

Prefatory note

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Perspectives on Historical Linguistics: Papers from a conference held at the meeting of the Language Theory Division, Modern Language Assn., San Francisco, 27–30 December 1979

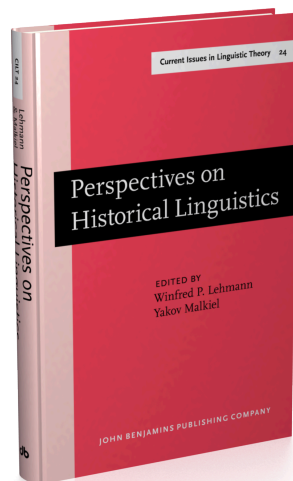
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PREFATORY NOTE

A decade and a half ago the editors of this volume arranged a conference to review aims for historical linguistics. The papers presented at that conference were thereupon published under the title: *Directions for Historical Linguistics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). They may well have achieved some of their goals. In any event the considerable attention subsequently devoted to historical linguistics suggested the usefulness of another conference. Unlike its predecessor this one required no major support; it was arranged as part of a meeting of a learned society. Two sections of the Modern Language Association program in San Francisco, December 27-29, 1979, were allotted to the Language Theory Division for presentation of papers which are now published here.

While the earlier papers and their topics are by no means obsolete, the titles of the papers in this volume may indicate that historical linguistics has progressed in the meantime. Not that the historical study of language has completely overcome an unfortunate legacy from one of its most influential theorists, by which it was sharply separated from descriptive linguistics! Yet the separation between the two approaches to the study of language no longer maintains the Saussurean sharpness of even a decade ago. Linguists are coming to understand that if problems are examined in isolation from the dimension of time affecting all human activities, such isolation, as well as their views of language, may be as artificial as the context in which they are treated.

Linguistics is slowly overcoming another troublesome heritage, this too bequeathed by theorists who have in part adversely influenced the historical study of language: virtually exclusive attention to the sounds and forms of language. While like other linguists, the neo-grammarians -- who set this narrow course -- considered the sentence the minimal unit of language, in effect they limited their attention to its most readily manageable

segments, phonology and morphology. Such a delimitation not only led to neglect of syntax, let alone discourse; it also provided limited direction for the approaches to the topics on which it concentrated, as essays presented below illustrate.

Linguistics pursued in the neogrammarian tradition, which persisted among theoreticians in this country as well as much of Europe, also for the most part treated language outside its social context. It was one of the achievements of the late Uriel Weinreich to assist in moving our field back to consideration of language as a social phenomenon. The founders of modern linguistics, notably Jacob Grimm, undertook their investigations of language as only one part of their concern with communication. Philology, the field in which they and their successors carried out their studies, involved the investigation of communication generally. In some degree then we now return to the broad approach of the founders of modern linguistics a century and a half ago. To solve a particular problem students of language may restrict their approaches. But the study of phonology, or morphology, or syntax with no attention to language in its social setting may be most useful in refining formalism. Investigation of language in its use by social groups deepens our understanding of it, at the same time disclosing many opportunities for further study.

By its title, the first essay after the introduction links this volume to its predecessor. Stating the principles presented in the final essay of that volume and reviewing subsequent research, it assesses progress made in the meantime towards constructing a general theory of change. Like the following papers on phonology and morphology, it poses new questions that have arisen in the increasingly ambitious research devoted to language. Historical attention to discourse, the topic of the fifth paper, is virtually new, though it too finds predecessors among philologists who devoted themselves to texts. Finally, two essays treat etymology, one concentrating on the rigorously investigated Romance field, the other on Indo-European, especially on new insights prompted by attention to Hittite in accordance with views developed largely in study of languages totally unknown or disregarded by previous Indo-Europeanists.

Etymology is the historical study of language in manageable proportions, including all sub-divisions of linguistics: phonology, morphology, syntax, discourse as well as meanings of items for individuals and society. In recalling the earlier participation of Émile Benveniste and Jerzy Kuryłowicz, who included its study as well as

theoretical approaches to language in their scope of investigation, we present this collection in the tradition of students of language whose broad grasp of it guides them to illuminating all of its segments as parts of the whole.

From the foregoing remarks, however, it would be wrong to infer that a much-needed partial return to certain crucial implications of earlier thinking, be it of the twentieth century, be it -- *a fortiori* -- of the Romantic era, comes close to exhausting our goals. Quite the contrary. The advance of linguistic scholarship and science (two branches intertwined) resembles a spiral, with each generation, to be sure, trying to reject certain gratuitous exaggerations of its predecessors by moving, sometimes abruptly, in the opposite direction, but with steady progress being nevertheless achieved along another, perhaps more important, axis. The latter qualification is a measure of the difference between a linear projection of the swings of a pendulum, where one movement virtually cancels out another and no visible over-all progress is achieved, and a genuine spiral, which unmistakably combines general progress along one line with the cancellation of extremist positions along another. Here is the acid test for this contention: Ask yourselves whether any of the papers here included would have been conceived or written at a distinctly earlier moment. In disagreement with the rigidity and schematism of previous schools of thought, we nevertheless cheerfully adopt certain minor techniques and absorb individual data developed or clarified under those régimes. It has been argued that the late Ramón Menéndez Pidal was, figuratively speaking, a latter day re-incarnation of Jacob Grimm. The comparison is valid; but only on the understanding that the arsenal of tools available to Spain's intellectual giant was radically different from the modest kit with which Germany's *Originalgenie* operated. Many changes of taste and perspective were necessary before, for example, typological analysis as envisaged here, cutting across the borders between Indo-European Romance, and Germanic -- that is, domains of knowledge almost hermetically sealed off in the past -- could be undertaken in an experimental vein.

In planning this work we selected specialists in specific fields of historical linguistics and gave them latitude for the direction of their contribution. We have tried to maintain their individualism of outlook and style, and are grateful to them for their participation. We would like to express our appreciation to

Janet Johnson, Lynn Johnk and Margaret Woodruff for editorial assistance, especially with the combined bibliography. The computer facilities of the Linguistics Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin permitted assembly of the master bibliography. The Cambridge University Press authorized inclusion of the maps from *Dialect Geography* by J. K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill. Janet Johnson merits special thanks for preparing the camera-ready typescript. We are also grateful to the Modern Language Association for our initial forum and for a travel grant which enabled the participant from abroad to attend the meeting at which these papers were first presented.

Austin, Texas & Berkeley, Calif.

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The Editors