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Reconstruction

The fundamental tenet of the comparative method in historical linguistics is that systematic similarities shared by two or more languages that are not attributable to borrowing, universality, or chance must be attributed to a common proto-language. Hypotheses constructed in this framework stand or fall on the evidence that can be adduced for the systematicity and regularity of the similarities. The most convincing evidence is provided by regular phonological correspondences in words with related meanings (e.g., the correspondence of Latin *c (k)* to English *h* in *cor: heart, capere: haft, canis: hound*, etc.). Such regular correspondences can only be explained as the result of common origin. They may be presented in various formats, but objectifying them as hypothetical proto-phonemes in specific lexical items in the proto-language (e.g., Proto-Indo-European *k in *kerd- 'heart', *kap- 'seize', and *kwon- 'dog' for the correspondence above) is the one that most convincingly demonstrates the historicity and predictive power of the comparative method.

The earliest extensive use of reconstruction in comparative linguistics is found in the work of August Schleicher (1821–1868). He appears to have been ambivalent about the historical reality of forms he created (and marked with an asterisk—his innovation) to represent the unattested prototypes of words that regularly corresponded in form and meaning in various Indo-European languages. On the one hand, Schleicher usually cited these prototypes as fully inflected words that he did not hesitate to use in phrases and sentences, on one occasion even constructing a short Proto-Indo-European fable. On the other hand, as a pioneer in the rigorous definition of sound laws, he could not have been unaware that many of the details he "reconstructed" were not unambiguously supported by specific phonological correspondences.

The formalism of the following generation of comparative linguists—Brugmann, Osthoff, and others who collectively styled themselves the "Neogrammarians"—was in many ways a reaction to such methodological

vagueness. In their view, only the systematic correspondence of phonological elements (the concept of the phoneme had yet to be invented, but was often implicit in their work) could be taken as incontrovertible evidence for the common origin of two or more languages. Thus the only solidly reconstructible elements in a proto-language are proto-phonemes. Although, of course, these are always instantiated in cognate lexicon, the Neogrammarians saw such factors as analogic reformation, borrowing between cognate languages, and the workings of chance, as dooming any attempt to directly compare and reconstruct words, let alone larger syntactic structures. Etymologies can only be the by-products of phonological comparison, and while here and there word-long sequences of reconstructed phonemes can be specified with some assurance, most are problematic in one way or another. Despite the theoretical caveats of the Neogrammarians, most historical linguists then and since have not hesitated to attribute words, paradigms, syntactic structures, and even some discourse phenomena, to the hypothetical parent languages of the families they have studied. Whatever their historical contingencies and inherent uncertainty, the pursuit of etymologies remains the focus of much comparative linguistic work, particularly that undertaken in more general historical and cultural contexts.

To the anthropologist seeking a linguistic perspective on prehistory, comparative reconstruction is of considerable evidentiary value in at least three distinct ways:

1. The rigorous reconstruction of elements of a proto-language is the surest evidence for the common origin of a group of potentially related languages, resting as it must on a detailed understanding of the regular phonological correspondences among these languages, as well as on at least a few highly probable etymologies. A language family for which a proto-language has been reconstructed may be treated as confirmed. Proposed relationships among languages that have not been tested by rigorous comparison in a framework allowing reconstruction must be considered unproved.

2. Lexical (i.e., etymological) reconstructions are an important tool for the investigation of the "proto-cultures" in which the speakers of a proto-language lived, especially in situations where written records are lacking. The reconstruction of the lexicon of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) remains the most extensive and widely discussed instance of such work, but the continuing uncertainty over the location of the PIE homeland and whether PIE speakers were involved with the spread of early agriculture into Europe indicates the tentativeness of the results. Some lexical reconstructions support a PIE homeland in southern Russia and a proto-culture that was primarily nomadic and pastoralist, but other evidence supports (as Tamaz Gamkrelidze and Vyacheslav Ivanov have recently proposed) a PIE homeland in Anatolia and a PIE culture with sophisticated agricultural technology derivative from Mesopotamia. Debate over these ambiguities, however, should not obscure the fact that a considerable amount of detailed information about the social and cultural life of the earliest Indo-Europeans can be recovered from reconstructed terms for various elements of material and symbolic culture. Of particular interest are etymologies that point to the reconstruction of

interrelated sets of terms in such semantic areas as kinship terminology, plant and animal taxonomy, and numeral systems.

Similar results have been achieved in a few other Old World language families, most notably Austronesian. In the New World, a significant body of work, much of it stemming from Edward Sapir and his students, has focused on the reconstruction of proto-languages for many North American Indian language families. Lexical reconstructions in these families have indicated a number of significant prehistoric language-culture correlations, such as that between Proto-Siouan and early farming in the Mississippi Valley, or between Proto-Athabaskan and the diffusion of the bow and arrow in the western part of the continent.

3. Whether or not they are reconstructible from phonological correspondences, elements of the morphosyntactic structure of a proto-language can be inferred from the correspondence of such features in the daughter languages of a family. Such grammatical reconstruction is firmest when the details compared are arbitrary and irregular and the languages are geographically separated. The reconstruction of a few features of discourse, such as poetic formulas and syntactic devices distinctive of highly marked genres, has also been attempted, with varying degrees of success, within Indo-European and a few other well-attested language families. Reconstructions of grammatical and discourse features can provide at best only a partial glimpse of the structure of a proto-language. However, especially where supported by phonological correspondences, they can be of great probative value in establishing a genetic relationship and, more generally, can provide evidence of areal connections, or of structural drift associated with certain typological configurations.

(See also *color, contact, endangered, evolution, genre, grammar, orality, syncretism, variation, writing*)

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