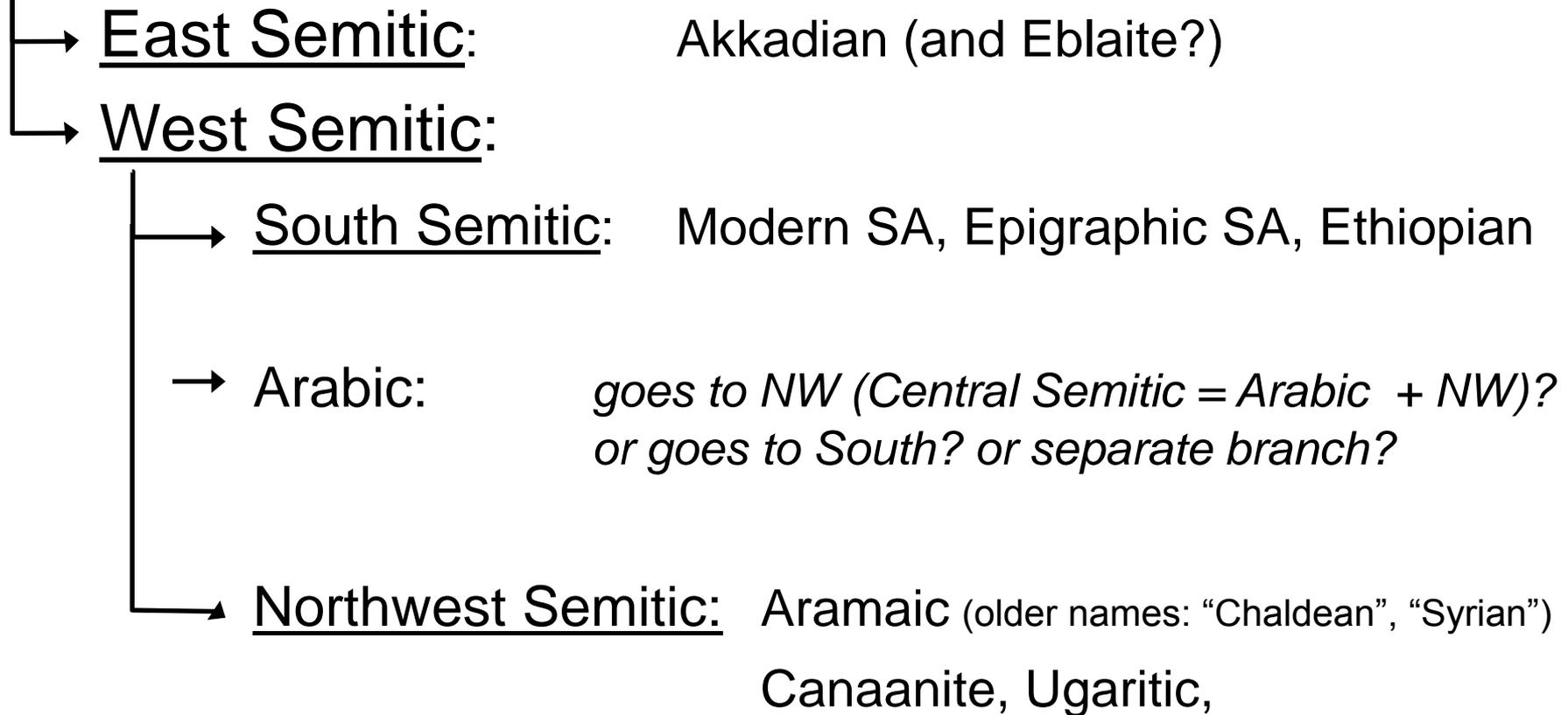
The West-Semitic language continuum

Soon after 1000 BCE:

• (<u>Ugaritic</u> not anymore, no Canaanite shift)

• (Philistine language? Indo-European?)

• <u>Aramaic</u> in Syria (no Canaanite shift)

• Canaanite sound shift [ā] > [ō]: <u>Phoenician</u> on the coast, and <u>Hebrew</u>: Northern and Southern dialects? (E.g., shibbolet/sibbolet?)

• Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite (etc?).

