ABSTRACT

The thesis aims to identify and explain the weak – the "blind" spots of the Comparative Method and Internal Reconstruction as they are used in the traditional historical linguistics, the prime example of which is Indo-European linguistics. As in language, even in science the best explanation may be the historical one – here the development of the method is followed briefly from the pre-scientific era up to late structuralism and the state-of-the-art of the 3rd millennium. It appears clear that the methods are based mostly on the same intuitions that serve the speaker to acquire any language and are prone to have biases that are useful for speakers but tend to ignore certain solutions that are counter-intuitive. The original aim of the methods was quite different from what it is now – and the debate still continues as to whether the proto-language is anything more than a formula, a short-hand for sets of correspondences or whether it is a real language which we may perhaps describe in the same manner, though with less certainty, than any living language. The formulaist language is *abstract* and from the point of historical linguistics (see bellow) not a language at all and provides no interesting explanation of how the languages came to be different beyond providing a means of encoding and decoding one into another for which no knowledge of the processes involved is necessary.

Historical linguistics is not particularly successful in defining and describing its subject of enquiry: language in time. Building on the metaphorical frame of evolutionary biology, the author aims to show that language in time should be understood as much a metaphor as a species is in biology: a population of grammars that are in a complex relation of source and descendent. Communication is here defined as replication of intention, possibly by use of mirror neurons or other such mechanism, and language – grammar and lexicon, are a means of coding intentions for replication. The code is digital although the intention may be analogue, which also guarantees or at least explains the success of both methods, largely left unexplained but considered beyond doubt. The "digits" – "phonemes" are replicated in the first phases of acquisition to allow for replication of more complex sequences and a high degree of similarity is required for this process to be successful. Thus there *must* be continuity in similarity of phonemes in the psycho-acoustic space. Therefore the highest degree of success in reconstruction is and has always been in the area of historical phonology and much of the theoretical discussion in this thesis treats phonology and grammar, syntax and lexicon are only considered in as much as they can be used provide further data.

Since both methods are used for reconstructing the linguistic past, be it only in part as in the case of attested but extinct languages or be it completely, as is the case of proto-languages, such as Proto-Indo-European, the explanatory power of reconstruction is given some consideration. Although it is clear that nomological explanations cannot be achieved since there can be no proof or experiment, there are still good and bad explanations within the field defined by the logic of language change and the physical abilities of our species. But since there is no good definition of language in historical linguistics, it is hardly surprising that the very term "change" is largely inadequate to the process in question. There is no physical continuity of language to allow for the basic sense of change, nor is there any exchange of entities in some space or system – and again the best way of conceptualizing language change is through language evolution. This excludes a number of philosophical positions taken to account for the processes that languages seem to undergo in time: the first is essentialism – the notion that language is a system *per se*, abstract and timeless, from which derive such fallacies as therapeutic and prophylactic change and indeed many of the organistic metaphors ascribing to language the capacity or at least a tendency to optimise itself or plan its evolution towards some specific end. The other philosophical – or perhaps intuitive – stance towards language evolution is atomism in system and sequencialism in sequence, where elements are primarily considered in isolation while – paradoxically –

appearing, as does a written word on a page to exist at the same time. The very opposite is true: it must never be ignored that phonemes do in a great degree overlap in real speech and that on the other hand while one part of the sequence is produced, the preceding and following context does *not* physically exist. Another such intuitive notion is symmetry as a feature of a perfect(ly reconstructed) system which has no basis in reality but has an esthetic appeal that is difficult to resist.

In order to bring to the reconstruction methodology a check on its accuracy typology has been invoked since at least Jacobsons paper on typological plausibility of reconstructed languages in 1958. The attempts to typologize historical linguistics has mostly failed since the comparanda are synchronic systems and generalisations over them not processes of "change" that lead to them and that probably provide a better explanation to any one language state than can synchronic typology. For historical phonology, the typology in question should be one of sequences of phone(me)s bound by psycho-acoustic similarity in a chain that synchronically appears as variation and in dichorionic terms should be called a cline – in this case a *phonocline.*

The blinds spots do not derive only from the wrong conception of "language" and "change", but even when understood in the new perspective, there is a number of (sometimes long recognised) blind spots that follow from the logic of the architecture of a phonemic system. There are a number of changes that are invisible to the method and mostly they are of the systemic character, *unconditioned changes*: shift, merger (even with zero) and apparent inertia. Strategies to infer such changes by means of contextual analyses are given in brief. In the case of merger, frequency in lexicon may provide a starting point for reconstruction.

Both methods are analysed step by step and notions that were or still are current in historical linguistics as, for instance, the majority rules principle whereby the most frequent reflex of phoneme is assigned diachronic preference, are mostly refuted. Examples and numerous case studies are drawn mostly from the area of Indo-European linguistic.

The original aim of the methods was quite different from what it is now – and the debate still continues as to whether the proto-language is anything more than a formula, a short-hand for sets of correcpondences or whether it is a real language which we may perhaps describe in the same manner, though with less certainty, than any living language. The formulaist language is *abstract* and from the point of historical linguistics (see bellow) not a langauge at all and provides no interesting explanation of how the languages came to be different beyond providing a means of encoding and decoding one into another for which no knowledge of the processes involved is necessary.