

LING 108: Introduction to Historical Linguistics

This syllabus is up-to-date as of: September 30, 2021.

1 Important information

the instructor: Adam Roth Singerman
how I prefer to be addressed: Adam
my pronouns: he/him/his
how you should contact me: adamsingerman@fas.harvard.edu

the Teaching Fellow (TF): Tamisha Lauren Tan
the TF's pronouns: she/her/hers or they/them/theirs
how you should contact the TF: tamishaltan@g.harvard.edu

when we'll be meeting for lectures: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30–2:45
where we'll be meeting for lectures: Barker Center 024
section time and place: stay tuned!

2 Course description and learning objectives

Divided into three units, LING 108: Introduction to Historical Linguistics explores how languages change and develop over time.

The first unit focuses on the variety of changes that languages undergo: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. The data that underlie our discussion of these changes will come from a variety of language families, including not only Indo-European (the best understood family in both synchronic and diachronic terms) but also families you might be less familiar with, such as Turkic, Uralic, Bantu, Mayan, Uto-Aztecan, Tupían, and Austronesian. ***By the end of the first unit, you will be familiar with – and able to offer analyses of – various kinds of linguistic change.***

The second unit focuses on the kinds of evidence that allow us to prove genetic relatedness between languages and to reconstruct ancestral proto-languages. How can we formulate contentful, rigorous hypotheses about the vocabulary and grammar of languages which were spoken millennia ago and which were never written down? To answer this question we'll take a detailed look at the Comparative Method, the methodology which grounds virtually all substantive work in the field of historical linguistics and which makes it possible for us to construct family trees. (For an example of such a tree, see Figure 1.) We'll also address proposals of 'long distance' relationships, which rarely succeed as scientifically rigorous hypotheses. ***By the end of the second unit, you will understand the way that the Comparative Method operates, the theoretical assumptions which underlie the construction of family trees, and the reasons why hypothesized long distance relationships frequently collapse when scrutinized.***

