

09: The evolution and diversification of the Caucasian languages.

Lead supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Russell Gray
Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History
Department of Linguistic and Cultural Evolution
Kahlaische Str. 10
07745 Jena, Germany
Email: gray@shh.mpg.de
<http://www.shh.mpg.de/2923/russellgray>

Co-supervisors:

Simon Greenhill
Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History
Department of Linguistic and Cultural Evolution
Kahlaische Str. 10
07745 Jena, Germany
Email: greenhill@shh.mpg.de
<http://www.shh.mpg.de/employees/48696/25522>

Johann-Mattis List
Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History
Independent Research Group Leader: CALC
Kahlaische Str. 10
07745 Jena, Germany
Email: list@shh.mpg.de
<http://www.shh.mpg.de/375796/calc>

Dr. habil. Diana Forker
Vertretungsprofessorin
Philosophische Fakultät
Fachbereich Kaukasiologie
Jenergasse 8 (Acchouchierhaus)
07743 Jena, Germany
Email: diana.forker@uni-jena.de
<http://www.kaukasiologie.uni-jena.de/Team/Dr.+Diana+Forker.html>

Involved subjects: historical linguistics, language evolution, Caucasian languages

Number of positions requested: 1

Abstract:

The importance of the Caucasus for the study of language contact cannot be underestimated. It is the most linguistically diverse area of Europe, with ample evidence of centuries-long contact both within itself and with neighbouring linguistic areas. However, the historical relationships and interactions between these languages, both within and between different families is still unclear. First of all, the question of genetic relationships between West Caucasian and East Caucasian has not fully settled (Nikolayev & Starostin 1994, Schulze 1997). Furthermore, there is no agreement on the precise internal structure of the East Caucasian family and its subbranches. Third, there is also an ongoing debate about the problem of the “Caucasian Sprachbund” with some prominent scholars (see e.g. Klimov (ed.) 1978, Chirikba 2008) proposing pan-Caucasian areal features, while others vigorously oppose their proposals (Tuite 1999).

In this project, the student will tackle these questions using the innovative tools and approaches pioneered by the DLCE. First, this project will contribute to the development of large-scale comparative databases of the languages of the Caucasus from both lexical and typological perspectives. The student will be responsible of building up the database in close cooperation with the LexCauc project currently conducted at the Institute of Slavonic and Caucasian Studies, supervised by the project leaders Dr. Diana Forker and Dr. Oleg Belyaev. These data will provide both a detailed resource for the Caucasus languages as well as being integrated into the DLCE's large-scale *lexibank* and *grambank* projects to enable global comparisons. In the second step the student will analyse these data using both traditional linguistic comparative method techniques, as well as leveraging the powerful tools developed by the DLCE including *Edictor*, *LingPy*, *CLICS*, and *Concepticon*. The project will then use quantitative statistical and phylogenetic tools for inferring the origins, dispersal and timing of the expansions of these languages and evaluate the results in comparison with the existing literature (e.g. Nikolayev & Starostin 1994, Koryakov 2006). A key component will be to use cutting-edge phylogeographic models to infer the geographic patterning of the underlying expansions through the region. In addition, since we will build our study on computer-assisted techniques, our study will allow for a very detailed representation of linguistic data that allows us to then apply cutting-edge techniques for sequence comparison, high-level annotation, including full and partial cognates inside and across the same concepts in our dataset, and will in this way also contribute to cross-disciplinary studies by integrating, for example, the names that the languages give to the physical objects to artifacts in archaeological records, or early attestations of domestication.

By combining both lexical data and typological data for these languages, with rigorous quantitative methods, the project will make an outstanding contribution to the entanglement of the complex phylogenetic and areal history of Caucasus and shed light on these long-standing debates.

The applicants should have:

- MA or equivalent in linguistics
- knowledge of historical linguistics
- basic knowledge of quantitative methods in linguistics
- knowledge of Russian (at least A2)