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BRIEF REPORT

REVISED Grouping sounds into evolving units for the purpose of historical language comparison

[version 2; peer review: 4 approved, 3 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Computer-assisted approaches to historical language comparison have made great progress during the past two decades. Scholars can now routinely use computational tools to annotate cognate sets, align words, and search for regularly recurring sound correspondences. However, computational approaches still suffer from a very rigid sequence model of the form part of the linguistic sign, in which words and morphemes are segmented into fixed sound units which cannot be modified. In order to bring the representation of sound sequences in computational historical linguistics closer to the research practice of scholars who apply the traditional comparative method, we introduce improved sound sequence representations in which individual sound segments can be grouped into evolving sound units in order to capture language-specific sound laws more efficiently. We illustrate the usefulness of this enhanced representation of sound sequences in concrete examples and complement it by providing a small software library that allows scholars to convert their data from forms segmented into sound units to forms segmented into evolving sound units and vice versa.

Plain language summary

In linguistics, it is difficult to clearly draw the boundaries between the sounds in individual words. What one linguist may analyze as two sounds, another linguist might analyze at just one sound. Since the segmentation of words into sounds is crucial for many analyses in linguistics and since no perfect solution can be found, we offer a new representation that allows scholars to analyze the sounds in a word in a more flexible way that conforms to general standards while at the same time giving linguists enough flexibility to advance individual analyses.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The revised version presented here contains minimal modifications as required by the reviewers and also adds more information on an improved handling of grouping sounds into evolving units, by referring to a new version of the web-based EDICTOR tool which now allows for the interactive grouping of sounds when editing comparative wordlists. We also correct several typos on the earlier version of the study and update references. The code has also be modified, using a new software package, that we have created for this purpose.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Over the last two decades an ever-increasing number of publications have applied quantitative approaches in historical linguistics. While early work focused almost exclusively on phylogenetic approaches, using manually annotated cognate sets to automatically infer the most plausible phylogenies for the divergence of language families (Chang *et al.*, 2015; Gray & Atkinson, 2003), more recent research broadens this trajectory of inquiry in three directions. Some recent work concentrates on the standardization and the concrete representation of cross-linguistic data (Crist, 2005; Forkel *et al.*, 2018; Hill & List, 2017), some studies try to develop workflows that automate sub-steps of the traditional comparative method (Jäger, 2013; Kondrak, 2000; Prokić *et al.*, 2009; Steiner *et al.*, 2011; Wu *et al.*, 2020), and an even smaller amount of research tries to make active use of tools for symbolic computing in order to implement models of sound change (Hartmann, 2003; List, 2024a; Marr & Mortensen, 2024).

One of the most contested aspects of all three new research venues in computational historical linguistics is the representation of the form part of a linguistic sign as a sequence of sounds. Although the linear aspect of the linguistic form has long since been emphasized in the linguistic literature (de Saussure, 1916), and although all sound laws are essentially based on the sequential representation of words and morphemes, practitioners of the comparative method as well as phonologists are usually unsatisfied when computer programs represent a word as a sequence of sounds, pointing to the continuity of the sound signal or the arbitrariness of assigning overlapping articulatory gestures to discrete sound units. With this brief report, we try to propose a solution for the problems resulting from strict word segmentation in historical language comparison, by offering a novel methodology to represent, annotate and compare sound units that do not necessarily consist of individual sounds. We show how our approach can be applied in the comparison of data from different language families.

Background

Scholars often emphasize the arbitrariness of segmenting speech into distinct sounds. Since the speech signal is a continuum it is indeed not always straightforward to determine a cut-off point in an objective manner. The problem of segmentation is also important for the level of phonetic transcription (Round, 2023). When dealing with a word like German *Apfel* "apple", for example, one must decide if one wants to treat the sounds [p] and [f] as one affricate sound [pf] or two distinct sounds. While there are ways to justify the affricate reading in synchrony for morphological reasons, the major diachronic reason for treating the *pf* in German *Apfel* as an affricate is that [pf] goes back to earlier [p]. The sound [pf] in German has thus evolved as one unit, and it keeps evolving as such.

While the case of the labiodental affricate in German may be considered as uncontroversial, there are certain sound combinations which are typically treated as separate sounds in synchronic phonology, which would be better treated as one evolving unit from a historical viewpoint. Consider, for example, sound sequences like [s t], [s p], [s k], [s m], [s n], [s l], and [s r] occurring as syllable onset in Indo-European languages. While these are typically treated as two distinct sounds, they tend to show very similar sound change patterns in particular Indo-European languages. In German, for example, the alveolar sibilant [s] tends to become a post-alveolar sibilant [ʃ], while — with exception of [k] — the following sound is not only unchanged, but also resists certain sound change patterns, like Grimm's law (Grimm, 1822), which would be active otherwise. Instead of treating these changes as distinct sound laws, such as

```
(1) s > ʃ / _ [p t k m n l r],
```

and

```
(2) [p t k m n l r] > [p t - m n l r] / s _,
```

one could use a single sound law that captures these cases directly:

```
(3) s [p t k m n l r] > ʃ [p t - m n l r].
```

Note that such a representation does not automatically mean that the sound law represents the actual sound change processes more truthfully. Especially in the case of the change of [s] becoming [ʃ] in German, German orthography, which represents the [ʃ] going back to [s] followed by [m n l r] as *sch*, while [s] followed by a plosive is still rendered as *s*, gives us some hints that the sound change processes may have happened at different times in the history of the language (von Polenz, 2021: 178f).