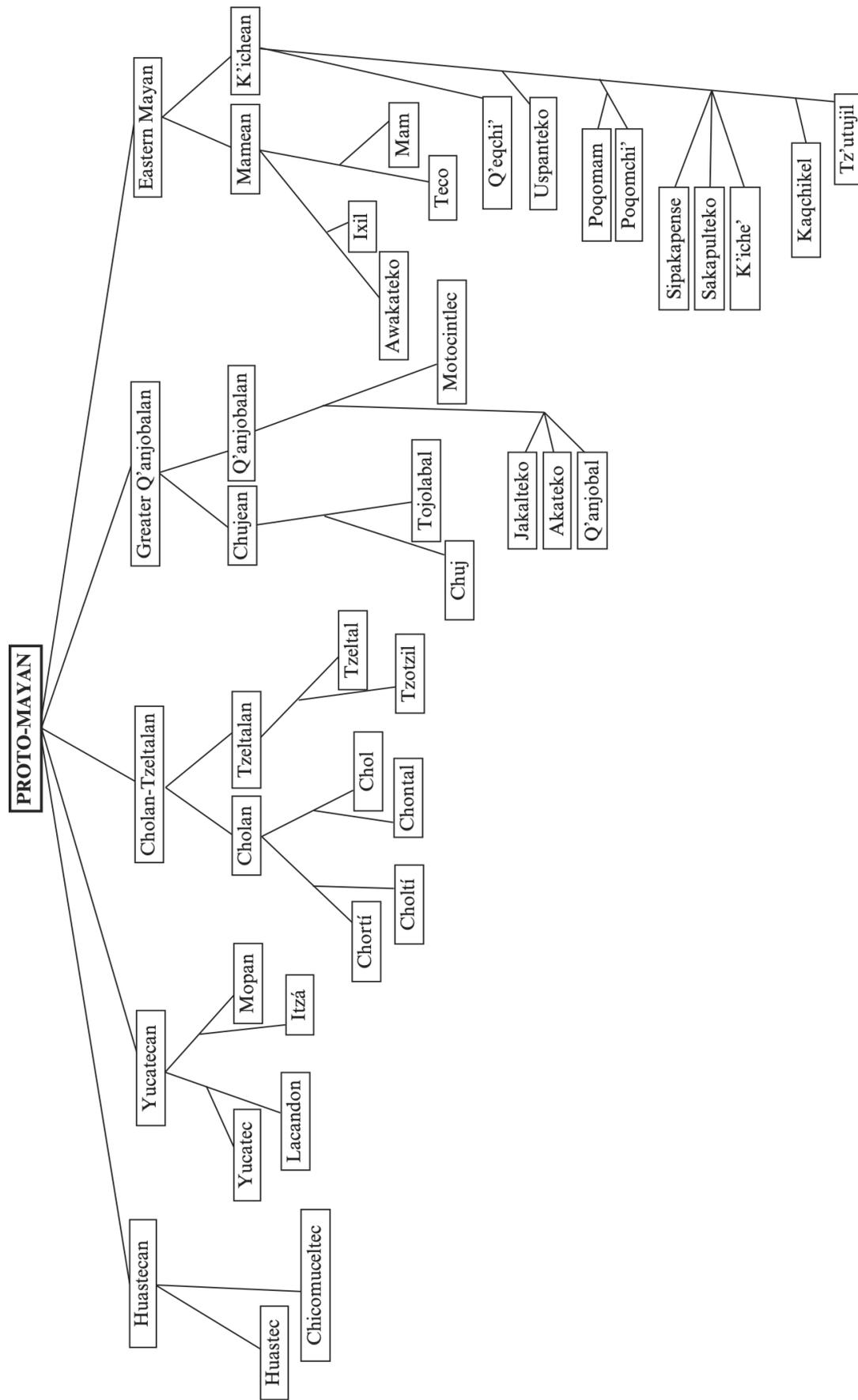


Figure 1: This tree of the Mayan language family is provided by Campbell (2013:180). A major goal of the second unit of our course is for you to understand what a tree like this is actually meant to represent. What kind of specific changes (to phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon) allow us to posit an Eastern Mayan branch that itself divides into K'ichean and Mamean subbranches?

The third and final unit addresses issues that challenge the primacy of the family tree model of historical linguistics. We will discuss the effects of language contact, with case studies drawn from Mesoamerica, Amazonia, and the Balkans. We will also discuss contact varieties such as creole languages, which seem to resist easy classification on genetic or genealogical lines. In addressing the impacts of language contact on language change, we will investigate the possibility that different historical processes on the societal or social level can have distinct influences on how languages develop over time. *By the end of the third unit, you will be familiar with language relationships that do not fit easily into the kind of tree given in Figure 1 – including but not limited to relationships forged in contact scenarios.*

3 Grading and expectations

Your final grade will be based on the following four components:

1. attending and participating in all class sessions 10% of final grade
2. completing the problem sets 40% of final grade
(six problem sets in total; the lowest score will be dropped from your final grade)
3. posting questions / comments to Canvas in response to the readings 20% of final grade
4. completing the final exam 30% of final grade

We have a lot of material to cover this semester and will be moving at a fast pace, so it's important that you be present for all class sessions. You are strongly encouraged to attend sections with the Teaching Fellow as well. To encourage you to think critically about the assigned readings (which can get rather technical), you'll be asked to post questions to Canvas prior to each class session. These posts are an opportunity for you to let me know what material makes sense and what material is giving you trouble. **Your Canvas posts are due by 8PM the night before class meets.**

There will be five or six problem sets, spread out over the course of the semester. You are welcome to work together on the problem sets; however, each student must write up his/her/their own assignment. Please include in your write-up the name(s) of the students you've worked with. The problem sets will be due during weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13. Problem sets are always due by the start of class on Tuesday and will be returned to you by the following Tuesday. We will take time in class to review the answers to the problem sets.

The final exam will be take home; you'll get more details on the content and format of the final exam as we get closer to the end of the semester.