Most probably:

- <u>spoken</u> dialect continuum
- artificial <u>official/literary</u> language(s) in inscriptions.

Source: http://library.kiwix.org:4201/I/300px_Levant_830_svg.png
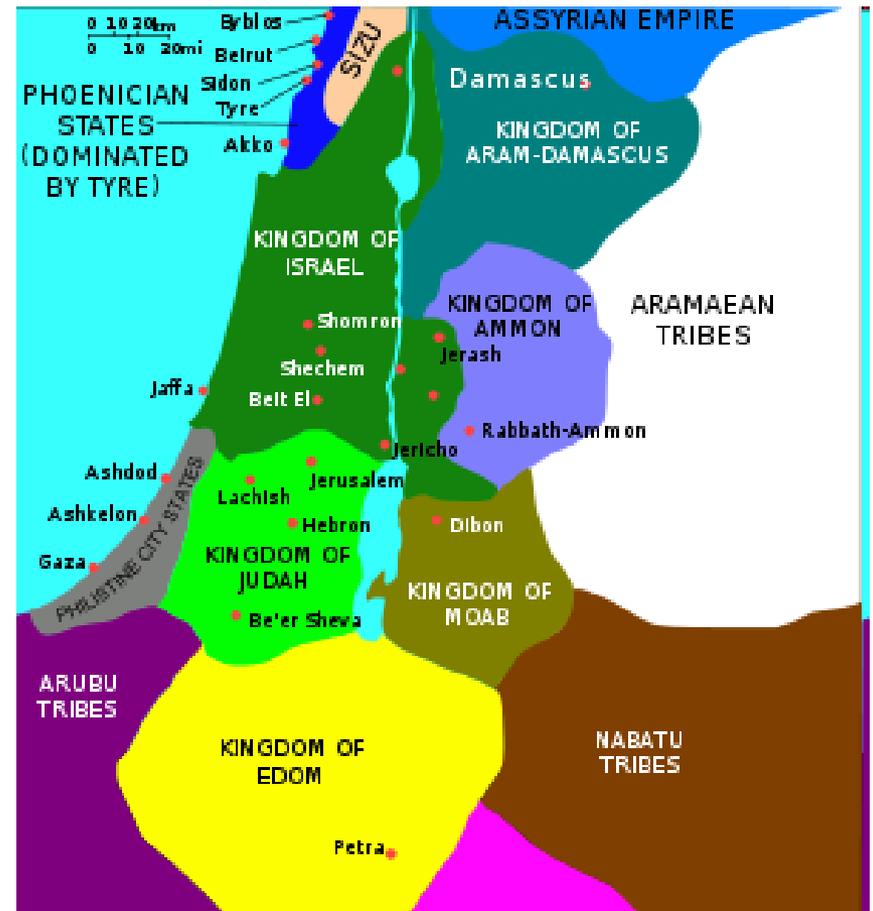
The West-Semitic language continuum

Hittite until 1200 BCE

Ugaritic until 1200 BCE

Phoenician

Ugarit

Aramaic from 1100 BCE

Akkadian

Mari

Asshur

Babylon

Damascus

Arabic (Nabatean) tribes?

