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Historical Linguistics in 2008: The state of the art

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Abstract: An overview of the current state of the field of historical linguistics is offered here, with an eye to identifying enduring questions and tested methodologies but also new opportunities and new methods.

1. Introduction

Historical linguistics can be characterized as both the study of language change and the study of language history. These are two distinct but related enterprises: we learn about language change by studying particular events in the history of individual languages but the history of these languages also includes more than just the study of change; there are also elements to be recognized that have stayed relatively stable and unchanged over time. Moreover, historical linguistics is interested in determining and exploring relationships that languages show with other languages, whether genetic or diffusionary in nature; the former sort of relationship can provide indirect evidence of change, if related languages, sprung from the same source, nonetheless show, as they typically do, some differences between one another, whereas the latter type of relationship allows for the determination of instances of language change through language contact.

Thus there is a vast amount of material that provides grist for the historical linguistic mill; in a real sense, every language has a history and thus is of potential interest to the historical linguist, if even just at the level of description, with the recording of the details of a given language's historical development.

Within the history of linguistics, there have been times when the venerable field of historical linguistics was linguistics, period, with little else of concern except the historical. During such times, it was almost impossible to engage in linguistics without being well-versed in historical methodology and without caring about the historical dimension to any description or account. So too, however, there have been times when historical linguistics has been virtually absent from the main stream of linguistic thought and practice, especially in the United States.

The former period can be identified with the 19th century and into the early to middle of the 20th century, and the latter period with much of the second half of the 20th century. As Watkins (1989: 784) noted, reflecting on the field from the late 1960s on into the 1980s, "it is possible to get a Ph.D. degree in linguistics at a number of fine and distinguished American universities without ever taking a course in historical linguistics, and there are good linguists teaching in my own department [at Harvard University] who have never had such a course". This period coincides with the emergence of intense concern for scientific methodology and the development of models that might be called "linguistics as cognitive science" or "linguistics as a branch of biological science",[i] and for many practitioners, it was not clear where the study of language change and language history fit into those scientific conceptualizations. There is of course an irony in this admittedly somewhat caricatured view of the field, since historical linguistics in some sense can be said to have put linguistics on a scientific footing in the 19th century with its

development of predictive means, via the recognition of the regularity of sound change, of accounting for certain aspects of language change.

2. State of the art: Infrastructural Indicators

To move to the current state of the art, the present day is a mix. If one looks just to external signs, then there are several indicators of health:

- the existence of a well-attended biennial international scientific meeting devoted to historical linguistics, namely the International Conference on Historical Linguistics (ICHL), soon to occur in its 19th instantiation (2009, in Nijmegen)

- a related book series, publishing, in John Benjamins' *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* series, selected papers from every ICHL since ICHL 3 (1977) and occasional special thematic volumes from workshops at ICHL gatherings)

- a flourishing journal dedicated to publishing the very best papers on a wide range of topics in historical linguistics, namely *Diachronica* (published by Benjamins), which is soon to expand from two to three issues per year

- the emergence of new book series with historical linguistics as their focus, including the University of Edinburgh Press historical textbook series and the series Brill has launched with a purely Indo-European focus (in a sense taking historical linguistics back to its own roots in 19th century Indo-European comparative philology)

- the maintenance of a lively electronic listserv, Histling (histling-l@mailman.rice.edu), maintained by Claire Bowern of Rice University, that serves numerous subscribers with announcements and opportunities for discussion of relevant issues

- relatedly, the recognition of a field of inquiry that has come to be known as "contact linguistics"; while language contact has long been of considerable interest to linguists, it is now coming of age as a subfield, with the publication in recent years of several textbooks and surveys (e.g., Thomason 2001, Winford 2003). It is true that contact linguistics is not just focused on studies of language change and particular histories, but is equally attentive to on-going multilingualism on a social and individual scale; nonetheless, the importance of understanding language contact for understanding language change is now widely recognized

- rapid expansion in the past 20 years of interest in "grammaticalization", the study of the origins of grammatical forms and of developments with grammatical forms, is noteworthy too (and external signs of this keen interest can be cited, such as a now-biennial conference (New Reflections on Grammaticalization—the fifth one is coming up in summer 2008), various research materials including a compendium of grammatical changes (Heine & Kuteva 2002), a dictionary of grammaticalization terminology (Lessau 1994), and numerous volumes of articles from conferences and the like, too many to list here). As a glance at any of these many works on