However, even if it may not always seem justified to treat a certain sound sequence as one single sound unit in a given language family, it can be very practical — with respect to the formulation of sound laws — to cluster sounds into units which are known to evolve together.

This practice of clustering sounds into evolving units has been routinely used in studies on South-East Asian languages, where the rigid syllable structure of many languages makes it much easier to consider sound laws for syllable onsets contrasted with syllable rhymes than to break these further down to sound laws occurring with initials versus medials versus nucleus

vowels and codas (see, for example, Ratliff, 2010 for Hmong-Mien languages, Jacques, 2021 for Hmongic languages, or Sprigg, 1972 for Tibetic languages).

Grouping sounds into evolving units

So far, computational approaches to historical language comparison have represented words and morphemes as rigid sequences of individual sound units whose segmentation cannot be further modified. The strictness is mainly justified by the fact that computational approaches have difficulties to recognize valid sounds when the segmentation is leveraged. Thus, while a software package like LingPy (List & Forkel, 2023, https://pypi.org/project/lingpy) can recognize a large number of symbols and symbol combinations from the IPA and similar phonetic transcription systems, the software needs to process these symbols in isolation. If symbols were parsed in combination, a specific algorithm would be required to recognize meaningful sub-units in order to understand their major sound properties, which are crucial for the application of phonetic alignment analyses and cognate detection routines (List, 2014). Similarly, while reference catalogs like the Cross-Linguistic Transcription Systems (CLTS, https://clts.clld.org, List *et al.*, 2024) offer detailed feature descriptions of an abundance of possible speech sounds (currently more than 8000 sounds are attested in cross-linguistic datasets), they do not account for the combinations of sounds into larger units.

Although it is very likely that the number of distinct speech sounds accounted for by the CLTS reference catalog is too large to reflect the linguistic reality of phonetic diversity in the languages of the world (see Rubehn *et al.*, 2024 for experiments to reduce the CLTS feature system in a systematic manner), the fact that more than 8000 distinct sounds that one would not traditionally treat as clusters of smaller sound units can be generated by a system that is based on distinctive features shows that it would not be feasible to try to account for all possible sound combinations that one can observe in different languages.

But since the clustering of distinct speech sounds into larger units reflects an important practice in historical linguistics — which was already discussed by (Grimm, 1822: 590), who emphasized that exceptions of his *Lautverschiebung* were due to their clustering with the spirant *s-* — we consider it important to allow for the individual, expert-informed grouping of sounds in the representation of sound sequences. Our proposal is therefore to leverage the strict requirement of segmenting the linguistic form into distinct sound units while at the same time preserving the information on distinct sounds in a given dataset. We achieve this goal by adding more flexibility in the representation of sound units without sacrificing the original level of segmentation required by reference catalogs and software for automated sequence comparison.

Annotation

Our proposal is very straightforward. While the current representation of sound sequences uses a space character as a segmentation symbol, we add the dot character (<.>) as an additional symbol that allows for the combination of sounds into units which would otherwise be segmented. For example, when dealing with a sound sequence like Chinese *quán* 全 "complete" [tɕʰ ɥ ɛ n ³⁵], we can "desegmentise" the sequence by grouping the sounds as [tɕʰ.ɥ ɛ.n ³⁵] and effectively treating the initial and the medial as one segment as well as the nucleus vowel and the final consonant.

The advantage of this representation — at least for the case of Chinese and many South-East Asian languages with a similarly restricted syllable structure — becomes immediately evident when comparing phonetic alignments of the data. In Table 1, we contrast the "traditional" alignment, as it has been carried out so far in most applications (see e.g., List, 2014), with our new alignment where we cluster sounds historically likely relevant units, which means in the case of the Chinese dialects to assign initials and medials to a common onset group while merging nucleus vowel and coda into a common rhyme group (data taken from Liu *et al.*, 2007, as prepared in Wu and List, 2023).

