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Scope, Context and Contribution. This paper well attests to Robert Sokal’s broad contribution to a cross-disciplinary human prehistory. For here, he and Jiangtian Chen team up with Merritt Ruhlen to add a linguistic perspective to a genetic one: specifically, to test whether the lineages of our languages might correlate, on a very ambitious worldwide scale, with those of our genes. “The implications . . . for the origin and history of our species would be great,” as they put it, and certainly the stakes could hardly be higher for a holistic understanding of our origins.

With such potential does come a commensurate temptation, however. Indeed, it must immediately be pointed out that the particular vision of language relationships and prehistory espoused here by Ruhlen is distinctly unorthodox and exceptionally controversial among historical linguists, such that grave concerns attend the “classification” that he contributes as the language “data” here. Not that this disqualifies the approach, however. Rather, in a sense it only reflects the ambition: to investigate potential correlations between linguistic and genetic lineages at the broadest possible level worldwide, and at the greatest time-depth possible. The very value of this paper is that it aspires to put to the test Ruhlen’s most controversial claims for deep language relationships. To do so, care is taken to keep a fairly tight rein on them, and to keep the method itself sufficiently distanced from them, without taking them as given (“If higher linguistic structure did exist, as claimed, we would expect . . .”).

A key result of this paper, in fact, is that it duly finds nothing to those claims, at least in the aspect assessed here: whether there emerges any clear correlation with genetics. Instead, the results incline toward the orthodox position as to what languages can and cannot reliably tell us of prehistory. In so doing, they render a service to all disciplines with a stake in understanding human prehistory. Notwithstanding the great advances in genetics since this paper was published, the latest generation of scholars in this cross-disciplinary field would do well to bear more in mind the lessons from this pioneering contribution.

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