

Unorthodox methods for evaluating macro-families

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The statistical difficulties inherent to long distance comparisons are immense as many factors are at play. Not only must we evaluate the number of proposed cognates, the evaluation must take into account the proportion of predicted segmental (and super-segmental) correspondents for any given cognate. More importantly, this must be weighted against the number of examined forms, as comparing two languages with richly documented vocabularies will obviously yield more convincing evidence than comparisons from poorly documented ones. Early loans, a problem which has been discussed amply in the literature, is a relatively trivial problem in light of these larger challenges, which have gone largely unexamined. As a result, the strength of long distance relationships have generally been evaluated by mere intuition rather than formal comparisons against chance.

In this talk, I use two methods for evaluating long distance relationships with Austronesian that may help us circumvent the statistical nightmares alluded to above. The first is to take the brash move of putting aside all lexical correspondences in order to focus solely on functional (derivational, inflectional, pronominal) morphology. The second method involves comparing proposed long-distance relationships with comparisons to far-flung families that are outside the realm of rational phylogenetic relatedness (e.g. PIE, Proto-Afro-Asiatic, etc.). The latter technique has been applied with interesting results by Thiel (2006) in reconsidering the relation of Omotic to Afro-Asiatic and can put many recent proposals about Austronesian's outside relations in better perspective.