What can be seen from the example is that this new annotation — in which we conjoin certain segments in our standardized sound sequences into larger units — allows us to align the data without the usage of gap symbols (-). Reducing gaps in phonetic alignments has two major advantages. First, since gaps often depend on the context in which they occur (compare the gap for the coda in Xiàmén our example, which appears because this dialect has dropped certain nasals following the main vowel, most likely via a stage in which the vowel was nasalized), clustering sounds into groups helps us to show the underlying processes in a much more integrated way, rather than proposing the loss of one sound in a specific context. Second, since gaps in phonetic alignments can be rarely interpreted as the loss or gain of an entire sound during sound change, avoiding gaps in our alignments helps us to bring the underlying processes that can be inferred from the alignments much closer to linguistic theory.

Representation

For the representation of grouped sounds, we have modified the EDICTOR tool as of Version 2.2 (List, 2023; List, 2017,

Table 1. Phonetic alignments of four words for "even" in Chinese dialects in segmented and "desegmented" form. On the left, the full alignment with three gapped sites is shown (cells with a – symbol shaded in gray). On the right, the words have been segmented into initial, final, and tone, and the resulting alignment has no gapped sites.

Variety	Alignment					Variety	Alignment		
Běijīng	pʰ	-	i	ŋ	³⁵	Běijīng	pʰ	i.ŋ	³⁵
Wēnzhōu	b	-	e	ŋ	³⁴¹	Wēnzhōu	b	e.ŋ	³⁴¹
Xiàmén	p	j	æ	-	²⁴	Xiàmén	p.j	æ	²⁴
Méixiàn	pʰ	j	a	ŋ	¹¹	Méixiàn	pʰ.j	a.ŋ	¹¹

https://edictor.org). In the original EDICTOR version, sound sequences (words or morphemes) are displayed by representing individual sounds as blocks that are colored according to their underlying sound class. The notion of sound classes itself goes back to Dolgopolsky (Dolgopolsky, 1964) and was later employed in List (List, 2014) for the purpose of phonetic alignment and automatic cognate detection. The major idea of sound classes is to represent individual sounds that are likely to occur in regular correspondence relations in cognate words by an overarching class. Thus, sounds like [k] and [tʃ] were grouped into a metaclass K in Dolgopolsky's original proposal (see List, 2014 for details). In the EDICTOR, these basic sound classes by Dolgopolsky are used to color sounds differently, in order to facilitate the comparison and alignment of words. Figure 1A provides an example on the typical representation of words for "all" in Bějīng and Jìnán Chinese (data taken from Liu *et al.*, 2007 in the version of Wu and List, 2023).

The representation of grouped sounds builds on the colored sound representation typical for the EDICTOR but assigns grouped sounds to the same square. As a result, grouped sounds occupy the same space as simple sounds, while individual background colors are used for individual sound segments, as shown in Figure 1B.

The grouping of sounds has immediate consequences for EDICTOR analyses, as the tool will treat grouped sounds as one unit. As a result, phonetic alignments are greatly facilitated and the search for sound correspondence patterns can also include grouped sounds, which helps to deal with conditioning context in a rudimentary form that may often be sufficient to disambiguate correspondence patterns on one's data.

Computer-assisted grouping of sounds

Since the grouping of sounds is typically done for a specific language family with a specific analysis in mind, we do not see the possibility to create a method that would group sounds directly into evolving units. While it may be possible to design algorithms that account for an approximate grouping, we would consider it as premature to devote too much time to this problem at a stage where not enough experiments with the possibility of grouping sounds into evolving units have been carried out yet.

What we can offer already, however, are two computer-assisted approaches. The first one is a method that groups sounds based on explicit prescriptions. The second one is a new routine, implemented in EDICTOR 3 (https://edictor.org, List & van Dam, 2024), that allows for the quick manual grouping of sounds in comparative wordlists.

Our first method, which is implemented in LinSe, a Python package for sequence manipulation in comparative linguistics (https://pypi.org/project/linse, Forkel and List, 2024), makes use of the technique of segment grouping by conversion tables that was prominently introduced as one of the major aspects of Orthography Profiles, as they were described in Moran and Cysouw (2018). The basic idea of this sequence conversion technique is to provide a replacement table that converts one sequence (e.g. written in one specific orthography) into another sequence (e.g. written in yet another orthography) while at the same time providing a segmentation of the originally unsegmented strings into distinct units. As an example, consider Table 2. On the left, there is a simple replacement table that will convert a sequence like *tian* into a segmented sequence [tʰ j ɛ n], and a sequence *tiang* into a sequence [tʰ j a ŋ], accordingly. All we have to do in order to apply a secondary grouping of the sounds is to define an additional replacement table for the already segmented and converted sound sequences. This is shown on the right in Table 2, where we represent spaces in the original sequence by underscores and replace underscores in isolation with an empty string (indicated by NULL). When applying this profile to [tʰ j ɛ n] and [tʰ j a ŋ], respectively, it will yield the desired grouping of sounds as [tʰ.j ɛ.n] and [tʰ.j a.ŋ].

