The significance of open data in Historical-Comparative Linguistics

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Indo-European languages are a model example for how a proto-language should be reconstructed. All proposed sound correspondences and sound laws have been published and the information is accessible to anyone who wants to work on this subject. With many other language families, the situation is not as ideal and the fact that less people are working on them is not the (only) reason. Neither is the fact that Indo-European linguistics looks back at more than two hundred years of study, while other disciplines have had less time or are just getting started.

The first half of this talk will assess the reconstruction status of the Mayan language family as opposed to the one of Indo-European and address the challenges researchers are facing when trying to contribute to the reconstruction of Proto-Maya. Proto-Maya is considered to be fairly well reconstructed. However, if one wants to see the actual cognate sets that are behind the proposed reconstructions, only a fraction of those have actually been published. Authoritative overviews of the reconstruction can be found in, e.g., Campbell (1984, 2017) or Campbell & Kaufman (1985). Kaufman (1964, 1969), Campbell 1977, Kaufman & Norman (1984) or England (1990) are often named as sources for the cognate sets the reconstruction is based on, but these publications do not publish enough cognate sets to cover the whole of Proto-Maya. More recently, younger linguists have begun to fill in the gaps, e.g., Eric Adell for the Q'anjob'alan branch of Maya (Adell 2016).

The second part of this talk will also try to remedy the somewhat unfortunate situation by presenting cognate sets for two select sound changes in a single Mayan language (Ch'orti') that have not yet been worked out in detail, especially not with a published data basis. The first sound change to be discussed is the merger of PM *h and *j > Ch'orti' *j* and ultimately the partial loss of *j* plus the consequences of this change. The second is the sound change that sets Ch'orti' apart from all other Mayan languages – at least in the literature: PM *l > Ch'orti' *r*. It will be shown that both sound changes actually did not occur in all positions in equal ways. Possible explanations for this apparent irregularity will be explored in connection with the more general question of whether sound change really is regular.

The final aim of this paper will be to show a) that sound change is indeed regular, b) that openly communicating the data your assumptions are based on is without alternative because otherwise, the reconstruction process is a lot more cumbersome, and c) that, contrary to what is often claimed, it is not at all impossible to elevate the reconstruction of another language family to the high standard of Indo-European languages, even if one is just getting started.

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