

# The Limits of the Comparative Method: Innovative Approaches to Understanding Orphan Languages

## Meeting Description

57th Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea*  
21 – 24 August 2024  
University of Helsinki

## Workshop proposal

The Comparative Method (CM) stands as one of the most impactful methodologies in historical-comparative linguistics, revolutionizing our understanding of the development of language families. Its enduring relevance in modern linguistics attests to its efficacy. However, the CM comes with a significant limitation: it requires comparanda—distinct languages suspected to share a lineage. This constraint renders it inapplicable for studying language isolates and many small language families, which, in reality, make up the majority of language families. We refer to these linguistically unique or small-scale genealogical units as 'orphan languages'.

While we join others in recognizing the importance of these 'orphan languages' to historical linguistics, they are often conspicuously absent from discussions that critique the limitations, or offer alternatives, to the Comparative Method. That is, the focus in terms of remnants of linguistic diversity remains on single languages classified as 'isolates'—those with no known genealogical relatives. Language isolates in particular have been extensively cataloged and analyzed from various angles—including comparative, typological, and diachronic approaches (Georg 2015, Epps & Michael 2023, Salaberri et al. 2020, Campbell 2017)—as well as from geographic perspectives (Urban 2021). Emerging research is adopting cross-disciplinary methods, utilizing statistical patterning (Van Gijn et al. 2022) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) in corpus linguistics (Gamallo et al. 2020). Recent investigations actively merge linguistics with genetics (Matsumae et al. 2021, Laurent et al. 2023) to tackle the tough questions of the origins the speakers of language *isolates*, but not necessarily the broader category of language *orphans*.

Furthermore, despite advancements, the limitations of the (classical) CM are still evident: it cannot effectively trace the history of language orphans and their speakers and there is no alternative method with proven results that can take its place. Additionally, many potential language orphans may exist in under-explored regions, or some languages might be wrongly assumed to have affiliations with their neighbors.

The *Orphan Languages* workshop aims to address these challenges by exploring innovative methods for reconstructing the proto-stages of language isolates and unaffiliated language groups, circumventing the limitations of the classical comparative method.

Topics include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Exploring how interdisciplinary methodologies can advance our understanding of orphan languages and their speakers;

- Investigating how chronological methods, such as internal reconstruction and genetic timelines, can help establish connections or separations between speakers of orphan languages and other groups;
- Researching language contact between speakers of orphan languages and other groups through trajectories of loan words or grammatical features or constructions;
- Demonstrating how big data, computational linguistics, and machine learning are offering new insights into speakers of language orphans' histories;
- Emphasizing the importance of insights gained from ethnography, historical narratives, and archaeology;
- Investigating what geographic information systems (GIS) and spatial analyses can reveal about the movement and settlement of speakers of language orphans;
- Examining how globalization and migration impact language orphans and what methodologies can help track these changes.

### Call for Papers

Abstracts of 300 words max. (including figures and tables but not references) should be sent to both workshop convenors by 6 November, 2023.

### Conveners

Abbie Hantgan: LLACAN, Paris, France [abbie.hantgan-sonko@cnr.fr](mailto:abbie.hantgan-sonko@cnr.fr)

Rik van Gijn: Center for Linguistics, Leiden University [e.van.gijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:e.van.gijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

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