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On making more of qualitative lexicostatistics

In many fields in the social science world, approaches to arriving at the solution of a problem may be *quantitative* (involving a numerically or statistically-based approach) or *qualitative*, in which the nature of the material under examination is itself examined closely. Most work on lexicostatistics has naturally been quantitative in nature because it involves the use of statistical techniques, as was most of Swadesh's work in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Swadesh 1950, 1951, 1952, 1955), but this has not always been so. (The Indo-European work done by the team under Don Ringe, for instance Ringe, Taylor and Warnow 2002, is an exception). Lexicostatistics, when used in attempts at the classification and filiation of groups of lects, lends itself admirably to qualitative approaches which use character-based methods in order to examine the degree to which a set of referents for the same gloss can be said to be cognate or non-cognate.

I present case studies of the use of qualitative lexicostatistics in examining subgrouping in a wide range of the world's families, and suggest that by using the techniques inherent in Swadesh's writings one can arrive – without extra effort - at a much more sharply nuanced picture of the historical and other interrelationships between groups of languages which derive from a single common ancestor.

References:

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