

Foreword by Raimo Anttila

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

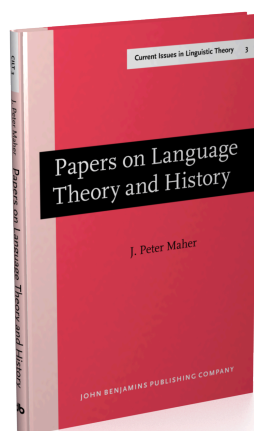
J. Peter Maher

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FOREWORD

Das Wort ist das wichtigste Element der Sprache; weder der Laut noch der Satz sind von so grosser Bedeutung. Beobachten wir ein Kind bei seinen ersten Sprechversuchen, so sagen wir dann: "es spricht", wenn es Wörter hervorbringt. Sprechen heisst also in erster Linie: Wörter gebrauchen.

Ernst Leisi (*Der Wortinhalt* 1967³:7)

J. Peter Maher's 1969 *Palimpsest* article (republished pp.1-32 below) was an extremely important statement at the time of its first appearance. It still is. The year 1969 however was not yet ripe for such a Sapirian approach. In those days one could still hear (and even read) statements to the effect that historical linguistics must start 'from scratch'. Linguistics was then under the spell of syntax and of transformational grammar in general; few 'younger' scholars would even think of jeopardizing their careers by expressing heterodox ideas, ideas which in fact had been well justified long before. A 'grand old man' of American linguistics at Harvard wondered whether the author was writing under a pseudonym, for no one would dare to publish such common-sense scholarship under his own name.

While writing my *Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (1972) I got Maher's above-mentioned article oven-fresh into my hands. His rehabilitation of the traditional linguistics was an important booster for my own efforts in a similar direction. This became evident to me when I inspected my own final product: the bibliography (p.416) contains more references to Maher than to any other single au-

thor. This is all the more significant, because I had started out with a bibliography over three times larger than the published one. Since at that time much of Maher's work was still unpublished, and because it later appeared in channels perforce not touched by 'mainstream' linguistics, I have often been at a loss when asked where one can actually get acquainted with Maher's ideas. The present volume goes a long way toward the elimination of that difficulty. Yet this book is centered only on language theory and history. Maher has written on other topics as well (cf. the list of his publications, pp.161-63). Nonetheless we get the essence of his work here.

Maher's erudite style and often caustic wit, coupled with a bold conception of linguistics as part of the total human condition, has not failed to arouse feeling. (A. Zwicky, *Language Sciences* 27.51 [1973], objected that such style be "permitted only to certified geniuses on special occasions".) In semiotic terms his writing is provocative, i.e. it triggers (re)actions. He has been a thorn in the side to two groups of scholars. The most conservative Indo-Europeanists let on privately, if not in print, that he wields too much bold theory; they suggest that he forgets the facts. On the contrary, Maher indeed shows that theory makes facts and that you cannot have historical facts without theory (cf. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena* 1963²:17) and that accepted views of the facts are not seldom in violation of the real facts themselves. Some of the pieces below treat etymological problems that were often considered unresolved (e.g., pp.35-48, 85-106, 127-41). Maher often shows that in fact one of the existing suggestions is correct when one applies not establishment dogma but 'sociological realism' and known sound laws. So this is hardly 'too much theory', but a consequent accounting of the relevant facts.

The second group whose investments have not only been threatened by Maher, but put under the suspicion of being counterfeit money, are the transformational-generative grammarians. Partisan sentiment here insinuates that since Maher masters a wealth of data and does not pre-

sent his results with mathematical formulations, he has nothing to say for 'Theory'. Yet these 'Theorists' typically abandon the very ideas that Maher has trained his guns on; they then pick up ideas resembling his, though always later, invariably less sharply focussed, and lacking his documentation. His attention to facts leads to new Theory; his demand for Theory leads to retrieval of obscured facts.

I admit that the above polarization into two extreme groups of critics cannot be well documented in their writings; nonetheless, it represents a valid assessment of the scene from 1969 to the late 1970s. For the historian of linguistics, the problem is that the parties involved appear unwilling to commit their feelings to permanent record. The rare exception is Zwicky (1973, above), and Maher's devastating reply (*Language Sciences* 28.30-31 [Dec. 1973]) demonstrates why his detractors are hesitant to cross swords with him.

