

The phylogeny of word meanings

Inferring the directionality of semantic change

Gerhard Jäger (Universität Tübingen)

It is a well-known fact from historical linguistics that meaning change—while being not as regular as sound change—follows recurrent patterns. A meaning change from ‘foot’ to ‘leg’, for instance, is attested multiple times, while a change from ‘foot’ to ‘head’ would be highly unexpected. Many of those semantic clines are directional, i.e., a change $A \rightarrow B$ is more common than a change $B \rightarrow A$. This is especially well-studied for grammaticalization (where we, e.g., frequently find changes from full verbs to auxiliaries, but not the opposite), but it also holds for changes between lexical meanings.

Recent advances in Bayesian phylogenetic linguistics and the availability of large cross-linguistic databases make it possible to quantify the rate of change between different meanings and its directionality. The talk will present the methodological and empirical background of this endeavor and some initial results.