Answer yey to reconstruction exercise 1

Study the following data from representative dialects of Chinese. *Beijing* represents the northern dialect; *Suzhou* represents the Wu dialect; *Guangzhou* represents the Yue dialect and *Xiamen* represents the Southern Min dialect. The pronunciations are indicated in IPA symbols[[1]](#footnote-1). Let’s ignore the tones for now.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dialects** | 傅assist | 分separate | 封to seal | 飛to fly |
| **Beijing** | fu | fən | fəŋ | fei |
| **Suzhou** | fu | fən | foŋ | fi |
| **Guangzhou** | fu | fɐn | fʊŋ | fei |
| **Xiamen** | pɔ | pun | paŋ | pe |

We have four cognate words in the table. Focus on the initial consonant only.

1. List the correspondence (Hint: all the data reveal one same correspondence of the initial consonants)

Bejing-Suzhou-Guangzhou-Xiamen

f f f p

1. Based on the correspondence set in Q1, please indicate three possible candidates for reconstruction.
2. f (2) p (3) some other sound that would have features from both f and p
3. Choose one from the three candidates in Q2 as the reconstructed sound using the “majority rule”.

Since there are three dialects that have f and only one dialect that has p, according to majority rule, we can reconstruct \*f as the original sound.

1. Look at the correspondence you have in Q1 above again. Can you find any similarity between the Chinese data here and Grimm’s Law? If any, can you describe the similarity in more detail?

Data from English and non-Germanic languages show that where there is an f in English, there would oftentimes be a p in non-Germanic languages, e.g. father vs pater (Latin). It has been shown that the proto-Indo-European \*p remained in some non-Germanic languages, but developed into f in proto-Germanic and consequently in English later. This is called Grimm’s Law. Similarly, the correspondences here also show p in some dialects of Chinese but f in others.

1. In comparative reconstruction, “naturalness” trumps “majority”, based on the assumption that more natural sound changes are attested widely in different languages. Now using the “naturalness” principle and Grimm’s Law, can you correct our reconstruction in Q3? Explain why this is a better reconstruction?

If a sound change took place in many different unrelated language families, or widely attested, then it is very possible that it is the result of a natural change determined by the mechanisms of human speech. In terms of Grimm’s Law, it shows that \*p>f took place in proto-Germanic. Thus we have independent evidence that \*p>f is indeed possible, although Grimm’s Law is only meant to cover the sound changes in proto-Germanic, with no intention to be a law like those in physics.

Until we find independent evidence that \*f>p is also widely attested, we can safely assume for now that \*p>f is more natural. Therefore we should reconstruct \*p as the original sound in proto-Chinese here as well.

1. Now in light of the reconstruction in Q5, using it as the proto-form for all the cited dialects, can you give a historical sketch of the sound change that has taken place with respect to the initial consonant?

Originally in Proto-Chinese there was only \*p. This sound remains in Xiamen in certain words under certain conditions, but developed into f in Beijing in the words cited above, Suzhou and Guangzhou (under certain conditions)

[We only have a very small set of data here, but actually the original \*p also remains in Beijing, Suzhou and Guangzhou in some other words.]

Thus:

 p (Xiamen)

\*p

 f (under certain conditions) (Beijing, Suzhou and Guangzhou)

1. All pronunciations are taken from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University (北京大学中国语言文学系语言学教研室编) eds. 1962. 《汉语方音字汇》, 北京: 文字改革出版社. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)