The following papers, when read with an open mind, provide a strong and valid theoretical point of view. For the youngest generation of linguists, who need more than they get from the usual sources, I will highlight the main points of Maher's argument as I see them.

I have chosen Ernst Leisi's opening words as a motto for this foreword. Maher begins his theory right where the child begins, also with words, words full of sound and glory. In the history of linguistics, dictionaries come before grammars in the 'pre-scientific', common-sense, charting of languages. But linguistics based on the word has not been popular in America since the 1930s. Still, such conceptions are now gaining ground again, typically among former proponents of 'abstract' syntax-based models.

Karl Bühler (*Sprachtheorie* 1965²:170) offered a convincing case in favor of the primacy of the word: subjects were able to restore the original text from randomly arranged lexical lists. A parallel with classical and modern physics makes the point very clear. The former maintained, as once formulated by Einstein for a lay audience, that if things are removed from the world, time and space will remain. But ac-

According to Einstein, time and space disappear with the removed things. Transformational grammarians, as linguistic Newtonians, have maintained that if words are removed, syntax remains, and that in fact this empty syntax is the true locus of creativity. Maher's position is the counterpart of Einstein's: remove the words and syntax disappears too.

The above paragraph should not be misunderstood, either as pertaining to Einstein or to Maher. Einstein did not support the primacy of (isolated) things as such, but that of the field: things are manifestations of the field, they are not entities in themselves. Similarly, Maher's conception encompasses cultural fields in an explicit way; words are not in themselves independent entities but manifestations of language (including syntax) as part of culture. Most linguists will find it surprising to hear that field theory (also in linguistics) started very soon after the neogrammarian 'revolution'. Maher's position can in fact be regarded as a modern development of Philipp Wegener's ideas (*Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*, 1885). Wegener maintained that percepts and thought formations are dynamic entities that struggle for a place in consciousness and interact according to definite principles within the framework of the *Sprechsituation* embedded in the total *Kultursituation*. These principles require the abandonment of word-level meaning invariance; Maher speaks of 'semantic investiture' of words dependent on the total context: words bring certain semantic features to the syntax, but certain other features are acquired only in a given syntagma, a syntagma motivated by our perception of the syntax of things in the world.

Thus Maher's position in no way entails a denial of the importance of syntax. Rather, it puts syntax in the right perspective, as part of field theory. Maher also points out that transformational 'theory' is admittedly a fiction. It is thus not an epistemologically valid theory, or even hypothesis. He does not deny the usefulness of fictions in the *Vaihingerian* sense, but calls a spade a spade: a fiction is a fiction. Some fictions are heuristic, hence scientific, while others are unscientific, because not heuristic. Some are plain nonsense. But in any case,

explanations are not fictions, cannot be fictions. Here theories must be facts.

Maher avoids the theoretical and practical difficulties of the old synchrony/diachrony distinction, which has been such a stumbling block for transformational grammar. His linguistics is properly pan-, meta-, or achronic. He shows that in a field theory the synchrony/diachrony division is arbitrary, unnecessary, and harmful to the theory. Paradoxically, his position is historical in the sense that he acknowledges history as the human universal. He cites Ortega y Gasset's drastic "Man has no nature: what he has is history" (quoted in Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving* 1962:18). He points out to aficionados of innatism that the faculty for 'history' - or call it 'culture' or 'tradition' - is mankind's one great species-specific, innate - and forgotten - universal. Where fashion conflates language histology with history, Maher's system liberates speakers from having to repeat history, by - paradoxically - making it explicit that speakers are heirs to a tradition that works on them, and of those origins they need to know nothing. Having a language is like inheriting a fortune that you did not have to earn for yourself. To explain how this works, however, requires the theoretician to do his history homework, or he will falsify creation.

