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The Comparative Method:

A universal heuristic across time and space

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Topic

The comparative method is a set of techniques developed in the 19th century and refined ever since involving the methodical comparison of linguistic data and the identification of regularities and systematic differences (cf. Fox 1995, 2015; Lass 2015; Weiss 2015; Hoenigswald 1950, 1960, 1963; Meillet 1925, etc.). At the crossroads of language variation and at the interface of linguistic sciences and diachrony, the comparative method allows for the positioning of linguistic entities in history and the recovery of linguistic structures of earlier, often unattested stages in the historical development of a particular language or language family. It has thus traditionally served as the fundamental tool for uncovering and describing language history.

Operating off the uniformitarian principle that the mechanisms of language acquisition, use and change were not substantially different in the past than they are today (cf. Brugmann 1885; Hale 2007; Trudgill 2020), the comparative method has exposed itself to criticism and refinement for almost two centuries and has surfaced essentially intact and strengthened. It has stood the test of time, precisely because it has always proven fruitful and reliable wherever it has been correctly and rigorously applied and therefore remains the gold standard in historical linguistics, not least because, in contrast to alternative methodologies, it allows for replication, correction and falsification. Because the comparative method can be regarded as a universal heuristic born from the universality of language shared by all mankind (Rankin 2003), it is a well-recognized fact that a bottom-up approach based on the application of the comparative method will, in the long term, lead to the best understanding of language history, relationship and genealogy.

Our workshop seeks to unite all scholars interested in language history who either deal with or wish to better understand the workings of the comparative method as it applies across various periods, continents, and language families. In trying to establish to what extent the traditional methodology can be fruitfully applied to new data and lesser-known languages and languages families, the workshop is thus intended as a contribution to the current methodological discourse permeating our field and is the occasion to foster discussion with scientists from other backgrounds.

Current state of research

Since its rise in the 19th century, the comparative method has been fruitfully applied to languages beyond the well-studied Indo-European and Uralic families and has shed light on local language histories across continents, for example: in **Africa** (already Koelle's 1854 *Polyglotta Africana* including Mande, Atlantic, and Gur languages; Brockelmann 1908-1913 on Semitic; Guthrie 1967 on Bantu; Mukarovsky 1976 on Atlantic-Congo; Drolc 2005 and Merril 2023 on Cangin; Pozdniakov 2022 on Fula-Sereer; see also Dimmendaal 2011), in **East-Asia** (Vovin 2005-2009 on Japonic; Vovin 1993, Alonso de la Fuente 2012 on Ainu; Van Driem 2001; Matisoff 2003; Sagart 2005; Hill 2019 on Sino-Tibetan), in **Inner Asia** (Fries & Korobzow 2024, Bonmann et al. 2023 on Paleo-Siberian; Poppe 1987, Janhunen 2003, 2012 on Mongolic; Benzing 1956 on Tungusic), in **the Pacific** (Dempwolff 1934-1937, Pawley & Ross 1993; Kikusawa 2014 on Austronesian; Ross 2020 & Blust 2020 for ongoing debate within

Oceanic), and in **the Americas** (Sapir 1936, 1947, Kroeber Campbell & Mithun 1979, Campbell 1997, 2024).

Recently, computer-assisted tools have also helped to identify correspondences (List & Forkel 2021), refine the ordering of expected sound-changes (cf. Marr & Mortenson 2022), and evaluate the likelihood of existing reconstructions (cf. Munteanu 2024). Yet all these tools are dependent on the philological evaluation of linguistic data (cf. Zuk 2023 on Romance) and must therefore, at least indirectly, rely on the consistent application of traditional methodology (as exemplified, e.g., in Kerkhof 2018 for Gallo-Romance and Fries 2024 for Baltic). Most linguistic reconstruction, both of proto-forms and the pathways of change, must be conducted by trained historical linguists, as mechanical tools will only be as good as the ones who train them. In recent years, the rise of quantitative and statistical methods (cf. Kessler 2015) reflecting a principally probabilistic world-view and reduced access to training in the traditional comparative method have led some scholars to call for fundamentally new methodologies in order to account for the multifaceted and complex historical development of languages. As Honeybone & Salmons (2015: 4) correctly point out, issues within historical linguistics, already discussed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries still “connect directly with a range of contemporary concerns”.

The consistent application of the comparative method continues to lead to reliable insights into the history of language in all its dimensions: **lexicon** (cf. Buchi et al. 2008- for Proto-Romance), **phonology** (Kümmel 2007; Fries & Korobzow 2024, Bonmann et al. 2023 for Paleo-Siberian; Merrill 2023 for Cangin; Zuk 2022 for Gallo-Romance), **morphosyntax** and **grammaticalization** (Ledgeway 2012 for Romance; Fries 2024 for Baltic; Bonmann 2023 for Iranian), etc.

Because spoken language is inherently characterised by the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, neither **genetics** nor **archaeology**, **language typology**, **sociolinguistics** or **statistical modelling** (‘**quantitative comparative linguistics**’) are posed to replace the comparative method as the backbone of modern historical-comparative linguistics. Rather they complement the traditional methodology, adding new perspectives that allow for the correlation of linguistic and extra-linguistic history. As new initiatives arise to study language history in alternative or more varied manners, it seems advisable that experienced practitioners of the comparative method, would-be practitioners, the curious and sceptics come together to reflect upon its application and candidly address challenging issues to energize a venerable knowledge-creating tradition that has, we think, unfairly been categorized as too rigid, idealistic, or inapplicable to certain language families or complex historical situations (often due to language contact).

Research Questions

Open research questions revolving around the comparative method pertain to:

- Regularity in sound change (cf. Osthoff & Brugmann 1878; Brugmann 1885), including questions about how sound change proceeds (cf. Fónagy 1956, 1967; De Oliveira 1991; Labov 2014), how it is actuated and implemented (cf. Chen & Wang 1975; Hale 2007), whether it is “natural” (cf. Scheer 2015), where it is located, how it spreads (cf. Labov 1981; 2007; 2014; Bowerman 2013), and what constraints govern its interaction with other linguistic phenomena.
- Changes in morphology, syntax and the lexicon and to what extent they follow the same principles as sound change, especially with regard to the role of analogy, language contact (cf. Hickey 2013; Schrijver 2013) and social selection (cf. Phillips 2015), and the extent to which they proceed in a regular fashion (cf. Schuchardt 1885; Brugmann 1885; Kuryłowicz 1945; Allen 1953; Hale 1998; Hill 2007, 2020; Clackson 2017; Hale & Kisson 2021; Bonmann 2023).
- The most adequate means to map language change and the relations between archaic and innovative forms, i.e. whether linguistic innovation can be represented in a *Stammbaum*-like

manner, in waves (Schmidt 1872), in networks (François 2014), or whether these approaches complement each other (cf. Labov 2007).

Objectives

Our workshop will be structured into two sections, each of which focuses on a particular objective:

1. The exposition and demonstration of the comparative method with the help of clear case studies, preferably beyond well-known handbook data.
2. The exposition and discussion of problematic cases or data where further input is desired from the community, or of suggestions to systematically and fruitfully augment the existing heuristic inventory of the comparative method.

We invite interested participants to submit an anonymous 500-word abstract via [EasyChair](#) no later than March 30th, 2025.

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