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.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **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)
2. Based on the correspondence set in Q1, please indicate three possible candidates for reconstruction.
3. Choose one from the three candidates in Q2 as the reconstructed sound using the “majority rule”.
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
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)