Egyiptian

Tel el-Amarna

South-Arabian & Ethiopian
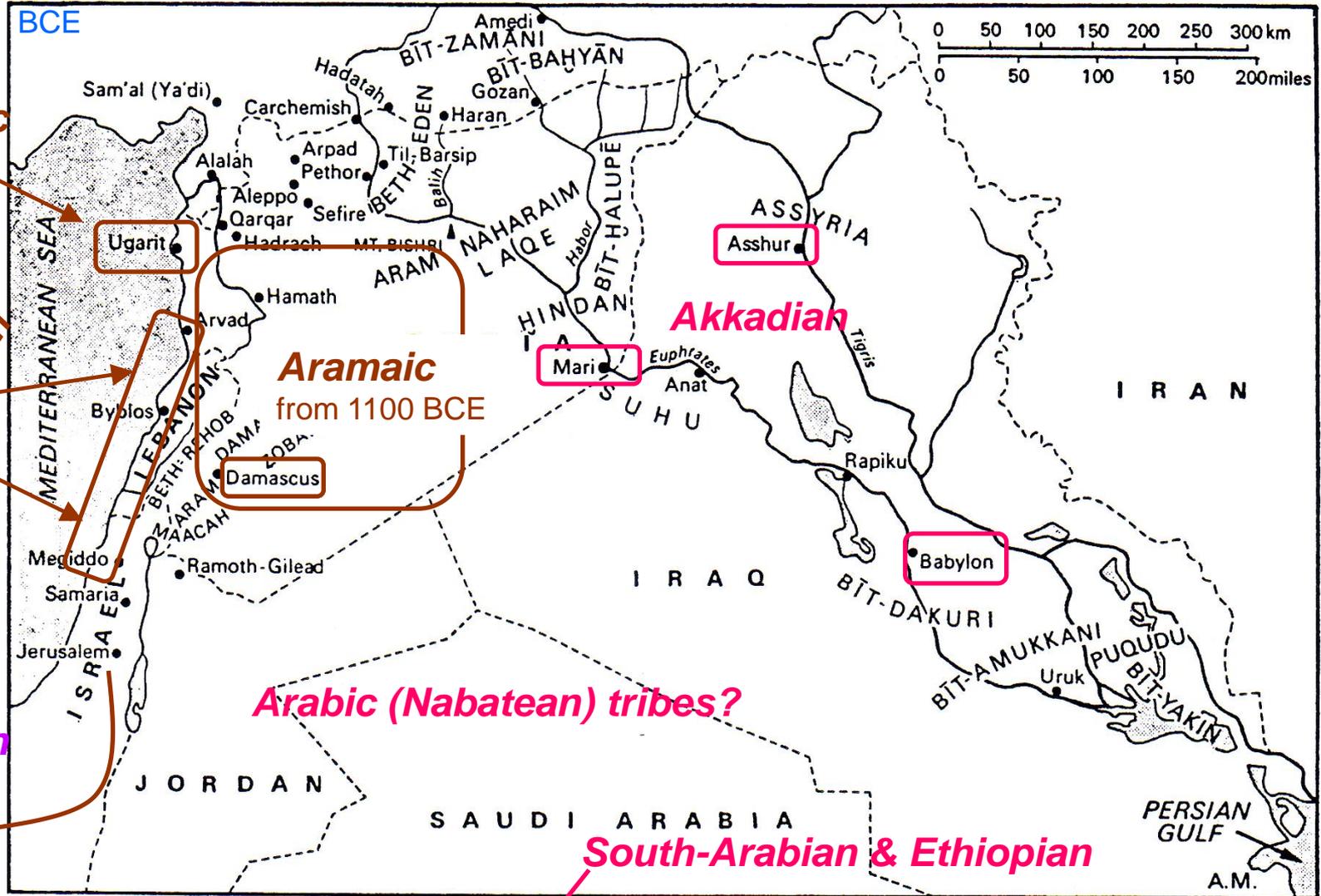
FIG. 4 The Aramaean cities and states.

The North-West Semitic languages

- <u>Aramaic</u>: 1st millennium BCE – today

  (Pe-history of the Israelites according to Bible: Laban; Deut. 26:5.)

- 11th c. BCE: Northwest Semitic tribes settling down in Syria.

- 10th – 7th century BCE: **Old** (or Ancient) **Aramaic**

  Arameans funding city states, such as *Damascus*. Leaving behind inscriptions, using their own script (borrowed from Phoenician script).

  2Kgs 18:26 = Isa 36:11: Aramaic as diplomatic language in 701 BCE.

- 6th – 3rd century BCE: **Imperial Aramaic** (*Reichsaramäisch*)
  - Neo-Babylonian Empire and Persian *(Akhaimenidan)* Empire
  - Biblical Aramaic: Jeremiah 10:11, portions of Ezra (and of Daniel).

The North-West Semitic languages

- Aramaic: 1st millennium BCE – today

- 3rd c. BCE – 2nd c. CE: **Middle Aramaic**:
  - Hellenistic and early Roman period (Greek in cities, later some Latin).
  - Main language in the Middle East. Diglossia within Aramaic.
  - Some Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament, earliest Targumim (Onqelos on Torah, Yonathan on prophets), inscriptions in Jerusalem...

- 3rd c. CE – 9th CE (and later): **Late Aramaic**
  - Western dialect: Palestinian Jewish/Christian/Samaritan Arm.
  - Eastern dialect: Babylonian J. Arm (Talmud, geonic texts…)

    Mandean/Mandaic: secret texts of a gnostic sect in S Mesopotamia
    Syriac: 1st millennium CE – (today: by Syriac churches)

The North-West Semitic languages

- <u>Aramaic</u>: 1st millennium BCE – today

- 3rd c. CE – 9th CE (and later): **Late Aramaic**

    <u>Syriac</u>: Holy tongue of Syriac churches. Eastern and western varieties (of language / of script / of churches). <u>Peshitta</u>: Bible translation to Syriac. Transmission of the Greek culture to the Arabs.

- (Medieval Jewish Aramaic: Zohar, liturgical compositions, etc.)

The North-West Semitic languages

- Aramaic: 1st millennium BCE – today   (or yesterday?)

- Today: **Neo-Aramaic** languages and dialects.

  Gradual decline of Aramaic after Arabic conquest. Islands still surviving: Syriac Christian and Jewish groups that resisted islamicization (or islamicized only recently). How long will they survive?

- Western Neo-Aramaic: 3 villages and in Syria, 5000 speakers (?).

- Eastern Neo-Aramaic: latest stages of E-Syriac, W-Syriac, etc.

  - E and W Syrian Orthodox Christians in E Turkey, N Iraq, NW Iran. As well as Jews originating from the same region.

  - Neo-Mandaic (Modern Mandaic) in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq, Iran; Australia and elsewhere after the first gulf war?)

# The North-West Semitic languages

- <u>Ugaritic:</u> 2nd millennium BCE

    Ras Shamra, NE Syryia, 1928.

    Cuneiform alphabet, 27 C + 3 V.

    Major port city. Importance for biblical studies:

    cultural, literary and linguistic parallels.

    Destroyed by the invasion of the *Sea People*, around 1200.

    Abecedary from Ugarit: order had ritual importance?
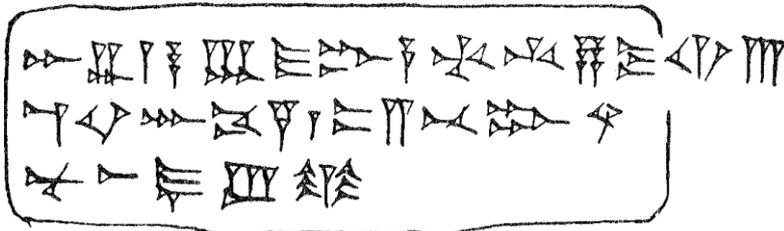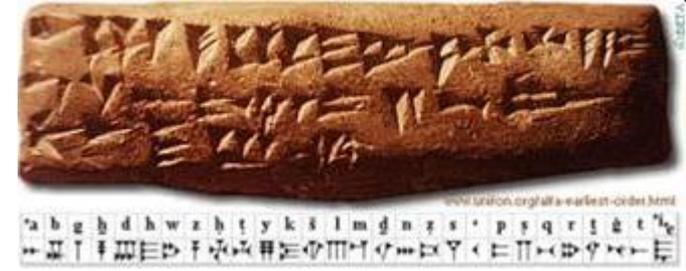
Fig. 25. An abecedary from Ugarit

ʾa b g ḫ d h w z ḥ ṭ y k š l
m ḏ n ẓ s ʿ p ṣ q r t
ġ t ʾi ʾu s₂

The North-West Semitic languages

- **<u>Canaanite</u> languages:**

  - Hebrew: 1ˢᵗ millennium BCE – today

  - Ammonite, Edomite, Moabite: early 1ˢᵗ millennium BCE

  - <u>Phoenician</u>: 1ˢᵗ half of 1ˢᵗ millennium BCE
    Tyre, Sidon, Byblos: trade colonies (Mediterranean, Black Sea)

  => <u>Punic</u>: in *Carthage* (originally a colony of Tyre), 1ˢᵗ mill BCE in Western Mediterranean, North Africa, until late Roman times (Augustine)!

