Comparative Linguistics

- By using the comparative method we can compare data from language to language (Comparative linguistics)
- By comparing data over time for the purpose of analyzing change (Historical Linguistics)
- In this section, we focus on Comparative Linguistics

Comparative linguistics helps us know:

- Where was the first Language?
- What are the relationships among languages?
- Which are more closely related?
- Is it possible that languages near each other might not be related?

Proto-World/Nostratic Language

- The term **Proto-World language** refers to the hypothetical latest common ancestor of all the world's languages, an ancient language from which all modern languages and language families – and usually including all known dead languages – derive.
- would have been spoken roughly 200,000 years ago
- Very controversial
Nostratic Language?

- Merritt Ruhlen, *The Origin of Language* suggests that if you go systematically back and compare cognates you can eventually find a common relationship among all languages.
- Says that mitochondrial DNA analysis suggests that it is true
- Critics suggest that it is too easy to mistake words that are not cognatic as cognates.

Is it correct to assume monogenesis? Or polygenesis?

- What reasons might suggest polygenesis?
- Can we ever know for sure?
- Are mtDNA studies reliable
- Note that the Nostratic theory of linguistic origin (one Proto-world language) is akin to the Babel theory of linguistic dispersal and differentiation

Glottochronology

- Dating the ages of languages can help to pinpoint where languages were located and whether they interacted.
- Use of Cognates (words with similar origins in more than one language, even though they may not look alike)
- Method developed by Linguist Morris Swadesh with a basic list of 100 or 200 foundational words

Glottochronology

- Estimating age of language using
  - Basic word list from suspected related languages with emphasis on cognates
    - Cognates are words from two or more languages with common origins
  - Lexico-Statistics (Morris Swadesh)
  - Words change at a constant rate
  - E.g., 80% cognates, 1000 years
Lexicostatistics
- Assumes languages change at a constant rate
- The loss of basic vocabulary seems to be at a rate of 20% per 1000 years
- Thus, 80% words the same after 1000 years, 60% after 2000 years, 40% after 3000 years, 20% after 4000 years.
- Problem with the assumptions of constant rate of change
- After 30%, similarities could be based on borrowing

Value of linguistics to prehistorians
- 1. Establish facts regarding the common origin and subsequent divergence (migrations and social isolation) of peoples
- 2. Discover diffused features of phonetics, morphology and syntax among languages which bear evidence of prehistoric contacts
- 3. Linguistic Reconstruction
  - Reconstruct the ancient vocabulary of old stages of language to determine the physical environment and content of prehistoric cultures
  - Develop a Proto-language (an extinct language’s):
    - Phonology
    - Lexicon
    - Syntax
Swadesh List

- Core vocabulary 100-200 words
- Made up of words that represent concepts thought to be universal
  - Blood, eye, skin, cloud, leaf, star, wet, I, you, red, bird, dog, louse, man, woman, etc.

Some Cognate Examples

- Escuela, school (?), ecole
- Campo, camp, champ
- Venir, come (?), venir
- Ir, go (?), aller
- Comer, eat (?), manger

Morris Swadesh list

of 207 basic words, a sample

1. I
2. you (singular)
  7. this
  11. who
  12. what
  22. one
  23. two
  45. fish
  47. dog
  48. louse
  64. blood
  65. bone
  67. egg
  68. horn
  69. tail
  73. ear
  74. eye
  75. nose
  77. tooth
  78. tongue
  83. hand
  103. know
  109. die
  128. give
  147. sun
  148. moon
  150. water
  155. salt
  156. stone
  163. wind
  167. fire
  179. year
  182. fall
  183. new
  207. name

Reconstruction

- Comparing related languages using their cognates to posit original phonemes, morphemes and syntax in common ancestor language
Three Main Methods of Classification

1. Genetic
2. Areal
3. Typological

Classification Type No. 1
Genetic System

1. Genetic – Family Tree Model- Mother languages and daughter languages make up a language family, e.g., Indo-European
2. Some are language isolates (not sure where they come from or to whom they are related)

Language families

- Genetically related languages (having a common origin)
- Deceased languages can be reconstructed
- Linguistic reconstruction produces a proto-language, e.g., Proto-Indo-European
Some of the World’s Language Families

- Finno-Ugric
- Uralic-Altaic
- Indo-European
- Dravidian
- Austro-Asiatic
- Austronesian
- Australian
- Indo-Pacific (Papuan)
- Afro-Asiatic
- Niger-Congo
- Nilo-Saharan
- Khosian
- Sino-Tibetan
- Eskimo-Aleut
- Mayan
- Uto-Aztec
- Macro-Carib
- Andean

Language isolates

- No known connection with other languages
- They were surrounded by other languages and resisted change?
- Basque, Japanese (?)
- Used as a symbol of uniqueness, destiny (?)

