

Lessons from typological comparison: the difficulties and discoveries of a standardised approach.

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Abstract

Similarities between languages can be due to 1) homoplasies because of a limited design space, 2) common ancestry, and 3) contact-induced convergence. Typological (or structural) features cannot prove genealogy, but they can provide historical signals that are due to common ancestry or contact or both.

Following a brief summary of results obtained from the comparison of 160 structural features from 121 languages (PloS Biology, 17 November 2009), I will discuss some issues related to the relative (in)dependencies of such features: logical entailment, chance resemblance, typological dependency, phylogeny and contact.

This discussion will focus on the clustering of languages found in a small sample of 11 Austronesian and 8 Papuan languages of eastern Indonesia, an area known for its high degree of admixture.