My policy is to not accept late homework assignments without justification and advance notice (see Section 4 for more detail). I maintain this policy, which might strike you as strict, to ensure that we can start talking about the content of a homework assignment as soon as it has been turned in. In compensation, I promise the following:

1. You will always have a minimum of three or four days to complete your homework. In other words, you will *never* be given an assignment on Tuesday that will be due on Thursday.
2. Your lowest homework grade will be dropped when I calculate your grade for the semester. In other words, if you can't complete one of the problem sets because of time constraints / other stressors, don't fear: that zero won't factor into your final grade!

It's my hope that these promises will help you to avoid stressful all-nighters and the like. For more details, see §4 ([Stress reduction measures](#)).

4 **Stress reduction measures**

The last year and a half have been especially draining and difficult. I want LING 108 to be a refreshing return to in-person classes, rather than a new source of stress. To that end, I'd like to make the following pledges to you:

1. I won't throw readings or assignments at you at the last minute.
2. I won't e-mail you in the evening or on the weekend.
3. I will be accommodating if the world outside of LING 108 should interfere with your ability to complete a particular task or assignment on time.
4. I will address you as you wish to be addressed, and will refer to you using your preferred pronouns.
5. **I will abide by Harvard's evolving policies regarding social distancing and mask wearing inside of University buildings.¹**

In return, I'd like to request that you agree to:

1. Do your best to complete all your class-related responsibilities on time, including posting to Canvas by 8PM the night before class meets.
2. Give me sufficient heads-up if the world outside of LING 108 should get in the way of you completing your work on time. (In practice, 'sufficient heads-up' = at least 24 hours. I will of course be more flexible if there's an emergency.) If a crisis or emergency forces you to miss more than one assignment and/or multiple class meetings, I may provide you with make-up work to ensure that you're staying on top of the material.
3. Treat everyone in our class with respect and patience, including using preferred form of address and preferred pronouns.
4. **Please abide by Harvard's evolving policies regarding social distancing and mask wearing inside of University buildings.**

Please remember: your own health and wellbeing is more important than any classroom obligation. Harvard makes lots of resources available and I encourage you to take advantage of these resources if and when the need arises. Learn more at the Counseling and Mental Health Services website.

5 **Readings**

There are several excellent historical textbooks on the market; each has its own strengths, and in an ideal world we'd read all of them cover to cover. Unfortunately, we don't have time to do so. So I have gone

¹According to the information I have received from Professor Amanda Claybaugh, the Dean of Undergraduate Education, instructors are allowed to take off their masks if it is possible for them to maintain a distance of 14+ feet from the students. I cannot say yet whether it will be possible for me to do so in our classroom in the Barker Center, so my plan is still to be masked while teaching.

through my two favorite textbooks and have selected specific chapters for you to read. **Please note: you do not need to buy any books for LING108. Instead, everything will be available to you on Canvas and/or through HOLLIS.**

The two books we'll be drawing the most from are:

- Campbell, Lyle. 2013. *Historical linguistics: an introduction*. 3rd edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. on Canvas
- Hock, Hans Henrich, and Brian D. Joseph. 2019. *Language history, language change, and language relationship: An introduction to historical and comparative linguistics*. 3rd revised edition. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. on HOLLIS

Hock and Joseph's textbook is really excellent. (I used the first version of it when I took LING108 as an undergraduate!) But as we move into units two and three, we'll need to draw increasingly on other texts as well. My own feeling is that Campbell's textbook is stronger when it comes to the Comparative Method and to the issues of long distance comparison, which are the focus of the second unit. (The different strengths of the two textbooks likely stem from the individual authors' specializations. Hock and Joseph are Indo-Europeanists, so much of their work involves close examination of languages with long written traditions; this allows for a different practical methodology than the one used by Campbell, who works principally on Native American language families. Few Native American families possess written records that predate 1492. As it so happens, languages belonging to the Mayan family – shown in Figure 1 – have been written for over two millennia.)

6 Week-by-week schedule

The schedule given here is subject to alteration, depending on the students' background knowledge and areas of interest. Per my pledges to you in §4 (Stress reduction measures), any changes to this syllabus won't be last minute. Rather, you'll be given at least a few days of heads up if the readings or the problem sets' due dates change.

Week #1: Introduction

September 2nd

Since the fall term doesn't start until Wednesday, September 1st, our first meeting will take place on Thursday the 2nd. You do not need to post questions to Canvas this week.

