**Proto-Chinese reconstruction exercise**

In some ways, the divergence of a common spoken Chinese language into the different dialects now that are mostly mutually unintelligible is comparable to the development of the Romance languages from Vulgar Latin. Now let’s see a few examples[[1]](#footnote-1). Ignore tones for now.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Guangzhou** | **Taiyuan** | **Suzhou** | **Wenzhou** | **Beijing** | **Meaning** |
| sam | sæ̃ | sE | sa | san | **三three** |
| tam | tæ̃ | tE | ta | dan | **担 carry** |
| lam | læ̃ | lE | la | lan | **藍blue** |
| fan | fæ̃ | vE | va | fan | **飯 meal** |
| tsan | tsæ̃ | tsE | tsa | zan | **讚 praise** |
| tan | tæ̃ | tE | ta | dan | **單 alone** |

1 What are the correspondences? Can you list all of them?

2 What are the reconstruction possibilities?

*Note:* Literary Chinese was the written language throughout the development of the Chinese dialects. Thus, written records of Literary Chinese should be useful, comparable to Classical Latin. But we do have a problem here, since the use of Chinese characters does not tell us directly how the words were pronounced. Also we actually would use the Middle Chinese Qieyun system as a reference point for these reconstructed terms. For example: in the Qieyun Dictionary, the first three words/characters would be arranged in a way to indicate that these have similar rimes, while the second three words would be arranged in a way to indicate that they have similar rhymes.

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)