

Re-Examining Tree-based Models of Evolution: Issues of Areal Diffusion and Convergence in Dialectal Continua.

The primacy of shared innovations in determining linguistic descent is axiomatic to all fields of historical linguistics. However, an assumption that language boundaries are formed only through the diversification of shared ancestors, has disproportionately informed our underlying model of linguistic evolution, ignoring the potentially crucial roles played by dialect continua, the diffusion of features across such continua, and the potential for convergence as particular members of a continuum spread.

Part of the issue involves confusing typological groupings with cladistical ones. In families where broad typological diversity is in evidence, a natural tendency to cluster typologically similar members together can result in problematic evolutionary claims based on shared features, but not necessarily shared descent. Clearly, typological similarities do not require genetic relationships (cf. Vietnamese and Chinese, Korean and Japanese, Southwestern Tai and Muong); yet the extent to which evolutionary descent may contradict shared features has not been adequately explored.

These issues are raised by Babel et al. (2009), who introduce terminology distinguishing clades (evolutionary subgroups) from taxa (related languages or dialects sharing a significant set of feature that may or may not be innovations), while introducing the notion of apomorphic taxa, that is, groups of languages that share innovative features, but which need not have descended from a shared ancestor. Garrett (2006) applies this concept of a non-cladistical grouping in his analysis of Mycenaean Greek, where he argues that convergence may wipe out portions of a dialect continuum, leaving conservative, cladistically unrelated dialects on the margins that are unified not by shared innovations but by shared reception of diffused features.

It is clear that a bias toward straightforward diversification of shared ancestors is inadequate for describing the formation of many linguistic groups throughout history, and that the roles of dialectal diversity, areal diffusion, and convergence must be dealt with in order to accurately reconstruct linguistic evolution.