

## LESS-THAN-CHANCE SIMILARITY AND LANGUAGE DIFFERENTIATION

(Full presentation)

T. Mark Ellison & Luisa Miceli  
Linguistics, University of Western Australia

Historical linguists are usually interested in languages whose lexemes show significantly greater-than-chance levels of similarity, as it is usually assumed that once similarity approaches chance levels, nothing conclusive can be said about historical connections. But what if languages display less-than-chance levels of similarity in at least a sizable part of their lexicon? What does this mean? In this paper, we will argue that, just like greater-than-chance similarity, less-than-chance similarity points to historical connection and, specifically, that it is an evidential marker of a special kind of language change: 'deliberate' lexical differentiation.

Deliberate lexical differentiation occurs when bilinguals strive to keep the languages they speak distinct (see Thomason 2007, Laycock 1982 for a discussion of observed examples). In a situation where languages in a bilingual's repertoire are genetically related (or even dialects of the same language) deliberate differentiation may result in the replacement of cognate word forms, or in the preference of a synonym not used in the other language. In a contact situation where the languages are not genetically related, differentiation is likely to result in avoidance of borrowing (Harvey 2006 suggests this for Northern Australian languages), but it may also affect words that are 'chance resemblances' or thought to be too similar by the speakers – these, like cognates, may also undergo replacement. In both situations, deliberate lexical differentiation results in a distribution of lexical similarity that is skewed: if the languages are related, the non-cognate word forms will display less-than-chance similarity, and if the languages are not related the overall similarity of the lexicon will be lower than expected by chance.

In this paper we present results of simulated comparisons as well as results of comparison in documented situations of differentiation (e.g. Catalan/Castilian). We explore difficulties encountered in using this measure and discuss how it may be potentially useful in testing suspected cases of prehistoric deliberate differentiation.

### References:

- Harvey, Mark 2006. Lexical change in pre-colonial Australia, paper presented at the Australian Linguistic Society Conference.
- Laycock, Donald C. 1982. Melanesian linguistic diversity: a Melanesian choice? *Melanesia: beyond diversity*, ed. by R.J. May & H. Nelson, 33-38. Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- Thomason, Sarah Grey 2007. Language contact and deliberate change. *Journal of language contact*, Thema 1, pp. 41-62

Lexical differentiation, historical connection, less-than-chance lexical similarity

Linguistics M258  
The University of Western Australia  
35 Stirling Highway  
CRAWLEY WA 6009