

Preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.191.preface>

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Language History: An introduction

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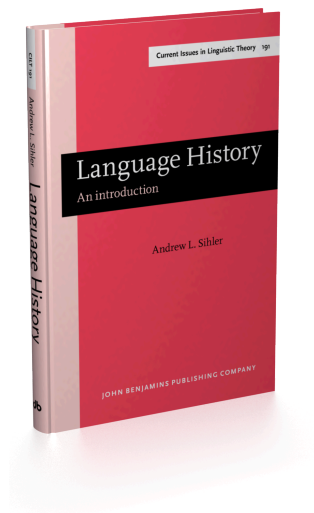
[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 191]

2000. xvi, 298 pp.

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P R E F A C E

THIS WORK STARTED OUT as a revision and expansion of the remarks about historical linguistics, titled 'Some general features of linguistic history', that occupy 37 pages of Carl Darling Buck's *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (1933: University of Chicago), now out of print. My revision of the comparative grammar itself resulted in a work so large that it seemed prudent to publish separately what had grown into a whole course in the whys and hows of historical and comparative linguistics.

Published separately, moreover, it would be not only a companion volume to the *New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*; it should be a useful guide for anyone unfamiliar with linguistics who was trying to study of the history of any language, and perhaps even those who are enrolled in courses devoted to reading texts in old languages (Old English, Old Church Slavic, Middle French, Gothic, e.g.), since the way most such courses are taught, some portion of them is devoted to the history of the language.

Conversations with colleagues who regularly teach such courses confirmed two things. Very few of their students have any idea of why or how languages change, or what proto-forms actually are, or how they are arrived at (never mind why). In an ideal world, students would take a couple of semesters of descriptive and historical linguistics as prerequisites, but that is an unrealistic expectation. Of course, some students, presented with the findings of historical linguistics, seem to be able to infer by induction at least some of the principles involved. But even the apt and interested would learn more (as well as more accurately and in less time) given a systematic survey, however compendious.

In fact, compendiousness would be a prime virtue. There are several superb introductions to historical and comparative linguistics available now, such as Bynon 1977, Anttila 1988, Hock 1985, Hock and Joseph 1996; but their excellence is due in part to their thoroughness and technical rigor. These very qualities unsuit them for the purpose at hand. They amount to full semester (if not full year) courses of study. There are, or have been, briefer and simpler treatments available, but

in my opinion they are marred by serious technical and even factual errors. Virtually all general introductory linguistic textbooks have a chapter on historical linguistics; but they are superficial (comparative linguistics is rarely more than mentioned, for example) and worse, they usually are inaccurate and flawed technically in all sorts of ways large and small—misused terms, incorrectly cited forms, and just plain mistakes (a best-selling introductory text now in its 5th edition lists *orthography* as an example of a loan word from Latin, and *verdict* as a borrowing from French).

This work aspires to be a brief but technically and factually accurate exposition of linguistic description and history. Whether studied as a thing in itself at the beginning of the term, or ‘backgrounded’ while the prime subject matter is tackled, it should help students understand the assumptions and reasoning that underlie the contents of their handbooks and etymological dictionaries. And while the facts and theories set forth here are prevailingly what might be called the Industry Standard, no claim is made for certified *communis opinio* status of any particular assertion. Some widely-held views, furthermore, are simply disregarded as being too fallacious to bother with, wide belief to the contrary notwithstanding (for example, the proposition that loan words are ‘immune’ to phonological rules, or the fictitious phonetic features known as *tense* and *lax*).

The heart of the book is the brief chapter on linguistic reconstruction (which traditionally goes by the odd name of ‘the comparative method’). Leading up to it are some discussions of how languages change through time. Taken as a whole, this sequence of chapters explains where the teachings of handbooks regarding unrecorded language change come from.

Following the discussion and demonstration of linguistic reconstruction there are chapters on the interpretation of written records, the language-external aspects of language change (dialects, for example), and then finally, almost as an appendix, a systematic discussion of articulatory phonetics. There is a glossary of terms.

Although as stated above Buck’s introductory section to his *Comparative Grammar* formed the basis for this work, even in the early stages of reworking the material it was both much enlarged and very much transformed. Subsequently, as the prospect of publishing a free-

standing volume became more palpable, I have actually undertaken to free the work from specific indebtedness to Buck, retaining at most a few of his examples, though here and there a phrase may have survived verbatim.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to classroom tests of earlier versions of this work by Jeffrey Wills and Rob Howell, of the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and to their good-natured students. Brent Vine contributed useful comments when the work was still encysted in the *New Comparative Grammar*, and also has used a draft of *Language Change* in a course of his at UCLA. I have been fortunate to be able to take advantage of the acute and useful suggestions provided by Michael Job and a second (anonymous) reader for John Benjamins. Thomas Purnell was kind enough to look over the Appendix, and to respond helpfully to many inquiries on phonetic matters, both articulatory and acoustic. Friends and former students, most notably John Winston, Benjamin Moore, and Ted Voth, have contributed valuable observations and corrections. Of course, whatever faults remain are on my head alone.

Apart from functioning occasionally as a native-speaker sounding-board, John Tallman made no technical contribution to this work; but without his encouragement and support, you would not be reading these lines.

As I buckled down to work on this book, I consulted profitably with my colleague Valdis Zeps on a numberless variety of matters of both form and content. I looked forward with relish to his inspection of the completed text—for the pleasure it probably would have given him; for the praise I smugly anticipated; and, most of all, for the valuable criticism he would have certainly offered. I am cheated of his pleasure; the reader is cheated of his wisdom and knowledge.

A.L.S.

MADISON, OCTOBER 1999