

A0032

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**Toward Greater Objectivity in Historical Linguistics: Probability, Statistics, and
Algorithmic Methods**

The comparative method traditionally relies on common sense, intuitive reasoning about probabilities, involving statements of the type "Such and such a cross-linguistic pattern cannot possibly be due to chance." Where we have abundant language data and large numbers of scholars qualified to evaluate it, as in Indo-European studies, this may well be adequate. But as we try to reach back further into the remote past, non-chance similarities become harder and harder to distinguish from random noise, and it becomes increasingly difficult to judge whether a pattern which one linguist claims to see as historically significant really is so or is merely accidental. In order to advance our knowledge beyond impasses of this type, it is necessary to make the mathematical basis of our methodology explicit and objective. The workshop aims to bring together researchers who are interested in finding ways to do this, whether in regard to questions of classification, reconstruction, contact-induced change, or indeed any area of historical linguistics in which distinguishing chance from non-chance patterns can be deemed important.