

The Comparative Method: a universal heuristic across time and space

Bordeaux, France, 26-29 August, 2025

Call for Papers

This 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.

The workshop will be structured into two sections:

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 initial 300-word abstract by November 13th, 2024, specifying which of the above sections is concerned. Talks which expose particular difficulties in applying the comparative method, or which demonstrate the success of the method where others had deemed it improbable are particularly welcome.

Key words: comparative method, historical-linguistics, linguistic reconstruction, language history, language change

Origins

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 2015; Lass 2015; Weiss 2015). 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.

However, both the rise of quantitative and statistical methods (cf. Kessler 2015) reflecting a principally probabilistic word-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.

Honeybone & Salmons (2015: 4) correctly point out that, issues within Historical Linguistics, discussed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries “connect directly with a range of contemporary concerns”. Controversies revolving around the comparative method have pertained 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; Bovern 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; Hale 1998; Hill 2007, 2020; Hale & Kissonock 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).

Because spoken language is inherently characterised by the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, neither genetics nor archaeology, language typology, sociolinguistics or statistical modelling 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.

Perspectives

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 – either consciously or unconsciously – 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 Merrill 2023 on Cangin; Pozdniakov 2022 on Fula-Sereer; Zuk *In prep.* on Dogon), in East-Asia (Vovin 2005-2009 on Japonic; Vovin 1993, Alonso de la Fuente 2012 on Ainu; Hill 2019 on Sino-Tibetan), in Inner Asia (Fries & Korobzow 2024, Fries & Bonmann 2023, Bonmann et al. 2023, Bonmann *Forthc.* on Paleo-Siberian; Poppe 1987, Janhunen 2003, 2012 on Mongolic; Benzing 1956 on Tungusic), in the Pacific (Kikuasawa

2014 on Austronesian) and the Americas (Campbell & Mithun 1979, Campbell 1997, 2024), etc.

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 in Kerkhof 2018 for Gallo-Romance; Fries 2024 for Baltic, 2023 for Indo-Aryan, Bonmann *Forthc.* for Yeniseian). Most language 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. Fortunately, 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 (Fries & Korobzow 2024, Bonmann et al. 2023 for Paleo-Siberian; Merrill 2023 for Cangin; Zuk 2022 for Gallo-Romance), morphosyntax and grammaticalization (Fries 2024 for Baltic, 2023 for Indo-Aryan; Bonmann 2023 on Iranian), etc.

Goals

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.

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 good scientific practice, 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).

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.

Please send abstracts to any of the organizers:

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See: <https://sites.google.com/view/comparative-method-sle58>

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