> grammaticalization shows, there is more to grammaticalization nowadays than just historical issues, as those working within this framework tackle matters of emergent grammar, usage-based grammar, the location of language within general communicative and cognitive strategies, and so on. But the original impetus behind studies of grammaticalization was the historical side of the development of grammar and thus grammatical change, as two landmark works demonstrate: Meillet 1912, which provided a conceptual basis, as well as relevant terminology (he spoke of "grammaticalisation", after all) for the grammaticalization "movement", and Givón 1971, who offered a modern nudge, with his slogan "Today's morphology is yesterday's syntax", in the direction that Meillet pointed towards.

These various indicators represent what might be called the "infrastructure" of historical linguistics.[ii] With all of them taken into consideration, it certainly seems that historical linguistics is on a solid footing and healthy once again. It is fair to say that there is good reason for these signs of health, since they rest in part on a recognition by those in the linguistic mainstream that historical linguistics really is a part of linguistics and has much to offer the field in general. Such a pronouncement may seem obvious to some, and it even has a ring of being self-serving (in that it is coming from a historical linguist). Nonetheless, as observed above, it is true that there have been times in the history of linguistics when historical analyses were viewed as niceties at best that could serve as distractions to making real progress with understanding language. There is thus within mainstream linguistics now a greater interest, more so than in the era surrounding the 1960s and 1970s perhaps (see the Watkins quote above), in addressing language change and learning about language in general from the examination of how it changes.

It is therefore reasonable to explore somewhat the conceptual underpinnings of the relation between historical linguistics and linguistics proper, since such an exercise not only offers an important additional dimension on the state of the field but it also allows for some consideration of new trends and developments: what the key issues—both old and new—are, what remains to be done, what challenges lie ahead, and what opportunities there are to seize upon.

3. State of the art: Conceptual bases

Kiparsky (1968:174) described language change as "a window on the form of linguistic competence". Since the goal of linguistic theory is to characterize the substance of the human linguistic abilities, i.e. competence, Kiparsky's pronouncement opened the door to a possible and potentially quite fruitful marriage of theoretical and historical linguistics, and to be sure, this sentiment has been taken to heart from time to time by theoreticians and diachronicians alike.[iii] I often tell the students in my historical linguistics classes that in my view, to be a good historical linguist, one has to be a good linguist. Moreover, I stress to them the importance of recognizing that there are applications outside of the classroom for what we teach – and learn – in classes on language change and that one such venue for applications is specifically in classes on other areas of linguistics. Such recognition, I say, is key to their learning to be well-informed theoreticians, sensitive to the value of diachronic evidence for the testing of theoretical claims that are more

synchronic in scope and focus. It also means that advances in theory or in our understanding of any aspect of language -- advances that are often made on the synchronic front -- can have an impact on our view of the diachrony of a given element or construct in a given language.

For instance, before the middle of the 20th century, before the work of Alfred Tarski and Richard Montague in particular, there really was no such subfield within linguistics as formal semantics. And, huge advances have been made in our understanding of phonetics with the advent of acoustic phonetics as a well-developed science with its own methodologies and related technology. Consequently, in order to understand now just how, for instance the scope of negation or marking for definiteness might develop or change through time or how sounds are altered diachronically, the insights of, respectively, formal semantics and acoustic phonetics cannot be ignored.[iv] To do so would be folly, but it would also mean that one was not being the best historical linguist possible, since one was not being the best linguist possible. Being a linguist first and foremost is crucial to understanding how linguistic systems can change.