Method of Classification No.2
Areal (Geographic) System

- Areal – A particular group of languages, which through contact, have developed common features that distinguish them from languages of other geographical areas. Some interesting features of this dimension are:

Areal: To determine oldest language, there are 3 basic rules

- Isolated areas conserve older linguistic traits more than central areas except where the central area is also an isolated one.
Lateral Areas – No. 2

Lateral areas conserve older linguistic feature(s) better than central areas.

The greater the concentration of Dialectal varieties, the more likely the home area will be located.

Areal Dispersion No. 3

- Of two linguistic forms, the older is preserved in a territory later occupied or held as a colony.

- Thus, one could say that the US is a better conservator of an older form of English than contemporary London.

The Wave Model

- Another type of areal classification system
- Advantage is shows more precisely how languages are related
- You can draw wavy circles around languages that share a similar feature (e.g., plural case endings in Slavic languages, where other IE languages have plural endings in an aspirated b
- [bʰ]
**Wave Model**
- Circles are drawn around languages that share a specific characteristic(s) that are in relatively close proximity. E.g., Baltic, Slavic and German languages could be circled as one because these languages have plural case endings that have an [m] whereas many other Indo-European languages have plural case endings that have an aspirated b [bh]. Other circles could be drawn around other groupings based on other phonemic features.

**Classification No.3: TYPOLOGICAL**
- Depends on system identifying a single feature as representative of a group of languages.
  - Isolating – no bound morphemes, e.g. Chinese
  - Agglutinative – bound morphemes appear after each other, e.g., Quechua
  - Inflectional – internal changes in a word make a semantic distinction, e.g., Latin

**Isolating Example: Mandarin Chinese**
- no conjugation, no declination, no masculine or feminine, no singular nor plural forms. Everything is based on the word order, and it usually is the same as in English: Subject + Verb + Object.
- There are strict word categories, such as verb, noun, preposition, as in Western languages. For instance, the word *get* can have the function of a verb, meaning *to give* but also of a preposition meaning *for*. The word to say *to arrive* will be the same as the preposition *from*, and *to be* can also mean *at*. An adjective can become a verb, thus *big* can also mean *is big* and by adding an adverb *to grow up*.

**Agglutinative Example: Quechua (Andes)**
- Quechua ("qheshwa") is an indigenous language of the Andean region,
- Seven dialects spoken today by approximately 13 million people,
- Speakers found in in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Northern Chile, Argentina, and Southern Colombia.
- It was the official language of Tawantinsuyu, the Inca Empire.
- Continued to spread long after the Conquest
Quechua grammar

- A large number of suffixes and infixes are added to words to change both overall significance and subtle shades of meaning.
- Bipersonal pronouns, e.g.,
  - Brother = wawqe (if male speaker to brother), but turi (if female speaker to brother)
  - Sister = pana (if male speaker to sister), but ñaña (if female to female)

Culture and Grammar

- Quechua requires some vast changes of mind-set as learners try to master bipersonal conjugation, conjugation dependent on mental state and veracity of knowledge, spatial and temporal relationships, and numerous cultural factors.

Quechua Agglutinating examples

- Allinllachu? (Are you well?) Answer= allinmi (allin=good)
- Runasimikunata
  - Runa (people) + simi (language) + kuna (plural) + ta (accusative, affirmative ending)
- Runasimikunataq (q ending makes it a question)
- Much’á-na-naya-ka-pu-chka-sqa-ku-puní-ña-taq-suna-má (Much’a = kiss)
  - (So they’ve always been kissing each other, then!)

Inflective Example: LATIN

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<th>Sg.</th>
<th>Pl.</th>
<th>Sg.</th>
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<td>numerus</td>
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<td>me</td>
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Inflective Example No. 2: