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**How Many Language Families are there in the World?**

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How many language families (including isolates) are there in the world? Surprisingly, most historical linguists do not know – estimates range around 250 but vary from only 1 to 500 or so. The answer to this question is complicated by a number of theoretical and methodological questions fundamental to historical linguistics:

- (1) Is the family tree model flawed?, or better put, why are most of the challenges to family trees without foundation?
- (2) Can linguistic diffusion be a serious challenge to linguistic genealogical relationships?, or, put differently, how successful in difficult cases can we be at distinguishing inheritance from borrowing?
- (3) Is there a temporal threshold beyond which genetic relationship among languages is no longer demonstrable?
- (4) Why have typological comparisons sometimes led to erroneous hypotheses of language families?
- (5) Can the wide geographical distributions of certain linguistic traits make it impossible to sort out genetic relationships among languages?
- (6) Why is it that human genetics and other non-linguistic fields cannot help us determine genetic relationships among languages?
- (7) Can the speakers' type of society or the sort of culture determine the nature of change in their languages and thus influence how they might be classified?
- (8) Why is it impossible to demonstrate Proto-World on the basis of extant evidence?
- (9) What is the prognosis for discovering new family relationships among languages?,  
What recent progress has been made?

This paper addresses these issues, attempting to proffer answers (or at least perspective) and thus to contribute to the classification of languages generally, and ultimately to answering the question, how many language families are there, really?

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