

Prehistoric languages beyond the limits of comparative linguistics

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Workshop description

The comparative method has enabled linguists to reconstruct extinct languages from the past, but it has limitations and shortcomings that seemingly preclude going back too much in time and which boil down to its methodological assumptions (heavy reliance on cognates) and the very nature of language change (which tends to lack directionality, and which interacts with the effects of contact and borrowing). Nonetheless, ongoing research on diverse areas suggests that, even if it may not be possible to reconstruct languages from distant periods with certainty, it is at least possible to improve our understanding of the basic structural features of prehistoric languages from remote epochs. It deserves to be mentioned that there have been several attempts of this nature, including, but not limited to: using genetic data to support less clear or controversial, deep phylogenetic groupings; grammaticalization theory; internal reconstruction; and research on the effects of external factors (nature of social networks, number of speakers, features of the physical environment) on language structure and complexity. Because research on paleoclimatology, paleoecology, and paleoanthropology is providing a sharper and more accurate picture of how our ancestors lived, we can expect that our understanding of the languages they spoke can improve as well.

The aim of this workshop is discussing new approaches to the reconstruction/characterization of prehistoric languages. Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, researchers from other fields with an interest in the evolution of human cognition and behavior are also welcome to contribute.

Specific research questions to be addressed include (but are not limited to):

- The problems of the comparative method in linguistics and possible ways of circumventing them
- Linguistic theories that can shed light onto the nature of remote prehistoric languages
- The evolution of human cognition and its effect on the structure of prehistoric languages
- Environmental changes in Prehistory and their effects on language structure
- Social changes in Prehistory and their effects on language structure
- The links between language change and cultural transitions in Prehistory

Instructions to participate

To submit an abstract for a 20-minute presentation, please email a PDF (200 words max, plus references) to Antonio Benítez-Burraco at abenitez8@us.es by November 18, 2018 (notification of acceptance: November 19). Since this workshop is intended to be part of the annual meeting of the SLE (Leipzig, 21–24 August), the whole workshop proposal has to go into review. If it is accepted, participants will be asked to submit a full abstract by January 15, 2019 (see <http://sle2019.eu/submission-guidelines> and <http://sle2019.eu/faq>)