Methods of Proof in Cognacy Assessment

The relative parenthesis in which Historical Linguistics found itself following the flourishing of the structuralist wave during the 20th century (Saussure, Bloomfield, Jakobson, up to Chomsky) has also had repercussions on the methodological reflexivity of the field. The new developments of the late preceding century, such as studies on grammaticalization and language contact, brought forth new cases for consideration; however, if they challenged the field's foundations or contested the formal outburst of linguistics, they did not really build on the principles of the fathers of linguistics, whose methods remained largely untouched, as established since the 19th century. Apart from the (still ongoing) debate between lexicostatistics and the traditional comparative approach, and a discussion on the role of syntax compared with lexicon, there have been limited efforts to refine the methodological apparatus of Historical Linguistics, even if linguists have individually adapted to the realities of their subfields.

This presentation zeroes in on a specific aspect of historical linguistics— the assessment of cognacy. Drawing inspiration from legal practice, linguists find themselves akin to judges resolving a case, to whom I propose a scale of rules, spanning three domains: phonetic correspondences, but also non-trivial syntactic-semantic correspondences, and systemic correspondences.

Firstly, I will outline the traditional views on cognacy assessment, for languages already displaying phonetic correspondences or not. Subsequently, I will demonstrate that cognacy can be assessed even in the absence of phonetic correspondences, given certain conditions. I will then introduce a range of hybrid methods, including homonymy and paradigms where phonetic correspondences are fostered through the convergence of morphosyntactic and semantic alignments, drawing on examples from Sino-Tibetan, Romance, and other language families. Finally, I will attempt to hierarchize these methods in relation to one another.