Reading:

- Chapter 1 ('Introduction'), the appendix to chapter 1 ('Phonetics, phonetic symbols, and other symbols'), and sections 1 and 2 from chapter 2 ('The discovery of Indo-European), all from Hock and Joseph

Optional reading):

- the rest of Hock and Joseph's chapter 2, which describes the different branches of the Indo-European family in detail

Week #2: Sound change

September 7th and 9th

Our theme this week will be the kinds of change that languages undergo over the course of time. To that end, we'll be talking in great detail about the best-understood kind of change: sound change.

Reading:

- All of chapter 4 ('Sound change') from Hock and Joseph

Background reading on phonetics and phonology:

- Make sure to brush up on the appendix to chapter 1 ('Phonetics, phonetic symbols, and other symbols') from Hock and Joseph, as well; you're responsible for knowing the content of this appendix.
- If you haven't taken a previous course on phonetics and phonology, you should consult Bruce Hayes's textbook *Introductory Phonology*, which is available through HOLLIS.

Week #3: More on sound change, plus morphological change

September 14th and 16th

We'll continue our discussion of sound change and begin to examine morphological change, as well.

Problem set #1 will be due on Tuesday of this week.

Reading:

- Chapter 5 ('Analogy and change in word structure') from Hock and Joseph
- Chapter 10 ('Morphological Change') from Campbell

Week #4: More on morphological change

September 21st and 23rd

We'll use our class meeting on Tuesday the 21st to review the answers to the first problem set. We'll then continue our discussion of morphological change.

Reading:

- Please continue working through the two chapters assigned during the previous week.

Week #5: Wrapping up the first unit

September 28th and 30th

We use this week to review the answers to the second problem set (on the evolution of the Bengali language) and to discuss other examples of sound change/morphological change. **Problem set #2 will be due on Tuesday of this week.**

Reading:

- No new readings this week.

Week #6: The Comparative Method

October 5th and 7th

Our second unit begins this week! The Comparative Method allows us to reconstruct ancient languages that were not recorded. If you only remember one thing from this class, I want it to be how the Comparative Method works and what it aims to prove. This is what the second unit is all about.

Reading:

- Chapter 16 ('Comparative method: Establishing language relationship') from Hock and Joseph
- Chapter 5 ('The Comparative Method and Linguistic Reconstruction') from Campbell

Week #7: More on the Comparative Method

October 12th and 14th

We continue our discussion of the Comparative Method by developing tree models for several different language families. **Problem set #3 will be due on Tuesday of this week.**

Reading:

- The two chapters assigned for the previous week are dense, so keep working through them.

Week #8: How far can the Comparative Method take us?

October 19th and 21st

We'll discuss limitations that may restrict the utility and informativeness of the Comparative Method. In particular, we will examine the extremely difficult problem of syntactic change – which is not as amenable to reconstruction as phonology, morphology, and the lexicon.

Reading:

- Pires and Thomason 2008 and Harris 2008, to be read in conversation with one another
- Clackson 2017
- Harrison 2003

Week #9: How far can the Comparative Method take us?

October 26th and 28th

We'll continue our discussion of the previous week's reading. **Problem set #4 will be due on Tuesday of this week.**

Week #10: ‘Long-distance’ relationships, plus synthesis of the second unit

November 2nd and 4th

This week concludes our unit on the Comparative Method. We will discuss efforts to prove the genetic integrity of very ancient language families (i.e., families that are temporally quite remote from us). Which, if any, of these efforts have proven successful? Why do the majority of these efforts fail? Answering this question will require us to synthesize our understanding of diachronic change and to make peace with the idea that the Comparative Method can’t take us arbitrarily far into the past.