ID	DOCULECT	CONCEPT	TOKENS
148	Beijing Man	all	tɕʰ ɥ ɛ n 35 + p u 51
150	Jinan Man	all	tɕʰ ɥ æ̃ 53 + p u 31

ID	DOCULECT	CONCEPT	TOKENS
148	Beijing Man	all	tɕʰɥ ɛ n 35 + p u 51
150	Jinan Man	all	tɕʰɥ æ̃ 53 + p u 31

Figure 1. EDICTOR representation of sound sequences. A) shows the typical representation with colored sound classes used in previous versions. **B**) shows how grouped sounds are represented in the EDICTOR interface.

Table 2. Using orthography profiles to segment words and convert from one transcription to another (left table) and to group sounds (right table).

Grapheme	IPA
t	tʰ
i	j
an	ɛ n
ang	a ŋ

Grapheme	GroupedSound
tʰ_j	tʰ.j
ɛ_n	ɛ.n
a_ŋ	a.ŋ
_	NULL

Table 3. Small excerpt of our Karenic orthography profile that represents sounds in grouped and plain form.

Graphemes	Grouped	Plain	Frequency
t	t	t	99
a_m	a.m	a m	16
ə_m	ə.m	ə m	15
p_r	p.r	p r	18
o_ʔ	o.ʔ	o ʔ	21
_	NULL	NULL	—

We illustrate this procedure by supplementing this study with a small Python script that can be used to extract grouped sounds (as annotated manually) from a wordlist and then construct an orthography profile to apply the groupings to additional datasets. In this way, users wishing to group sounds in their data can first annotate parts of their data and later apply this annotation automatically to the rest of their collection. We illustrate the suitability of this approach by applying our package to a recently standardized dataset of Karenic languages (Luangthongkum, 2019, standardized in Luangthongkum, 2023, curated on GitHub at https://github.com/lexibank/luangthongkumkaren, Version 1.0), in which we carried out a manual grouping of all sounds in the data.

Our second method expands the functionality of EDICTOR in its most recent version, EDICTOR 3, (List & van Dam, 2024) by allowing users to group sounds into units interactively when editing data in the main panel of the tool. In order to group sounds into evolving units, users simply have to press the CTRL key and do a right mouse click on a particular sound. As a result, the sound will be merged with the sound following it. A little button will appear to the right of the sound, allowing uses to ungroup the sounds by pressing CTRL and the right mouse button another time.

Examples

Grouping and ungrouping sounds in a Karenic wordlist

In order to illustrate how grouping and ungrouping of sounds can be done in an automated way, we wrote a small Python script that starts from a dataset in which sounds have been manually grouped before. From this dataset, we create an orthography profile that is capable of grouping ungrouped sounds by extracting all graphemes from the original data (including grouped sounds) and replacing our grouping character (the dot) by a new segmentation symbol (an underscore in our case). This profile is illustrated in Table 3. With such a profile, we can convert a sequence in which sounds have not been previously grouped into both a grouped and an ungrouped representation, simply depending on the output to which we convert the previously matched sequence. Thus, if one starts from a sequence "`t a m`", we would first convert the whitespace separating sounds from each other, by the underscore. In a second step, the sequence "`t_a_m`" would be segmented into the three segments `t`, `_`, and `a_m`. These three segments could not be converted to "`t`" → "`t`", "`_`" → "`NULL`", "`a_m`" → "`a m`" or "`t`" → "`t`", "`_`" → "`NULL`", "`a_m`" → "`a.m`", respectively. This principle of converting into two representations is very simple and straightforward. But it is very useful when working with datasets where one wants to handle two segmentations at the same time.

In order to make sure that the conversion indeed yields the expected output, we test our segmentations by applying them to the whole dataset, for which the grouped sounds profile was automatically created and can show that the conversion from the ungrouped sounds back to the grouped sounds works without a single error, accounting for all sound groupings that we applied to the data manually before. The code and the data that we used for this experiment is provided as part of the supplementary material along with all information necessary to replicate the experiment.

Grouping sounds in the comparison of Mataguayan languages

Benefits of sound grouping can also be observed when comparing languages with articulatory complex sounds, such as the case of Nivaclé, one of the four Mataguayan languages spoken in the South American Gran Chaco region. Here we consider examples coming from a dataset designed for exploring ancestral relationship in two South American language families, namely Guaycuruan and Mataguayan. Viegas Barros (2013) provides a list of (135) manually annotated cognate sets that we retro-standarized for computer-assisted analysis. Within the Mataguayan group, Nivaclé has the typologically unusual sound [kl], which corresponds to a complex sound with a voiceless velar onset phase released into a lateral approximant (Gutierrez, 2019:49). Figure 2 illustrates the alignment of segments for the cognate set WALK, when edited in the EDICTOR tool. In the alignment on the top, we treat the sequence [k l] as two distinct sounds, which results in an alignment that suggests that the sound [k] has been gained by some sound change processes from Proto-Mataguayan to Nivaclé. When grouping both [k] and [l] into one unit [k.l], we receive a much more organic alignment, in which we can propose a specific sound change from Proto-Mataguayan **l* to Nivaclé *kl*. While the specific conditions of this sound change will still need to be explained by comparative linguists (as far as we can see from the data, the pattern seems to be regular, occurring in at least 5 instances in the dataset by Viegas Barros), the resulting alignment is

much more in line with both synchronic and diachronic analyses of Nivaclé in specific and Mataguayan languages in general.