Nonetheless, there is a downside, and on-going controversy, associated with an interest in looking to diachronic evidence for models of synchronic linguistic competence. In particular, Kiparsky's treatment, in that same 1968 paper, of various linguistic developments in several languages engendered a notion that language change was simply equivalent to change in the grammatical apparatus employed in theoretical descriptions. And since the theoretical constructs one worked with were themselves subject to change due to shifts in the acceptance of particular linguistic theories and general analytic frameworks, the "location" of language change in properties of the grammar has depended on the shape and form of that assumed grammar. Thus while Kiparsky 1968 and 1971 embraced such classical generative phonological notions as rule ordering, which translated into treating rule reordering as a mechanism of phonological change, more recent theoreticians, working within a constraint-based optimality theory (OT) framework, look to rerankings of the relative strength of constraints as a primary mechanism of change. Other related questions come up below in sections 4 and 7**.**

4. State of the art: Old but persistent questions and old but useful methods

In a now-classic paper, Weinreich, Herzog, and Labov (1968) articulated a number of basic issues that face anyone interested in examining language change; briefly stated, they are:[v]

(1) a. the "constraints" problem: What are the general constraints on change, if any, that determine possible and impossible changes and directions of change?
b. the "transition" problem: By what route does language change?
c. the "embedding" problem: How is a given language change embedded in the surrounding system of linguistic and social relations?
d. the "evaluation" problem: How do members of a speech community evaluate a given change, and what is the effect of this evaluation on the change?
e. the "actuation" problem: Why did a given linguistic change occur at the particular time and place that it did?

Although progress is being made on solutions to all these problems – in particular, see below section 5, regarding variationist methodology -- they still remain as a driving force behind most research into the mechanisms of language change.

And, just as such key questions remain from the advent of variationist approaches to language change, there are some key principles of even greater age, dating from the 19th century, that remain useful and almost essential. For instance, the Neogrammarian formulation of sound change as inherently regular to this day not only drives decisions about historical reconstruction, but it also provides a basis for determining relative chronology of changes, for separating out borrowings from inherited items, and for recognizing analogical change as opposed to sound change. Although questions are routinely raised about the validity of the Neogrammarian position on sound change, it seems well justified to recognize a type of change event, to adapt the phraseology of Hale 2003, that involves systematic (i.e. regular) and phonetically driven alteration of sounds, what may be called "sound change proper", "sound change in the strict sense", or simply "Neogrammarian sound change", to introduce terms that I have employed in my teaching over the years; see Labov 1981 and Hale 2003 for discussion.

Similarly, careful philological attention to data, arising out of their training in the Classics, allowed the Neogrammarians to have a solid empirical basis for their historical work, and that can be seen as the precursor to a modern interest in building theories on accurate descriptive studies and experimental results.

And, old methods remain useful and in fact indispensable for progress along certain fronts. One in particular, the comparative method, despite challenges to its validity (cf. some of the discussion in Durie & Ross 1996), still is the most reliable and powerful method for certain types of historical questions, especially those involving relatedness among languages. Also, however, identifying across different languages cognate forms that are "congruent" historically in some way but are not identical means that at least one of those languages has undergone at least one change.[vi] In that way, the comparative method also provides indirect evidence of language change and therefore, depending on how much one believes in one's reconstructions, for particular changes as well. The use of the comparative method thus not only allows for the recovery of aspects of language history but it also feeds into our understanding of language change.

To return to the generative reinterpretation of language change as grammar change mentioned at the end of the previous section, one key question it raised (see Andersen 1973) but left unaddressed, namely why the rules should change, is a question that persists now. Inasmuch as that reinterpretation continues today in a reincarnated form in OT, a parallel question of why constraints should ever be reranked needs to be asked. One answer to both the earlier instantiation of that question and the current one is that changes in the grammar are not the mechanism of change but only the modeling of the results of completed changes, but to the extent that the grammar change view continues to hold appeal, this key question must continue to be asked.

5. State of the art: New methods

As noted in section 3, new advances in linguistic theory have immediate consequences for any diachronically oriented linguist: determining how the view of language change is altered in the new theory and asking whether the new theory provides new insight into, or

just new robe, as it were, for particular changes. In the case of new methods, the question is simply how to put them to best use in analyzing and accounting for change.

There are three relatively new types of methodologies that add to tried and true methods mentioned in section 4 for studying language change. These are computationally based applications, variationist methods, and attitudinal/ideological approaches.

Under computational applications, I include the modelling of change (as in Polinsky & van Everbroeck 2003), the mathematical testing of claims about frequency effects, relatedness, the role of chance, and the validity of tree phylogenies (as well represented in the many papers in Forster and Renfrew 2006 (including studies by Brett Kessler, April McMahon, Johanna Nichols, Donald Ringe, and Tandy Warnow, among others), and by such works as McMahon & McMahon 2006, again among others), the use of statistical tests more generally (including applications as employed by variationist sociolinguists – see below), and corpus-based studies (such as those emerging from the study of the Helsinki Corpus of English or any of the other large annotated or tagged corpora that offer material on different stages of well-documented languages).

