

## *In Search of the First Language (Nova Video)*

Suggested answers to the study questions, p. 67 of the APS course reader

(1) The *comparative method* (using inter-language comparisons to establish systematic correspondences) and the method of *mass comparison* are generally treated as two differing ways of working out genetic relationships between languages. What types of data are used for these methods? What are some of the methodological techniques of these two approaches? Do these methods have the same goals? Are they in conflict? What criticism(s) can be leveled at either or both?

Data for both comparative method and mass comparison consists of forms which combine sound/meaning resemblances (particularly lexical items, but also grammatical morphemes).

Techniques: The *comparative method* relies on finding repeated and regular sound correspondences which can be attributed to direct descent from a common ancestor. Note that any cognate items are relevant, i.e. compared items often are *not* from basic vocabulary. *Mass comparison* compares lists of *basic* vocabulary from as many languages as possible seeking resemblances in vocabulary across languages which are too numerous to attribute to chance (cf. the notebooks which Greenberg describes in the film). Demonstrated regular sound correspondences, while desirable, are not required. One does not usually stray far from basic vocabulary since once too much semantic freedom is allowed, e.g. something comparing the word meaning ‘see’ (an item of basic vocabulary) in one language with a word meaning ‘disease of the eyes’ (a non-basic item) in some other language, one loses control of what constitutes legitimate comparisons.

Goals: The purpose of *mass comparison* is to establish genetic relationship between languages. The primary purpose of the *comparative method* is to reconstruct proto-forms which can be related to their reflexes by regular changes. To attempt such a task *assumes* genetic relationship, but some practitioners would claim that without the presence of documentable regularity in sound correspondences, such a relation is not proven. The two pursuits should not be in conflict inasmuch as their goals are different.

Criticisms: Most criticisms are aimed at mass comparison. Critics state that there are no controls what passes for a “resemblance” in either the sounds compared or in the range of meanings allowed for compared items. No one would criticize the comparative method per se, but proponents of mass comparison as a technique for arriving at genetic groups would argue that if absolute regularity of sound correspondence and an understanding of the history of every form were a requirement to “prove” genetic relationship, only the most obvious groupings would ever be arrived at.

(2) Why do some linguists believe there is a temporal limit beyond which it is impossible to provide any convincing evidence of genetic relationship? About how far back is that temporal limit? How is this putative limitation reflected in present-day classification of the world’s languages?

A number of researchers would argue that the limit for demonstrating genetic relationship between languages is about 10,000 years from the time of the original ancestor language. At that depth, given what we know of the rate of vocabulary change, nothing would be left of the original vocabulary in the descendant languages, and any apparent resemblances could not be convincingly shown to be cognates rather than chance resemblances. Evidence for this claim is the fact that none of the well accepted families are reconstructed as having histories longer than 10K years, and most such families have shorter histories.

(3) What sorts of classifications have been proposed for American Indian languages? What controversies have arisen in classification of these languages

Sorts of classifications for American Indian languages: The most vitriolic controversy has centered on Greenberg’s 1987 *Language in the Americas*, with just three big families. The arguments have been carried in popular print media, academic journals, and conferences. The geneticist Luigi Cavali-Sforza claims to have established human genetic support for Greenberg’s groups from DNA sampling.

(4) What is Nostratic? Who are some of the main proponents of the Nostratic hypothesis? What types of reconstructions have been claimed for Nostratic?

Nostratic is a “super-phylum” consisting of grouping Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, Dravidian, Caucasian (or Kartvelian = South Caucasian), and Afroasiatic. This grouping was proposed by V.M. Illič-Svityč in the early 1960’s. Two of its main living proponents, both seen in the film are Vitaly Shevroshkin and Aharon Dogolpolsky. These researchers claim to have reconstructed several hundred items of vocabulary exhibiting regular sound correspondences. See box on Dogolpolsky for an illustration.

(5) What range of views can be found among linguists on the reconstructability or even the existence of “proto-Human”?

reconstruction of a few vocabulary items to complete dismissal of the idea that we can say anything at all about a language that may have been spoken 100,000 years ago.

(6) Give some ways that (at least some linguists have claimed that) linguistic classification and reconstruction has implications for human history.

At the very deepest levels, say 40,000 years or more, we have *cultural* information such as the use of symbols and rituals which would seem to have required a communication system with expressive power on the order of that found in modern human languages. The putative reconstruction of roots for items of *basic vocabulary* in all world areas, such as Ruhlen’s suggested reconstructions for ‘one/finger’ and ‘milk/suckle’ suggests that language must have had a single origin and all languages share elements from that origin. At a more shallow level, reconstructed vocabulary can tell us about where the homeland of the ancestral language of a group of related languages must have been and about basic features of the culture of the speakers of that ancestral languages. Thus, proto-Indo-European must have been spoken in a temperate, rather than a tropical or arctic area because we can reconstruct the names for a number of plants from that area, such as *beech* tree. The original Indo-Europeans must have practiced agriculture and animal husbandry because we can reconstruct plant names like *grain* and *wheat*, animal names like *cow* and *ewe*, and the word for *wheel*. At the Nostratic level, however, the word that comes out as *canis* or *hound* in Indo-European, suggesting the domestication of dogs, seems to mean just “wild animal” or “carnivorous animal” in Nostratic, suggesting that the original “Nostratic” speakers had not yet domesticated animals. And finally, at an even shallower level, when we find words like *tobacco* or *tea* which CANNOT be reconstructed for a group of languages, we know that the people speaking those languages must have already dispersed from their homeland before the words were introduced.