Word families across time in the Pano-Tacanan language family

Frederic Blum
(Max-Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig)

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The Pano-Tacanan language family consists of two groups of languages: The Panoan languages spoken in Peru, Brazil, and parts of Bolivia, and the Tacanan languages from the Bolivian lowlands. Even though they have long been argued to descend from the same ancestor (Girard 1971), compelling evidence has only been presented recently (Zariquiey and Valenzuela 2022; Valenzuela & Zariquiey 2023; Blum et al. accepted-in-principle). A potential reason for the difficulties in conclusively establishing this relationship is the expected large time depth since the separation of Panoan and Tacanan, obscuring the genealogical relationship between both branches. This scenario makes the family a perfect test case for the study of word families across the course of time.

Given the common history of Panoan and Tacanan, but also the long time since their separation, we can analyze the change of and within word families across a long time-span in two different branches of the same language family. For this purpose, we can make use of the annotation of partial cognacy to provide information whether a specific word family is shared across the whole language family, or part of only a specific branch (Wu & List 2023). This analysis contributes directly our understanding of how word families evolve along language phylogenies and helps us to better understand the history of the Pano-Tacanan language family itself, but also to better understand the effects of language change on word families.

In the talk, we will focus on two points. First, we will discuss from a methodological perspective how we can computationally extract the relevant word families from a newly created comparative wordlist of basic vocabulary in Pano-Tacanan (Blum et al. 2024). Second, we will investigate the change of those word families both within Panoan and Tacanan, and across the whole language family. This includes the extraction and visualization of partial colexification networks (List 2023). In this step, we will discuss the semantics and the diachrony of the most prominent word families in both Panoan and Tacanan, and analyze their shared and separated history in the light of the history of Pano-Tacanan.

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