



Comparative Reconstruction in Linguistics

Martine Robbeets

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Introduction

Linguistic reconstruction is a procedure for inferring an unattested ancestral state of a language on the evidence of data that are available from a later period. An ancestral language reconstructed in this way is often referred to as a “proto-language,” meaning it is the common source of all the languages in a given family. *Comparative reconstruction* is distinguished from *internal reconstruction* in that it is based on a comparison of forms between related languages rather than a comparison of forms within the same language. The goal of reconstruction is to recover as many aspects of the ancestral language as possible. The work usually begins with an attempt to infer various parts of the ancestral language’s structure, such as its sounds (phonology), words (lexicon), meanings (semantics), word structure (morphology), and sentence structure (syntax). Proceeding from their knowledge of possible ways of language change, linguists try to recover the original form from which cognates in related languages could reasonably be derived. The more successfully different parts of language structure can be reconstructed and assembled, the more accurately linguists can replicate the originally spoken language. This in turn should enable them to set up an internal classification, representing hypothetical kinship relationships between the ancestral language and its descendants. Ultimately, reconstruction may allow linguists to situate the ancestral homeland in time and space, and to draw inferences about the cultural and natural environment available to the speakers of the ancestral language. The method applied for reconstructing different parts of language structure and basing inferences about language classification upon them is called the *comparative-historical method*. However, comparative reconstruction of other aspects of human prehistory, such as cultural aspects, chronology, and geography, requires techniques other than the comparative-historical method. Among these methods are quantitative methods recently introduced to linguistics. They provide an alternative way of determining the subgrouping of language families, estimating the time depth of proto-languages, and locating the original homeland. Comparative reconstruction using the comparative-historical method forms the foundation of comparative-historical linguistics. It was first consistently applied by the Neogrammarians in the 19th century in connection with their claim of the regularity of sound change.

Textbooks

Since textbooks in comparative-historical linguistics concentrate more on the theory of change than on the methods of comparative reconstruction, there are few textbooks with the word “reconstruction” in the title. Exceptions are Fox 1995 and Birnbaum 1978, but the latter work is somewhat outdated. Nevertheless, the basic procedures of comparative reconstruction are covered by most standard works in comparative-historical linguistics. Containing suggestions for further reading and practical exercises, Trask 1996, Campbell 2004, and Crowley and Bower 2010 are helpful for students at a beginner’s level, as well as for those who take an interest in language without being academically engaged in linguistics. Fox 1995, Campbell and Poser 2008, and Hock and Joseph 2009 are useful for researchers and students with an elementary knowledge of linguistics. Bynon 1977 and McMahon 1994 are directed at a similar level, but they have a strong sociolinguistic focus. Anttila 1989, Hock 1991, and Ringe and Eska 2013 are theoretical textbooks aimed at a more advanced level.

Anttila, R. 1989. *Historical and comparative linguistics*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

A revised edition of a standard work in which the first part is concerned with language change in general, and the second part deals more specifically with linguistic reconstruction, including the reconstruction of phonology, grammar, and semantics. The focus is on English in particular, and on Indo-European languages in general, with Finnish and its closely related languages examined for contrast.

Birnbaum, H. 1978. *Linguistic reconstruction: Its potentials and limitations in new perspective*. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Man.

A slim book (84 pages) that examines the specifics of linguistic reconstruction at various levels of language structure, notably phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The data are primarily drawn from Indo-European languages (Slavic in particular), and reference is made to the case of Nostratic languages as an example of distant genetic relationship.

Bynon, T. 1977. *Historical linguistics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.

A textbook with a strong sociolinguistic orientation, concerned with the process of language change through time in individuals, social groups, and speech communities. Examples are mainly drawn from English and German, but also from classical languages, French, and Welsh.

Campbell, L. 2004. *Historical linguistics: An introduction*. 2d ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

An accessible introduction to the study of language change that teaches students how to apply comparative reconstruction in practice. It contains extensive reading suggestions, exercises, and examples from the languages of the world, especially Finno-Ugric and Mesoamerican languages.

Campbell, L., and W. J. Poser. 2008. *Language classification: History and method*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.

This is a significant survey of the status of language classification around the world, with attention given to a large variety of language families. The work has a strong methodological focus, explaining the procedure of comparative reconstruction and evaluating how efficiently it has been applied to the languages across the world. Although it evaluates alternative methods that provide a view on language origins, it does not deal with recent quantitative approaches to reconstruction.

Crowley, T., and C. Bower. 2010. *An introduction to historical linguistics*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

A clear and concise introduction to language change and the procedures of comparative reconstruction. This textbook is notable for being up-to-date: the 2010 edition added recent advances in computational modeling as well as interdisciplinary perspectives on cultural reconstruction. Furthermore, the appeal of the book has broadened from an emphasis on the languages of Australia and the Pacific to one presenting examples from all over the world.

Fox, A. 1995. *Linguistic reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

A comprehensive introduction to the basic procedures of comparative reconstruction, this book is an accessible guide for students with an elementary knowledge of linguistics. The contents are well balanced between linguistic reconstruction of phonology, morphology and syntax, classification issues, cultural reconstruction, and quantitative methods in reconstruction. However, the quantitative section is no longer up-to-date, as it lacks a discussion of recent advances in phylogenetic linguistics.

Hock, H. H. 1991. *Principles of historical linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Not so much a textbook as a manual for linguistic researchers, providing an insight in the major concepts of historical linguistics and linguistic reconstruction. The focus is on sound change and phonological reconstruction, abundantly illustrated with examples, which are mainly drawn from Indo-European studies.

Hock, H. H., and B. D. Joseph. 2009. *Language history, language change, and language relationship: An introduction to historical and comparative linguistics*. 2d ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

This is a detailed introduction to language change, language contact, dialectology, history of writing, the history of Indo-European linguistics, and language relationship, but linguistic and cultural reconstruction are only briefly dealt with. It does not cover quantitative approaches. The book contains suggestions for further reading.

McMahon, A. 1994. *Understanding language change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.

A textbook designed for students with only an elementary knowledge of linguistics. Covering topics such as language contact, linguistic variation, pidgins and creoles, and language death, it has a strong sociolinguistic orientation. The discussion is illustrated with examples from English and other languages.

Ringe, D., and J. F. Eska. 2013. *Historical linguistics: Toward a twenty-first century reintegration*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.

An innovative textbook that concentrates on theory without losing sight of data. It integrates functional and generative approaches to the analysis of language change before exploring comparative reconstruction and new methods for linguistic comparison. Examples are drawn from a wide range of language families across the world.

Trask, R. L. 1996. *Historical linguistics*. London: Arnold.

An introduction to historical linguistics designed for students who have no prior background in the field. English examples are frequently used to encourage readers to relate their own knowledge to the context of the book.

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