  - <u>Old Canaanite</u>: Tel el-Amarna glosses

The Tel el-Amarna letters

- Akhetaton: new capital of Pharaoh Echnaton (Amenhotep IV), after his religious reforms, cca. 1350.
- 1887: discovery of >300 cuneiform tablets: diplomatic correspondence of Amenhotep III and Ekhnaton!
- Written in Akkadian, the lingua franca of that time.
- Some of them were sent by the kings of city states in Canaan to the Pharaoh: Canaanite variety of Akkadian,…
- but also including *glosses* in the Canaanite language:
  - Innovations: e.g., displaying Canaanite sound shift: [ā] > [ō]
  - Archaic, proto-semitic features: e.g., case system (3 cases)
  - Cuneiform: more on vowels, but questions on consonants.
- *More info: http://www.tau.ac.il/humanities/semitic/amarna.html.*

Isoglosses in NW-Semitic

Ugaritic:

[ā]

Case system:
Nom Acc Gen

Old Canaanite:

[ō]
Case system:
Nom Acc Gen

Aramaic:

[ā]

No cases

Hebrew:

[ō]

No cases

Problems with the family tree model

- West-Semitic: Aramaic vs. Canaanite languages.

- Long debate: is Ugaritic a Canaanite language?

- Answers:

  1. Time: You cannot compare languages from different periods. Aramaic vs. Canaanite distinction in 1st millennium, whereas Ugaritic is a 2nd millennium language.

  2. Geography:

     - *dialect continuum* (remember earlier slides)

   - isoglosses intersect.

A dialect continuum

Dialect continuum

Dutch:

Gradual change:

What is a dialect?

Semi-arbitrary

dialect borders:

Center vs.

periphery:
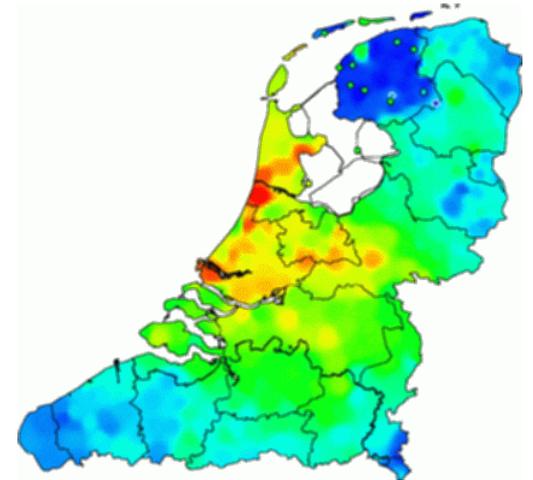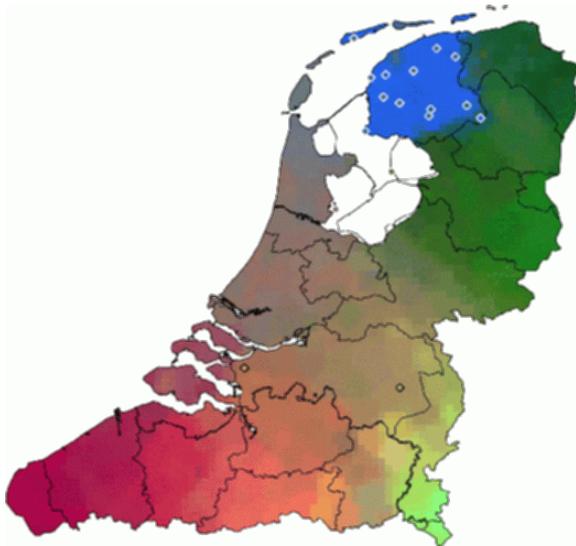
(Source of the illustrations: Wilbert Heringa and John Nerbonne)

Isoglosses

Isogloss: geographical boundary of a linguistic feature (*isolex* for lexicon=word use, *isophone* for phonological=pronunciation difference, etc.). Crossing isoglosses.
Area between two isoglosses: where does it belong to?