Under variationist methods, I have in mind the studies in the paradigm of William Labov and related approaches, as exemplified best in Labov 1994, 2001, and more recently 2007. In this line of inquiry, the fine details of inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation, especially with regard to phonology, are subjected to careful instrumental phonetic analysis and to various statistical tests using such programs as VARBRULE (Sankoff 1988) or GOLDVARB (Rand & Sankoff 1991), and the sometimes subtle but nonetheless significant trends shown by the variation are correlated with on-going changes progressing towards completion or with changes whose effects have settled into a stable variation. In addition, variationists these days are attending more to matters of style as reflected in usage, and to the role of identity in determining language use; these add up, for the historical linguist, to a crucial concern for external issues that affect language choices speakers make and thereby alter their realization of forms and their selection among variants. If, as Ohala (2003, and elsewhere) reminds us, the seeds of change are to be found in synchronic variation, then any factors which contribute to or promote certain choices out of a range of possible variants will necessarily have an impact on language change.

Finally, in what might be thought of as an extension of the variationist interest in identity formation, the role of language ideologies (see Silverstein 1979 on this notion) in guiding speaker choices has come to be recognized as a potent force shaping the direction of change. In as yet unpublished work (Joseph 2006, 2007) on language contact in the Balkans involving phonology and the reactions of speakers to such contact, I have drawn (fruitfully, I believe) on the notion of language ideologies, especially pertaining to a basic ideologically driven decision speakers make every day (perhaps falling under the rubric of the "evaluation question" stated above in (4)) of where to draw boundaries between one's own language and the speech form of others. Further compelling applications await only the development of a sufficient level of interest on the part of scholars in this area.

6. State of the art: New opportunities

The current state of the field of linguistics presents several novel opportunities for historical linguistics. I signal here three such avenues for new investigation.

First, our understanding of language relationships and individual language histories can only be enriched and extended as our knowledge of under-documented and under-studied languages grows, with greater attention and resources being directed toward endangered and generally threatened languages. Of course, not all endangered languages are under-documented but many, perhaps most, are; nor are all under-documented languages endangered, but again, many, perhaps most, are. Thus the heightened awareness of the loss of languages expected in the coming few decades and the increased documentation (and additional funding for such basic research) that it has engendered mean that more will be learned about how various languages are related – or not – to one another. The boost to comparative linguistics from such efforts will mean too that reasonable inferences about the histories of particular languages will be able to be drawn, thus increasing the storehouse of information on possible language changes.

Second, the populations that were the basis for variationist studies done now over a generation or more ago, such as the ground-breaking Labov 1963, have aged to a point where it is now fruitful to do follow-up studies, with the same speakers (or a comparable sample). This type of study, e.g. Pope, Meyerhoff, & Ladd 2007 or Sankoff & Blondeau 2007 or the work of the Danish LANCHART project,[vii] allows for the tracing of language change in individuals throughout their lifetimes, a phenomenon not widely recognized as possible, and for the drawing of inferences about the consequences of such lifespan change for language change in a speech community at large.

Finally, there are productive cross-disciplinary lines of inquiry to pursue. For instance, striking parallels between biology and linguistics, and more particularly, evolutionary biology and historical linguistics, have long been noted, [viii] and some of the computational methods noted above in section 5 exploit these parallels, especially with regard to rate of change and working out phylogenies. Still, one has to wonder if these parallels provide a good biological metaphor for linguistic work or if they have substantive consequences; one can note that there is no direct analogue in biological evolution to the common linguistic act of borrowing; in language contact, borrowing can be seen in choices individuals make about which words (for instance) to use, but in biological development, contact with others does not affect individual organisms but can only promote the selection by large populations of particular features.[ix] And, there are other potentially fruitful cross-disciplinary marriages that may yield insights into language change, e.g. studies on the psychology of bilingualism and what that might tell us about the sort of language contact that takes places within an individual's mind.

