

# Preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.3.01pre>

Pages ix–x of

**Papers on Language Theory and History: Volume I:  
Creation and Tradition in Language**

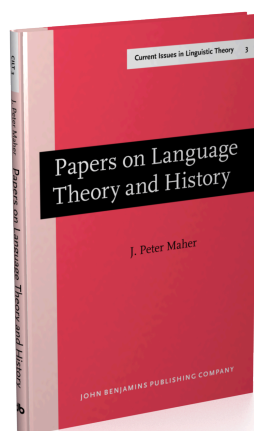
**J. Peter Maher**

[Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 3] 1977. xx, 171 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)).

For further information, please contact [rights@benjamins.nl](mailto:rights@benjamins.nl) or consult our website at [benjamins.com/rights](http://benjamins.com/rights)



## PREFACE

Interest in word-meaning is on the increase among mainstream linguists again after a half-century of neglect, the labors of several notable isolated workers notwithstanding. Many North Americans trained in the 1930s and 1940s, repelled by the incessant etymologizing of their professors, sought new challenges in phonology. Their pupils subsequently, who were to become the transformational-generativists, heard little about lexis, word-study. They are more and more coming to sense the problem of the place of the word in linguistic structure.

During this interval progress in phonology and syntax was great, but further progress in these sub-disciplines will remain blocked until it is recognized that the prime functional unit of speech is the word, that the central problem of language theory is lexis. For syntax is nothing if not the syntax of words, and phonology is nothing if not the study of the pronunciation of words, whether alone, in syntax, or — at a great remove from speech — in their paradigms.

It is widely recognized, and correctly, that word-meaning is typically complicated by changes across time: *oil-cloth* is not oily any more, *steam-rollers* run on diesel propulsion now; the writing implements called 'feathers' in so many languages are no longer feathers. If syntax, morphology, and phonology are seen in their proper perspective as aspects of words, it follows that these levels of language structure, too, will incorporate the effects of change in time.

Speaking is not pure creation, but an uneven mix of creation and tradition. Those interested in the theory of language creativity, clear-

ly, must be able to discern the flotsam and jetsam of the past from spontaneous creations of the moment. History is thus a necessary precondition for theory construction in language, just as in biology, geology, astronomy, even in physics! — Your ship will be sunk by a mine if you haven't neutralized its magnetic field, which is determined by the ship's particular history (see George C. Homans, *The Nature of Social Science*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967, pp.92-93).

But history is not a mere inventory of static vestiges of the past, not mere antiquarianism. It is rather that theoretical framework in which we account for the perceptual dynamics that produce the changes and their complications in the first place.

The articles reprinted in this volume represent an attempt to illuminate, on the basis of particular lexical studies, the dynamics of perception and word-meaning, of language and mind.