One can also say that *handlungstheoretisch*, i.e., according to the theory of action, the diachronic viewpoint is conceptually primary in that language is characteristically used to influence (future) action or to report past action. Strict synchrony is rather peripheral, and in fact 'uninteresting', to use a fashionable technical term. Words as symbols free us from time and place. This does not mean synchrony in the traditional sense. History is necessary for true explanation, since static description is only that and not explanation.

Particularly in his more recent work, not included in this volume, Maher has stressed the theoretical fact that "every phenomenon is attended also by an epiphenomenon. *Pitch-black* for example means not only 'black as pitch', it also means - epiphenomenally - 'very black'" (*Current*

Progress in Historical Linguistics 1976:232), and can thus lead to forms like *pitch-white* 'very white'. The explicit principle first appears in germ in the epilogue of his paper on Latin *aquila* (pp.51-78 below), rejected by *Language* as early as 1968. As an implicit principle it is found in his earliest work, as presented by the paper on the name of the Slavs (pp.107-19) and the related study of the paradigm of such ethnic names in Slavic (pp.121-26).

The past flits here by the speaker into future without a synchronic mooring, as it were. The following papers will show Maher's skill in taking linguistic symbols, words, into his hands, and reenacting larger cultural situations from them. Certainly this would not be possible without viable theory, and Maher is in fact able to reconstruct the *Sprachgeföhle* of speakers dead for thousands of years. This cannot be achieved with 'innate tacit knowledge', but only with talent, rich facts, and a persuasive theoretical argument. It would not be necessary, either, if synchronic rule systems really 'mirrored' history.

The total situational motivation is Maher's frame for the study of historical syntax, as is required in a field-theory conception. His article on Spanish-Italian *bravo* (pp.143-59) is a lucid modern statement on theoretical historical syntax. It shows characteristically the ease with which Maher steps into syntax from lexicology. What his work in fact says, without saying it, is that the syntax of natural language is based on the syntax of perception, a requirement which is explicit in Uhlan V. Slagle's synthesis and elaboration of philosophical and psychological work. Why is it easy to miss the fact that this article is perhaps the best modern one on historical syntax? It is because prevailing syntactic theory is like establishment physics, which presents itself as a branch of mathematics. But Bertrand Russell, no less, has written: "Physics is mathematical not because we know so much about the physical world, but because we know so little: it is only its mathematical properties that we can discover" (*An Outline of Philosophy* 1927:163). With justification Maher maintains that the limitations of mathematical models

are greatest in the study of natural language, precisely because natural language is indeed isomorphic with all other natural systems. His 'program', as the fashion calls it, for the mechanisms of syntactic change is simple and unspectacular, since he looks for what works, not for the tinsel that attracts the naïve: the two-page list (171-72) in Carl D. Buck's *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (1933) for instance says more than volumes of transformational-generative historical linguistics. Already a decade before that K. Bühler (thus well before his *Sprachtheorie* of 1934) was pointing out that Hermann Paul had delineated all the possible syntactic means in his *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (1880: 5th ed. 1920: latest repr. 1975). What Maher achieves is not due to a flashy notational jargon but a closer look into the total situation. As long as the century-old theory works, it can be kept and developed. Curiously enough, this long and well-founded tradition is ignored and little known today. It is not Maher who is out of date; he is one of the few who has really done his homework. Those who are out of date are the generative grammarians; it is they who have failed to profit from the basic work of the last two hundred years.

Maher has for instance taken his lessons from Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). They argue strongly against hypostatizations like the 'deep structures', or 'underlying forms' (UFOs in Maher's notation), of generative grammar. "What's wrong with treating relations as things?" a critic once called out to me. Maher answered him by noting that when medical science hypostatizes 'disease', takes it as an independently existing thing rather than a relation between, say, viruses and host bodies, the result is death: patients die. (See Maher's full argument on this, regarding smallpox, in *Forum Linguisticum* 3, 1977) - In linguistics patients do not die, but many semesters are wasted in mastering 'theories' that become 'inoperative' overnight. And millions of tax dollars are wasted on research on (TG) hypostatizations: textbooks costing more millions, based on this 'research', will be bought by school-boards and used by pupils and teachers who have to strain their credence

to learn that "there really is a *g* sound in *sign*". (Those who cannot believe this will certainly think linguists a weird bunch with funny ideas.)

