

Attestation meets reconstruction: the case of Romance

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Those who work on language families like Germanic take it for granted that the further back in time one tries to go the more one will have to rely on conclusions derived by comparing the properties of the surviving languages and projecting them backwards via the Comparative Method (CM) to recover a lost proto-language, in this case proto-Germanic. By contrast, in his classic *The Romance Languages* W.D. Elcock expressed the view that ‘It is the special privilege of Romance philologists that they are not compelled to rely entirely upon reconstruction’ (1960: 33). In consequence the need to reconstruct proto-Romance has traditionally met with little favour. Things changed with the development of the project for a new *Dictionnaire Étymologique Romane (DÉR)* some ten years ago. In my talk I will consider the pros and cons of this project and the relative roles of textual analysis and linguistic reconstruction in helping us to understand the origin and development of the Romance languages from Latin. I will argue that, rather than seeing the two methods as opposed, we need to draw on both and be alert to the ways that they can be integrated to yield a fuller picture than can be drawn by either taken alone.

For a good introduction to the comparative method (CM) and its use in reconstruction, see Weiss (2014) and, for discussion of the issues in connection with Romance, Dworkin (2016). Details of the *DÉR* project and the online version of the dictionary are available at: <http://www.atilf.fr/DERom/> (including a video made by the students on the project about how entries in the dictionary are put together). A detailed review of the project is Weiss (2017)

References

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