

Advances in Sino-Tibetan Historical-Comparative Linguistics

Place: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, University of Bern (Switzerland)

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Comparison of related languages, reconstruction of the common ancestor and classification of the language family are the three main tasks of historical-comparative linguistics. The standard tool for such research is the Comparative Method. It constitutes a sequence of interrelated steps and results in the reconstruction of entire lexical and grammatical morphemes (cf. for the workflow Hoenigswald 1950; Anttila 1989: 229–256; Ross & Durie 1996: 7; Rankin 2003: 187; Weiss 2015: 128–132). These reconstructions enable inferences about the ecological and cultural environment of the speakers of the reconstructed proto-language, the developments of linguistic forms in the daughter languages and the phylogenetic classification of the language family. Furthermore, the Comparative Method is the only tool to reliably separate cognates from mere look-alikes. Much of the explanatory force of the method comes from its tight connection to the Neogrammarian postulate of regularity of sound change (Leskien 1876: XXVIII; Osthoff & Brugmann 1878: XIV–XV; Bloomfield 1928), i.e. irregularities in the sound correspondences must be explained by intersecting regular sound changes, borrowing or analogy (Brugmann 1879: 5–8; Hill 2014).

Although often closely associated with Indo-European, the Comparative Method is in principle applicable to any language family (cf. among others Hoenigswald 1990). As a zero hypothesis, then, the Comparative Method constitutes the standard tool of historical-comparative linguistics also for the Sino-Tibetan language family (cf. also Fellner & Hill 2019b).

However, in Sino-Tibetan, the meticulous application of the Comparative Method has not yet proceeded as far as in other language families. The main reason for this is the lack of sufficient and reliable descriptive data on many individual languages and entire subgroups for most of the 20th and well into the 21st century.

Consequently, Sino-Tibetan historical linguists often felt constrained to resort to heuristic principles and subjective judgement (cf. Benedict 1973: 130; Matisoff 1994: 54, 2007: 437). This approach was conceptualized as an explicit methodological tool called Teleo-Reconstruction (Benedict 1973) and proved fruitful, producing the canonical works of Sino-Tibetan historical linguistics (e.g. Benedict 1972; Matisoff 2003, 2015). However, it repeatedly faced severe criticism for its lack of methodological transparency and rigour, an inadequate choice and handling of data sources, premature and arbitrary reconstructions, including the admission of “proto-variation” (cf. Matisoff 1978), and insufficient precision in the prediction of actual reflexes (Chang 1973; Miller 1974;

Sagart 2006; Hill 2011, 2019; Fellner & Hill 2019a, 2019b, cf. also the critical introspection in Benedict 1973: 130; Matisoff 2003: 9, footnote 21). Additionally, the description of Sino-Tibetan languages has greatly advanced in the last few decades. As a consequence, Teleo-Reconstruction has increasingly drifted into obsolescence, and a rigorous application of the Comparative Method, relying on testable empirical evidence in the form of sound correspondences, has become feasible for many subgroups and the family as a whole.

Recent case studies applying the Comparative Method (e.g. Hill 2019; Lai et al. 2020; Gerber 2023; Bodt 2024) have shown that it is able to generate a wealth of empirically founded and testable hypotheses on different phylogenetic levels, putting our knowledge of the respective units on a more robust foundation. A broader application of the Comparative Method therefore has the potential to significantly forward Sino-Tibetan historical-comparative linguistics.

The objective of this workshop is to bring together historical linguists of the Sino-Tibetan family already working with or aiming to apply the Comparative Method in a methodologically rigorous manner. It offers a platform to present findings and to have an exchange on both those findings and methodological aspects. The workshop responds to the necessity to place Sino-Tibetan historical-comparative linguistics on a more robust foundation. It aims to advance the discipline by evaluating the state of the art and identifying challenges and desiderata for future research.

We invite contributions that present bottom-up case studies of the application of the Comparative Method in a qualitative framework on any branch or phylogenetic level of Sino-Tibetan. Low-level contributions are especially encouraged.

Potential topics include, but are not restricted to:

- Low- and mid-level reconstructions of (specific parts of) the phonology or morphology
- Critical and constructive discussion of previous comparisons and reconstructions
- Specific problems or challenges in the application of the Comparative Method
- Revision of existing classifications and new classification proposals
- Individual etymologies (existing or new ones)

Theoretical contributions on methodology are welcome if they have a substantial empirical foundation, i.e. make regular reference to actual data points. Contributions on neighbouring language families (e.g. Austronesian, Austroasiatic, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien) are admissible to the extent that they contribute to the elucidation of general or specific issues in Sino-Tibetan.

The workshop will be held as a part of the 58th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics. The submission deadline and notice of acceptance of this workshop will be the same as for general papers for the conference.

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