Descriptive And Comparative Linguistics

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Abstract: Comparative linguistics includes the study of the historical relationships of languages using the comparative method to search for regular (i.e. recurring) correspondences between the languages' phonology, grammar and core vocabulary, and through hypothesis testing persons with little or no specialization in the field sometimes attempt to establish historical associations between languages by noting similarities between them, in a way that is considered by specialists.

Keywords— method, language, similar words, research group, synchronic analyses, language documentation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most common method applied in pseudoscientific language comparisons is to search two or more languages for words that seem similar in their sound and meaning. While similarities of this kind often seem convincing to laypersons, linguistic scientists consider this kind of comparison to be unreliable for two primary reasons. First, the method applied is not well-defined: the criterion of similarity is subjective and thus not subject to verification or falsification, which is contrary to the principles of the scientific method. Second, the large size of all languages' vocabulary and a relatively limited inventory of articulated sounds used by most languages make it easy to find coincidentally similar words between languages.

It is striking that all good descriptive work, done both in the past and today, in some way combines thorough synchronic description with family-internal comparison and historical reconstruction, or is grounded in these. Conversely, the quality of comparative linguistic studies crucially depends on the quality of the synchronic analyses of the relevant data. In the case of modern languages, these synchronic analyses are often provided by descriptive linguists. In the case of ancient languages, the synchronic analyses are carried out by philologists, whose methodology often overlaps with that of descriptive linguists. Descriptive and comparative historical linguistics has a number of naturally shared domains of research.

For synchronic language description it is crucial to have or accumulate knowledge about the earlier stages of a certain sound, affix or word, and to investigate how these structural items evolved over time to become what they are in the language today. Therefore, researchers in the descriptive linguistic group often engage in comparative research on a group of related languages. This type of research also enables them to contribute to the study of the socio-cultural past. Two main research domains may be distinguished within the program: 1) language description and 2) linguistic reconstruction and comparative linguistics.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

Language description, aiming at in-depth analyses of the world's languages. Descriptive linguistics is concerned with the study of the structure of languages through an analysis of the forms, structures and processes at all levels of language structure: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics and pragmatics. It is based on data gathered through fieldwork, preferably immersion fieldwork for extended periods of time. It draws on ethnographic and linguistic methods. Languages are of strategic importance in understanding the history and culture of a people and the cognitive capacities of humans, as in Sapir's idea of linguistics as a science. Leiden University has a long and strong tradition in producing comprehensive grammars of understudied languages. Leiden University comparative linguistic (LUCL) researchers are active in the development of the new field of language documentation. Language documentation is broader than description: it not only entails the establishment of searchable annotated audio and video corpora, including the most relevant cultural practices, but also involves reflection on data and on the nature of variation. The challenge for the coming years is to strengthen the program's position in developing the field of language documentation and to combine this with deeper linguistic analyses of the languages that are studied. The present context of LUCL favors these aims. The world's heritage of linguistic diversity is endangered in many different ways.

The first practicing of Comparative linguistics were not universally acclaimed: upon reading Becanus' book, Scaligerwrote never did I read greater nonsense, and Leibnitz coined the term goropism (from Gropius) to designate a far-sought, ridiculous etymology.There have also been claims that humans are descended from other, non-primate animals, with use of the voice referred to as the main point of comparison. Jean-Pierre Brisset (La Grande Nouvelle, around 1900) believed and asserted that humans descended from the frog, by linguistic means, due to frogs' croaking sounding similar to the French language. He held that the French word logement, "dwelling", derived from the word l'eau, "water".

For prehistoric times, the most advanced insights are developed and applied for the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Semitic and their subsequent stages.

Supportive evidence from archaeology and genetics is put to use, and researchers concentrate not only on internally motivated language changes, but also on external factors such as language contact and substrate effects. For historic times, the research program is strongly data-oriented: it is based on comprehensive philological study of the sources, on close reading of texts within their social, cultural and pragmatic contexts, and on corpus linguistics. At the same time, the research is well informed by the theoretical concepts of modern descriptive and historical linguistics as well as sociolinguistics. The members of this program in general cooperate with other researchers in the LUCL in numerous ways. The audiences of the various discussion groups and lecture series within LUCL cut across all groups and enable us to establish fruitful areas of cooperation and exchange in research.

3. CONCLUSION

Language contact and Afro-asiatic linguistics are examples of topics in which LUCL has considerable expertise with potential of synergy. The members of the descriptive linguistics research group have the additional ambition to intensify cooperation with colleagues in their areas of research in order to improve and expand on advanced training in their field, using the annual LUCL summer school and the development of internet-based teaching materials. They aim to expand our coverage of languages of the world.

In summing up it is clear that linguistic reconstruction and comparative linguistics, aiming at describing and understanding diachronic variation and linguistic developments across time, as well as synchronic older language stages in all their varieties.

4. REFERENCES

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