Grouping sounds in alignments of Quechuan languages

In the Quechua language family, a main criterion for distinguishing the Central Quechua group from the other branches of the family is the elision of [j] in the sequences **aja*, giving rise to a large vowel [aː] (Adelaar, 1984; Cerrón-Palomino, 2003). This change is attested both in the lexical and the morphological domain. In another variety of Quechua, Santiagueño, the same process occurs with **awa*, independently of the aforementioned subgroup.

We illustrate this change in the publicly available CrossAndean dataset (Blum *et al.*, 2023, curated on GitHub at https://github.com/lexibank/crossandean). Figure 3 shows the annotations for two cognate sets, the lexical concept TO STAND and the DESIDERATIVE morpheme in five varieties. In both cases,

ID	DOCULECT	CONCEPT	ALIGNMENT	COGID
2	Niwaclé	caminar	w a k l e tʃ	1
1	Proto-Mataguayan	caminar	w e - l e k	1
3	Chorote	irse al monte	w i - l i k	1
4	Wichi	viajar	w e - l e k	1

ID	DOCULECT	CONCEPT	ALIGNMENT	COGID
12	Niwaclé	caminar	w a k l e tʃ	2
11	Proto-Mataguayan	caminar	w e l e k	2
13	Chorote	irse al monte	w i l i k	2
14	Wichi	viajar	w e l e k	2

Figure 2. EDICTOR representation of non-grouped and regrouped sound in Mataguayan languages. Top: Segments [k] and [l] are treated as individual segments; Bottom: Regrouping of sound as [k.l].

ID	DOCULECT	CONCEPT	ALIGNMENT	ALIGNMENT B
44	Apurimac	DESIDERATIVE	n a j a	n aja
45	Cuzco	DESIDERATIVE	n a j a	n aja
47	Huanca	DESIDERATIVE	n aː - -	n aː
48	Huaraz Huailas	DESIDERATIVE	n aː - -	n aː
46	Pastaza	DESIDERATIVE	n a j ɑ	n aja
34	Apurimac	stand, to	ʃ a j a	ʃ aja
35	Cuzco	stand, to	ʃ a j a	ʃ aja
37	Huanca	stand, to	s aː - -	s aː
38	Huaraz Huailas	stand, to	s aː - -	s aː
36	Pastaza	stand, to	ʃ a j a	ʃ aja

Figure 3. EDICTOR representation of grouping [a j a] as [aja] in five Quechuan varieties across two cognate sets. As can be seen from the representation, the grouping of the sounds in the column Alignment B reveals the regular nature of the correspondence.

we can observe that the sequence [a.j.a] in the Quechua of Apurímac, Cuzco, and Pastaza corresponds to [aː] in the varieties of Huanca and Huaraz-Huailas. In order to represent this change, it is necessary to group all three sounds of the sequence **aja*. If this were not done, [aː] would be treated as corresponding to [a] in the sequence, while the other two sounds would need to be filled with gaps.

Discussion and outlook

In this brief report, we have illustrated a seemingly small change to existing resources on historical language comparison. By proposing a modified annotation format and showing how it can be integrated into existing resources, we offer a solution for the problem resulting from a strict segmentation of words into speech sounds in computer-assisted approaches to comparative linguistics. Although small, however, we consider the proposal as important, since it addresses an important problem that has so far been disregarded in formal approaches in historical linguistics. Our solution of grouping sounds that were previously rigorously segmented and properly transcribed in standard phonetic transcriptions, we offer a flexible compromise that allows us to adhere to common standards (such as the International Phonetic Alphabet) while at the same time allowing for much more flexibility when carrying out phonetic alignment analyses.

Data availability

Underlying data

Zenodo: Underlying data for: Grouping sounds into evolving units for the purpose of historical language comparison. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10080690 (List, 2024b)

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0)

Software availability

Source code available from: https://github.com/calc-project/grouping-sounds/releases/tag/v1.1

Archived source code at time of publication: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10080690 (List, 2024b)

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔ ✔ ? ? ✔ ✔ ?

Version 2

Reviewer Report 02 January 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19876.r48052

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?

Wei Zhao
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

The idea looks interesting, but I fear experimentation is not rigorously designed. For instance, dataset details are missing - how many words are contained in the Karenic dataset, how was this dataset constructed, and what is the diversity of the manual sound grouping results? Without such information, I will be puzzled by the argument that the conversation from ungrouped sounds back to the grouped sounds works without a single error - how reliable this argument is? This issue also applies to other datasets, where quantitative experimentation seems missing. Furthermore, baseline approaches are missing, it is crucial to statistically demonstrate your approach by comparing it against baselines on the investigated datasets. Additionally, are there any limitations of your approach?