Historischer Verlauf der Benrather und Speyerer Linie bis 1945

Legende:
maken	Benrather
machen	Linie
Appel	Speyerer
Apfel	Linie

Städte:
- Städte mit bis zu 5 Mio. Einwohnern
- Städte mit bis zu 1 Mio. Einwohnern
- Städte mit bis zu 250.000 Einwohnern
- Städte mit bis zu 50.000 Einwohnern

Hauptstädte: Berlin

ik/ek

ich/ech
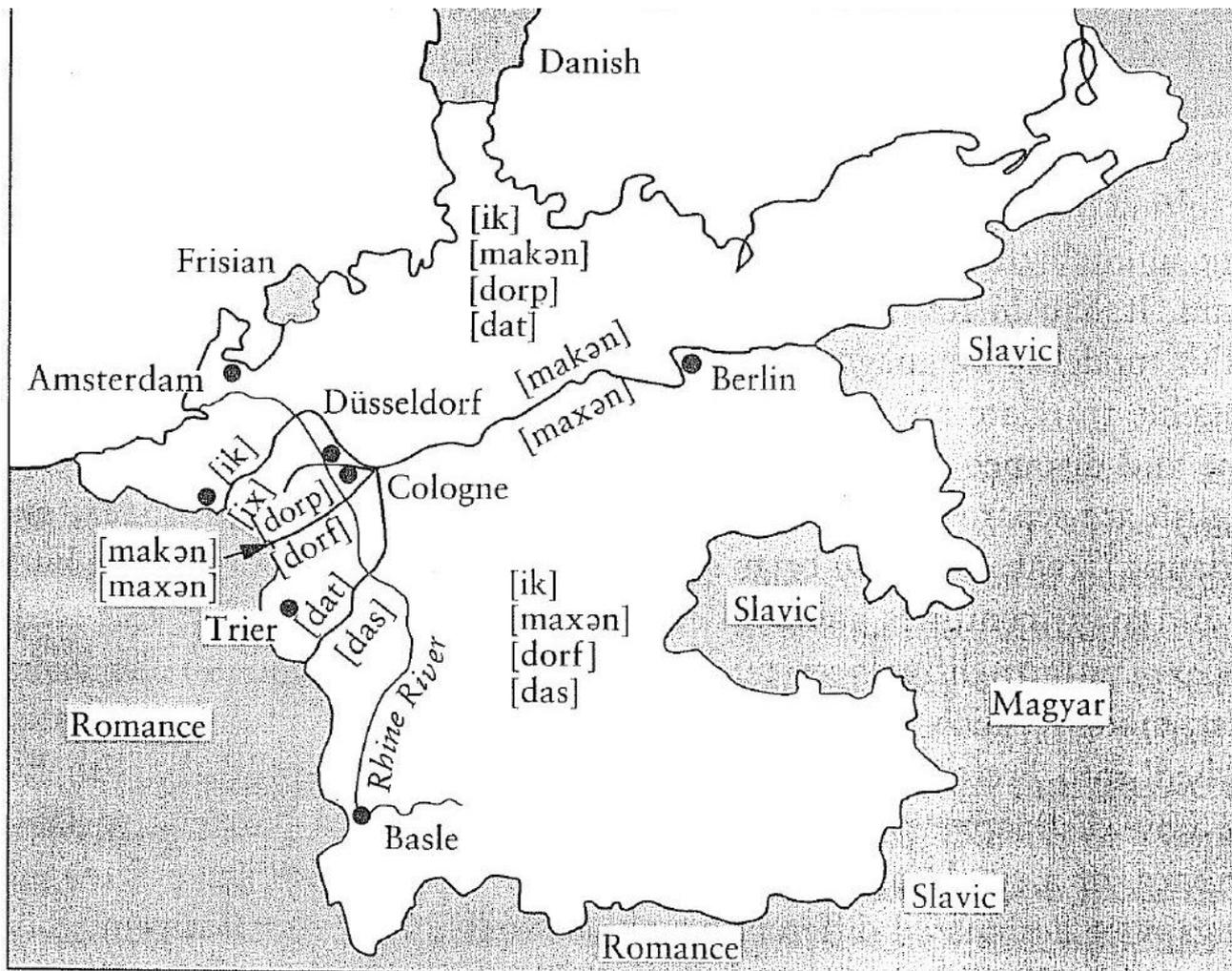
The Rhenish fan

Source:

http://courses.essex.ac.uk/lg/lg232/images/DialectMaps/Europe/RhenishFan.JPG
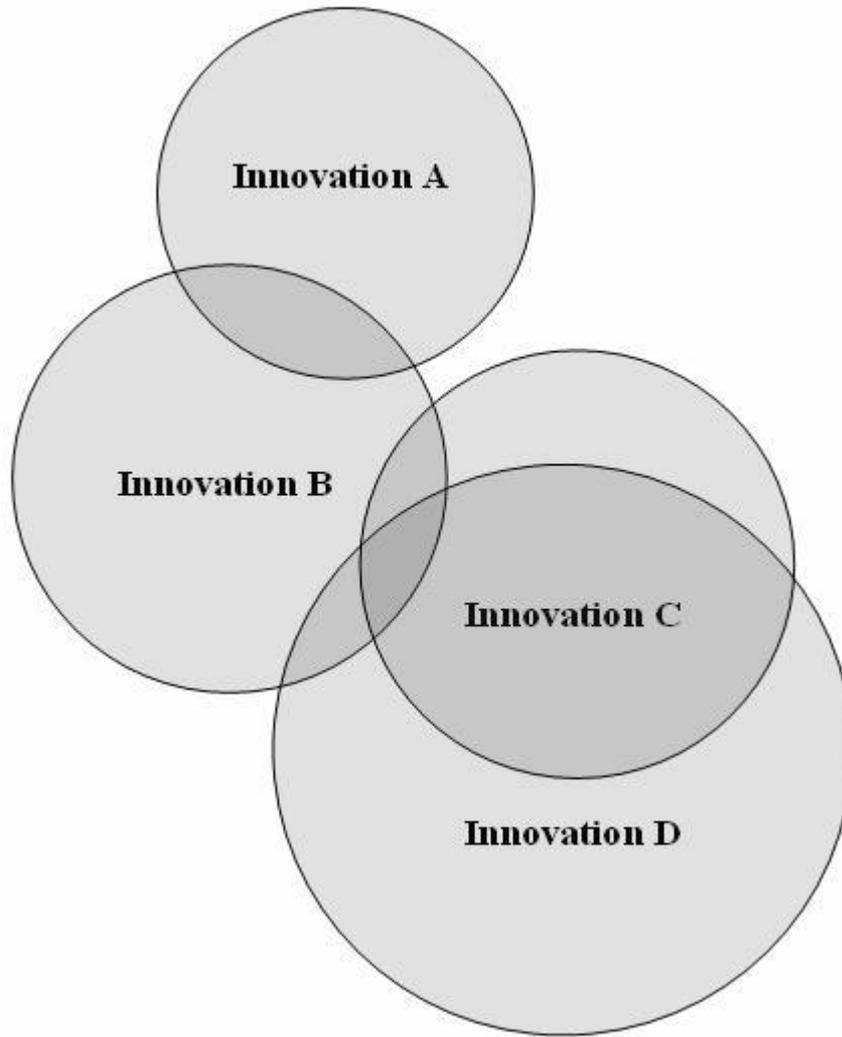
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wave_Model_Schmidt.jpeg

Family tree model vs. Wave model

Family Tree Model (August Schleicher: *Stammbaumtheorie*, 1860s):
- Biological analogy (Darwin). NB: Darwin influenced by linguistic analogy.
- Related languages originate from common ancestor:
    - different "tribes" migrating to different directions
    - "hard" geographic boundary (hill, river, political border) between "tribes"
    - language change (linguistic tree ≠ genetic tree)
    - Explains linguistic diversification, but not convergence.

Wave theory (Johannes Schmidt: *Wellentheorie*, 1872):
- Dialect continuum; different languages in contact (cf. areal linguistics)
- *Innovation* spreads from *center* in continuously weakening circles.
- Peripheries (in all directions) not always reached by innovation: archaic features may survive in distant varieties of the language.
- Can account for complex isogloss structures: different innovations arising in different centers, spreading in perpendicular directions, and reaching different distances.

See you next Tuesday!