Reading:

- Chapter 14 (‘Distant Genetic Relationship’) from Campbell
- Chapter 11 (‘Beyond comparative reconstruction: Subgrouping and “long-distance” relationships’) from Ringe and Eska 2013

Week #11: Introduction to language contact

November 9th and 11th²

Contact between speakers of different languages is the historical process that interferes most drastically with the application of the Comparative Method and, subsequently, with the elaboration of family trees. We’ll spend the last few weeks of the term discussing different language contact scenarios and examining the kinds of linguistic effects that result from them. **Problem set #5 will be due on Tuesday of this week.**

Reading:

- Thomason 2020
- Grant 2020

Optional background reading:

- Chapter 12 (‘Language spread, link languages, and bilingualism’) from Hock and Joseph
- Chapter 13 (‘Convergence: Dialectology beyond language boundaries’) from Hock and Joseph

Week #12: Zones of grammatical convergence

November 16th and 18th

We now turn to the issue of language areas (*sprachbunds*): cultural-geographical zones within which languages have influenced one another repeatedly. We will discuss several famous examples of these zones, in particular: the Balkans, Mesoamerica, and the northwest Amazon Basin.

Reading:

- on the Balkans: Friedman and Joseph 2017

²Thursday, November 11th is a holiday (Veterans’ Day) for the University staff, but classes will still be held.

- on Mesoamerica: Campbell et al. 1986
- on NW Amazonia: Stenzel 2005 plus additional selections from Epps and Stenzel 2013

Week #13: More on language areas

November 23rd³

We'll continue our discussion of language areas. The previous week's readings are dense, so keep working on them. **Problem set #6 will be due on Tuesday of this week.**

Reading:

- The previous week's readings are dense, so keep working through them.

Week #14: Synthesis of unit three and conclusion of the course

November 30th and December 2nd

We synthesize unit three by discussing some extreme cases of contact-influenced language change, including creoles and 'mixed' languages. We conclude the course with a discussion of everything we've covered since September 2nd. Please bring questions! **Your final exam will be due the following week (final due date TBA).**

References

- Campbell, Lyle. 2013. *Historical linguistics: an introduction. 3rd edition.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Campbell, Lyle, Terrence Kaufman, and Thomas C. Smith-Stark. 1986. Meso-America as a linguistic area. *Language* 62(3):530–570.
- Clackson, James. 2017. The Comparative Method and comparative reconstruction. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Historical Syntax*, eds. Ian Roberts and Adam Ledgeway, 189–206. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Epps, Patience, and Kristine Stenzel, eds. 2013. *Upper Rio Negro: Cultural and linguistic interaction in Northwestern Amazonia.* Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional and Museu do Índio - Funai.
- Friedman, Victor A., and Brian D. Joseph. 2017. Reassessing sprachbunds: A view from the Balkans. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Areal Linguistics*, ed. Raymond Hickey, 55–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grant, Anthony P. 2020. Contact and language convergence. In *The handbook of language contact, second edition*, ed. Raymond Hickey, 113–128. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Harris, Alice C. 2008. Reconstruction in syntax: Reconstruction of patterns. In *Principles of syntactic reconstruction*, eds. Gisella Ferraresi and Maria Goldbach, 73–95. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

³Thanksgiving recess goes from Wednesday the 24th through Friday the 26th, so we'll only have one meeting this week.

- Harrison, S.P. 2003. On the limits of the Comparative Method. In *The handbook of historical linguistics, volume I*, eds. Brian D. Joseph and Richard D. Janda, 213–243. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Hayes, Bruce. 2011. *Introductory phonology*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.
- Hock, Hans Henrich, and Brian D. Joseph. 2019. *Language history, language change, and language relationship: An introduction to historical and comparative linguistics. 3rd revised edition*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Pires, Acrisio, and Sarah G. Thomason. 2008. How much syntactic reconstruction is possible? In *Principles of syntactic reconstruction*, eds. Gisella Ferraresi and Maria Goldbach, 27–72. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Ringe, Don, and Joseph F. Eska. 2013. *Historical linguistics: toward a twenty-first century reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stenzel, Kristine. 2005. Multilingualism in the Northwest Amazon, revisited. In *Memorias del Congreso de Idiomas Indígenas de Latinoamérica-II 27 – 29 de octubre de 2005*. Department of Linguistics, University of Texas at Austin.
- Thomason, Sarah G. 2020. Contact explanations in linguistics. In *The handbook of language contact, second edition*, ed. Raymond Hickey, 33–49. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.