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: computational modeling of semantics, lexical semantics, (partly) sound

change.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 02 Jan 2025

Johann-Mattis List

We thank the reviewer for this interesting report. We think, however, that we can easily answer the critics without writing a new version of the article.
First, all data and counts are available openly, published with open archives, where everybody can check the code and all details without a problem. Second, the fact that the conversion works without flaws in both directions is also due to the fact that we use a rule-based approach for a problem that can be solved directly.
The expectation, that algorithms never hit 100% on individual datasets is only true for problems that cannot be solved entirely. If we designed a calculator, for example, the expectation would be that it knows to add and to subtrat without any errors in a certain numeric range. The same holds for the approach that we present on the grouping of sounds. We hope that this clarifies why we would not modify our study based on this review. But we express our gratitude to the reviewer for taking the time to assess our approach.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 20 December 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19876.r48055

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Stephen Bothwell
Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

This article tackles an important issue in the study of sound in computational historical linguistics (CHL, henceforth): the segmentation of phones in a sequence. Due to the limitations of phonetic notation, information about interactions among sequential phones may be lost or left to inference. These limitations cause a disconnect between computational and traditional studies of historical linguistics.

To remedy this disconnect, the authors propose a notation for grouping adjacent phones together, hoping to better reflect the evolution of language in sequence alignment. In addition,

the authors also augment two pieces of software to promote the use of their notation: LinSe, a Python library, and EDICTOR 3.0, a web interface. They exhibit the capabilities of their software and the utility of their notation in producing more natural evolutionary sequence alignments through Chinese, Karenic, Mataguayan, and Quechuan languages.

Overall, this paper is quite well-written and conveys clearly, both in plain language and in a more technical manner, the contribution and implementation of evolving sound units. The paper argues that its contribution is small and straightforward, and I do not think it has overstated its claims. In addition, I feel that exploring the limits of phonetic notation for CHL is a critical and relevant topic for advancing the use of computational tools in historical linguistic studies. The array of examples shows well that allowing many-to-many alignments between phones in distinct phonetic sequences permits more sensible analyses for explaining the relationships between sounds in related lects.

To me, the crux of this work is a matter of perspective. Evolving sound units provide a new perspective for phonetic notation in the context of CHL, making explicit which sounds change together. The usefulness of this notation has been made clear to me from an analytical perspective, but from a practical point of view, it is not yet evident whether what may be called a prescriptive tokenization of phonetic sequences may be applied further in the field. If some additional practical grounding could be provided for this notation (perhaps in terms of computational efficiency, learnability, or interpretability), I feel that its overall contribution would be stronger. However, I again think that this work has not overstated its accomplishments and could see an exploration of its computational applications in future work.

On another note, while I found that applying the authors' notation in the EDICTOR 3.0 software is very straightforward, I felt that LinSe was a bit more indirect. The publication on LinSe indicates where to find the Orthography Profiles that are central to the segmentation algorithm; it also provides an example application of Orthography Profiles in LinSe with the SegmentGrouper class. However, a lack of documentation for the library may hinder some users in applying this notation. Adding documentation aside from the paper may help users employ the library for the purpose intended in this article.

Finally, aside from the above comments, I wanted to note a few places in the current manuscript where edits could be warranted.

(p4, first full paragraph): "... computational approaches have difficulties to recognize valid sounds ..." The phrasing here with the infinitive seems somewhat awkward to me. Perhaps "... computational approaches have difficulties in recognizing valid sounds ..." would work better?

(p4, fifth full paragraph): "... with our new alignment where we cluster sounds historically likely relevant units." There seems to be a preposition missing here; perhaps change to "... with our new alignment where we cluster sounds into historically likely relevant units."

I am not sure that edits to the "Amendments" section matter for later versions of the article, but I have included one in case they do.

(Amendments): "The code has also be modified, using a new software package, that we have created for this purpose." In this sentence, I believe "be" should be "been"; in addition, the latter

part of the sentence (“using ... purpose”) is somewhat confusing to me, as it could imply (incorrectly, I believe) that the software package is what modified the code. I believe that the authors are trying to say something to the effect of “We have created a new software package and have modified our code to integrate this package.”