7. Conclusion: A key remaining (set of related) question(s)

Several questions have been posed here, but only few have been answered. I see that as reasonable, since the purpose of this presentation is to signal where we are in historical linguistics and where we need to be in the years to come. And while other questions could well be explored -- such as the relation of language change to language acquisition by children, what creole languages can tell us about language change, how many distinct processes of language change there are,[x] and so forth -- I close here with another basic issue that maybe has not yet been answered, and discuss its ramifications:

(2) At what point do we consider a "change" to have occurred?

In particular, the issue here is what "counts" as an event of language change: is it the first introduction of some innovative feature alone (arguably revealing a change in some individual's language and thus of relevance to the language taken as a whole and viewed as the union of the speech of all its speakers) or is it instead the spread of the innovation to other individuals (and arguably within a speaker's own usage, as to whether the innovation even persists and recurs in that one speaker)? Opinions are mixed on this point, and perhaps it will never be fully resolved.

As a spin-off from that question, it is reasonable to ask how abstract language change is, as that may offer a handle on the question of when change is said to occur. More to the point (to return to the position of Kiparsky 1968, 1971 – see above section 3), which comes first, change in the surface manifestation of a language or change in the grammar underlying those surface forms? For instance, in a study involving formal approaches to grammaticalization phenomena, Amritavalli 2004 examined how functional heads grow out of lexical heads and become separate projections, but it is fair to ask what the cause and effect relationship is here regarding the shift in the location of the head: is the shift in the grammar the result of a shift in the way a once-lexical head is used or does the once-lexical head take on a new surface role once its status in the grammar is altered? And similar questions can be asked about any formal account of a change: does the change occur first in the surface and then the grammar "catches up", so to speak, with the new reality of how forms have been redeployed by speakers, or are the speakers at the mercy, as it were, of restructurings of the grammar?

Questions and more questions – that is what the spirit of intellectual inquiry is all about, and thus the robustness of the questions asked here about language change and its study can be taken as an index of the robustness of the field of historical linguistics early in the 21st century.

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[i] This characterization of the field most famously belongs to Noam Chomsky; as Battistella (1996: 130) notes, "Chomsky views linguistics as a branch of psychology (in turn a branch of biology)".

[ii] Another infrastructural issue that might be considered is institutional in nature. That is, the question of jobs in historical linguistics within the academy must be considered. Here, however, there is not the same array of positive indicators for the health of historical linguistics since jobs that focus just on historical linguistics or even which mention it as a desired secondary specialization are few and far between. I reckon that there have been no more than a dozen in my 30 or so years in the field.

[iii] Kiparsky maintains this position in later works; for instance Kiparsky (1988: 405) writes "It is this interplay of mutually constraining factors which gives historical linguistics its focal role in the study of language".

[iv] On the role of advances in acoustic phonetics to the understanding of sound change see especially the work of John Ohala, as summarized nicely in Ohala 2003. Deo 2006 is a nice example of the value of formal semantics to historical analysis.

[v] Joseph 2001a offers some discussion of each problem. Some of these problems are reminiscent of statements of problems in studying language change articulated by Coseriu 1958, namely the "rational" problem (why are languages not invariant? Why are they always changing?), the "general" problem (what are the conditions that lead to language change?), and the "historical" problem (why does any particular change occur when it does?).

[vi] Maybe both have changed and maybe more than one change has caused the difference between the outcomes of what was once the same element in the proto-language linking the two offspring languages in question. But minimally, such a situation indicates that at least one change has occurred.

[vii] See http://lanchart.hum.ku.dk/; the project studies language change in real time.

[viii] See Atkinson & Gray 2005 and Ben Hamed 2004 for some discussion of these parallels.

[ix] For instance, flowers in one area might ultimately develop in the direction, i.e. select for, the color of other flowers in their area, especially if there is some evolutionary advantage to be had. But an individual flower would not change within its lifetime, unlike humans who can change aspects of their language within their lifetimes by contact with other speakers.

[x] More particularly, is grammaticalization a separate process of change (or processes – see Janda 2001 and Joseph 2001), or just a label for the result(s) of other processes of language change (e.g. analogy, metaphorical extension, sound change, etc.)? Similarly, is lexical diffusion something different from analogy (as, e.g., Phillips 2006 thinks) or just subsumed under analogy (as Kiparsky 1995 argues)? Does reanalysis have a status as a separate mechanism of change? And so on.