For generative phonology and semantics the article on Indo-European **pet-* (pp.127-41) is devastating. Maher shows that the surface structures for this family of words have remained singularly stable for well over four millennia, whereas the 'deep structures' have drastically shifted. This is the reverse of generativist doctrine. More recently, his study of this word-family has extended to such things as wagons and vehicular spring suspensions and their terminology,* and he has announced a wider program of *Wörter-und-Sachen* treatment of wheeled vehicles, but even with the current selection Maher does indeed vindicate the *Wörter-und-Sachen* method as a theoretically valid endeavor. In the *bravo* article in particular (pp.143-59) Maher in fact phrases the goals of etymological research in the same terms as grammar construction. In both one has to pick out the 'correct' solution, or description, according to considerations of simplicity and naturalness. But this simplicity is not formalistic symbol-tallying, and the naturalness involved does not mean 'agreeing with the investigator's expectations', as in current linguistics. Rather, simplicity and naturalness refer to the proper aspects of the total field, they serve synthetic requirements, not analytic aggregates. When parts fall into place we arrive at explanation.

It is now time to debunk the faddish idea that encyclopedic knowledge is (or leads to) mere atheoretical listing of facts. It is indeed generalized knowledge, i.e., theory in the best sense. And here we have

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Cf. J. Peter Maher, "Change in Lexical Underlying Forms: The language and culture Gestalten of German *Feder* 'feather' and 'spring'", *Current Progress in Historical Linguistics (Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Tuscon, Arizona, 12-16 January 1976)*, ed. by William M. Christie, Jr., 389-400. Cf. also Maher's comments on the papers by R. Anttila, "The Reconstruction of Sprachgefühl" (215-31), Adam and Valerie Makkai, "The Nature of Linguistic Change and Modern Linguistic Theories" (235-63), and Yakov Malkiel, "The Interlocking of Etymology and Historical Grammar" (285- to 307) on pp. 231-32, 264-65, and 307, respectively.

a philosophical justification of philology, from August Boeckh's program formulated a century ago (1877) but in use even fifty years before that. Maher represents philology honorably. A dozen years after he drafted the first of these papers linguistics has begun to turn to the lexicon (as a new breakthrough!); the total cultural situation acting as a single interacting whole is bound to get increasing attention. Maher's efforts to correct the course of linguistics have to be credited as having been among the first. Now his work also deserves attention because it is still far in advance of the late-comers to the study of the lexicon. Unlike phrase-structure (PS) grammars, lexicology calls for critical, integrative thinking about words and things. Rule-writing of PS-grammars and transformations is merely an exercise in playing back analysis, as if such were synthesis, or creation.

Lastly, let me note that Maher does not stand alone. We already have Adam Makkai's sketch of a pragmo-ecological grammar (grafted on stratificational grammar) and his monumental work on idioms. This spells out pragmatics (à la William James) and ecology (Einar Haugen's term for the field conception from the point of view of language in social context). Maher, like Collingwood (*The Meaning of Nature*, 1945/60), also argues expressly for ecological models and against the machine theory of transformational-generative grammar. Maher's line falls within the gestaltist conception prevalent in Slagle's and my recent work for instance, where the innate element is the human perceptual faculty, not an ad hoc "deep structure" based on the immediate-constituent analysis of simple sentences in English.

For Maher language is not the rigid determinant of thought that Whorf saw in it, and which some today - to the detriment of just causes - see as sources of racism and sexism. Language is not fixed and independent of speakers' wills. As against generativists, who see creation in petrified relics or as residing in recursive rules, or who claim the absolute novelty of all utterances, Maher sees language as a complex that can only be understood with a dialectical frame of mind: speaking a lan-

guage involves mastering, then practicing, a tradition, a culture, and then innovating within that frame. We, as Sapir (1921:37) observed, have inherited a rigidly given tradition, but with it we re-create the familiar and we can, when we need to, create new products in response to the real world in which we live. Only within such a theoretical model is it possible to understand, with sanity and good humor, that the oldest bridge in Paris for example is called *Le Pont Neuf*.

Santa Monica, California

Raimo Anttila

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