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: natural language processing, computational historical linguistics, digital humanities, language modeling

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 20 Dec 2024

Johann-Mattis List

We want to express our gratitude to the reviewer. If we manage to come up with an updated version in the next year, we will gladly take the suggestions for amendmends into account and correct the errors mentioned. As to the documentation questions of LinSe, we hope to further enhance the library in the future as well, but we cannot promise yet when this would be done.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 17 December 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19876.r47615

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Ander Egurtzegi
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, CNRS, Paris, France

This brief report presents an improvement to sound sequence representations in computational models of phonological comparison within cognate sets. The new idea involves grouping individual sound segments into sequences of sound that have been observed to evolve as a unit. The report is clear, concise, well written (I only found a typo at the end of the “Amendments” section), and very easy to follow.
This approach seems to be especially useful to historical linguists working on South-East Asian languages, but it can also be useful to model sound changes where a sound influences an adjacent sound before it is lost (as in the development of nasal vowels from VN sequences or tonogenesis), which are widespread in the world’s languages inasmuch they stem from cross-linguistically recurring coarticulatory patterns. It is also likely that this method can account for cases of local metathesis (which is the most likely to be regular) much better than the previous one. Nonetheless, this approach would not help model coarticulation-based developments that occur at a distance (e.g. umlaut). There might be a (maybe not so simple and visually elegant) way to accommodate to these as well, which would be a welcome future addition. In any case, the alignment resulting from the improvement described here clearly improves the previously available one for the examples discussed in the report.
In addition, the implementation of the features seems easy to use and user-friendly. The examples used as an illustration come with the link to the open-access database used for each of them. The links to the repositories with the relevant data and source code are also included in the report. All this greatly facilitates the replication of the examples for the reader, which is very appreciated.
However, this approach can result in the oversimplification of historical change by conflating sequences of independent changes affecting sounds in the same phonological context, as illustrated by the authors with an example from German sibilant retraction. In addition, segment grouping can bias analysis by means of adding a priori designated clusters that may increase the effect of confirmation bias. Of course, this is not a problem of the software in itself, but it is something the analyst needs to keep in mind when performing this kind of analysis (or basically any other, for that matter).
In short, this brief report presents a useful addition to the toolbox for computational analysis of historical phonological data. An interested reader can easily understand the use and possibilities of the new feature of the EDICTOR software by reading it, as well as finding the relevant links to the data and source code at the end of the report.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Historical phonology, phonetics, sound change.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 17 Dec 2024

Johann-Mattis List

We express our gratitude to the reviewer for this positive review. We hope that future research can prove the usefulness of our new coding scheme.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 13 December 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19876.r47618

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Susanto Susanto
Universitas Bandar Lampung, Bandar Lampung, Lampung, Indonesia

The article presents a novel approach to improving sound sequence representations in computational historical linguistics. It aims to address the limitations of traditional rigid sound segmentation by allowing for the grouping of sounds into evolving units. This flexibility is intended to enhance the analysis of language-specific sound laws and improve the alignment of phonetic data across different languages.

The introduction of evolving sound units is a significant advancement in the field, providing a more nuanced understanding of sound changes over time. The accompanying software library adds practical value, enabling researchers to convert their data between traditional and evolving sound unit formats. Concrete examples, particularly from Chinese and Mataguayan languages, effectively illustrate the benefits of the proposed method.

The article mentions a software library but lacks detailed documentation on its implementation. Including a section on how to use the software, along with examples of input and output data, would make it more accessible to researchers unfamiliar with the tools.

A candid discussion of potential limitations and challenges associated with the new approach would provide a balanced view. For instance, are there specific language families where this method may not yield accurate results?

The article offers a valuable contribution to the field of historical linguistics by addressing a critical issue in sound segmentation. By enhancing software documentation, and expanding the discussion of potential limitations and challenges, the authors can significantly improve the scientific rigor and overall impact of their work. The proposed methodology has the potential to advance the study of language evolution and sound change, provided it is presented with the necessary clarity and detail.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: phonetics, phonology, computational linguistics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 16 Dec 2024

Johann-Mattis List

We express our gratitude to the reviewer for this comment. Since the article was meant as a brief report on an ongoing system of annotation, we limited examples and discussions in the article itself, hoping that future work would reveal the usefulness of the study. When writing an update later, we will demonstrate that even by now, much more documentation

on the new feature is already available, specifically in the particular tools that make use of the new annotation practice.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 11 December 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.19876.r46347

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?

Ewan Dunbar
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

This brief report describes a modification to existing tools for doing historical linguistics, namely, a mechanism by which segments can be grouped together for the purposes of alignment. The obvious applications of this are complex segments (diphthongs and affricates), as these are known to behave differently than sequences, both synchronically and historically, but the paper demonstrates the effect of this tool on a number of other cases, including a case where a glide is elided and the surrounding two syllables coalesce into a single long vowel (note that the paper says "large vowel" - I believe that "long" was meant).

The major limitation of this paper is its very narrow scope. To be perfectly transparent, I am not a historical linguist, and, therefore, some of the things that may be implicit, I am not able to guess. For example, while it is very clear to me how historical analyses could benefit from grouping a diphthong into a single complex segment, it would have been useful to demonstrate what exactly the tangible downstream consequences are for computational linguistics, as referred to in the first paragraph. The paper repeatedly refers to figures showing alignments and points to the fact that they are "more in line with" traditional analyses of the languages in question. Perhaps visually, but the utility of grouping depends entirely on the analysis being done and the question being asked. If my research question required me to *identify* cases where two vowels in adjacent syllables coalesce into one, it would be counterproductive to turn the two-syllable sequence into a single unit. Clearly, this is intentional: the grouping is manual, and so it is very obviously intended to be used by researchers who know what they are doing and why! However, without more concrete use cases, it is difficult for me to fully appreciate the degree to which this tool is really needed, or, rather, whether it represents a minor convenience. While this is a brief report and is meant to be limited in scope, I believe it would greatly benefit from more concrete discussion about specific analysis problems that would benefit from the technique proposed.

Nevertheless, the paper competently and clearly presents the technique, such as it is, and is likely to be useful to the target audience.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Computational linguistics; speech processing; phonology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 11 Dec 2024

Johann-Mattis List

We thank the reviewer for this very useful review on our little study on the grouping of sounds. Whether we will be able to account for the points raised, i.e., to provide detailed examples of why it may be useful to group sounds or to not group sounds, however, is something that we won't be able to answer to soon, since studies are still ongoing, and the annotation itself is tedious. What we can say for now, however, and we may well add this at a later stage to an updated version of the study, is that linguists are in fact already using versions of grouped sounds for particular language families (mostly South-East Asian languages). Thus, the tool as such may not need to prove its usefulness, we would argue, but rather makes sure that our computer-assisted approaches come closer to the needs of traditional analyses. If the reviewer would find an extended investigation of such differences in analysis useful, we'd gladly consider to update the report soon.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 24 June 2024

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Jelena Prokić
[1] Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
[2] Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

The article presents new sound sequence representation and annotation format that allows researchers to group individual sound segments into sound units. This research is a valuable contribution to the field of computational historical linguistics since it will allow researchers to go beyond current strict segment models. As shown by the authors, it is a very useful method while working with certain languages, like Nivaclé. It still remains to be seen how widely this kind of representation can or will be used while working with different languages. The conversion to sound units cannot be done automatically and requires annotated data or a list with mappings (an orthography profile). The proposed solution is useful when sound units are already determined by the researcher. Sound unit representation is a valuable addition for the sequence alignment analysis, but the application in automatic language comparison and analyses like loan detection needs to be investigated. This research can be seen as the first step toward incorporation of new sequence representation into computer aided language research.

The paper is clearly written and easy to follow. The only exception is a section where the authors say that 'the number of distinct speech sounds accounted for by the CLTS reference catalog is too large to reflect the linguistic reality of phonetic diversity in the languages of the world'. This sounds confusing and it should be better explained. Why is the case that the a large number of distinct sounds is not a good way to represent phonetic diversity in the languages of the world?

The paper includes accompanying code and data and adheres to values and principles of open science.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: dialectometry, quantitative linguistics, computational linguistics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 05 Aug 2024

Johann-Mattis List

Thanks a lot for these very helpful comments. We have tried to enhance our revised version by adding code examples that are more transparent and also made up for some typos in our previous version, adding new references.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 28 May 2024

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.18194.r40340

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Erich Round
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[2] School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Queensland (Ringgold ID: 1974), Saint Lucia, Queensland, Australia
[3] University of Surrey, Guildford, England, UK
[4] School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Queensland (Ringgold ID: 1974), Saint Lucia, Queensland, Australia

Summary
This brief report illustrates a small but powerful change to existing resources on historical language comparison, namely allowing the grouping of individual speech sounds into larger molecules prior to alignment. This is a smart innovation which solves two connected problems: (1) that sounds may pattern in a 1:many or many:many way wrt alignment, and (2) that simply enumerating all combinations would be combinatorially unfeasible.

Add two recent, relevant references on p3
- To Hartmann 2003 add Marr & Mortensen 2023[Ref 1]
- "The problem of segmentation is also important for the level of phonetic transcription." Here, add Round 2023[Ref 2]

Clarify one point on p4
"shows that it would not be feasible to try to account for all possible sound combinations", > "shows that for reasons of combinatorial explosion, it would not be feasible to try to account for

all possible sound combinations"

Suggestion to clarify a bit in the abstract:
"are segmented into fixed sound units which cannot be modified" > "are segmented into units of sound whose boundaries cannot be manipulated"

References
1. Marr C, Mortensen D: Large-scale computerized forward reconstruction yields new perspectives in French diachronic phonology. *Diachronica*. 2023; **40** (2): 238-285 Publisher Full Text
2. Round E: Canonical phonology and criterial conflicts: relating and resolving four dilemmas of phonological typology. *Linguistic Typology*. 2023; **27** (2): 267-287 Publisher Full Text

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Computational historical linguistics; Phonology; Morphology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 05 Aug 2024

Johann-Mattis List

Thanks a lot for these insightful comments. IN our updated version, we have tried to account for all suggested changes and hope that this has been done in a satisfying way.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.