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Preface

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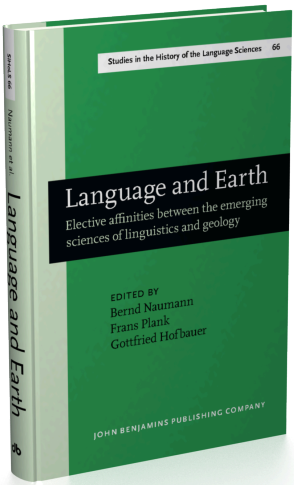

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PREFACE

Working on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about the origin of language (Bernd Naumann) and on comparative grammar and typology in the Enlightenment and after (Frans Plank), we were not in the least surprised to find that the study of language in these days tended not to be pursued in isolation from the emerging sciences of man and other living things. It is, after all, conventional wisdom that linguistic (pre-)historians and comparatists did not turn a deaf ear, for instance, to evolutionary theorizing before and after Darwin, and were wont to borrow ideas or at least terminology from biological taxonomy and in particular comparative anatomy, with some cross-fertilization also going the other way.

What we had not quite reckoned with was that there would be any noteworthy affinities with yet another department of the study of nature, the fledgling science of the earth. Our suspicion that these affinities were actually remarkably close, however, grew stronger the more points of contact between the sciences of language and of the earth were coming to our attention, without us initially searching for them in any systematic manner. The kinds of liaisons that we began to take mental note of were diverse.

There were individual scholars whose curiosity or expertise, amateur or professional, extended to both language and the earth—most prominently Abraham Gottlob Werner and James Hutton, two founding fathers of modern geology. Or, also on the biographical side, there were specialists in philology or linguistics maintaining close relations with geological colleagues, and vice versa—including the brothers Whitney, William Dwight and Josiah Dwight Jr. There were the unmistakably parallel desires for knowledge about very early and possibly original states and processes, with linguists and geologists relying on fundamentally similar

methodological principles in their attempts to reconstruct prehistory—in particular that of uniformitarianism. There were interdependent changes of the time scale for prehistorical developments, with the beginnings of language being moved backwards as geological time deepened. There were structual concepts that seemed about equally suitable for the analysis of language and of the earth—including those of strata and, on a grander scale, the idea of the domains under study representing well-integrated systems of interlocking parts. Diachronic processes and entire chains of development were likewise conceived of as being conceptionally analogous—with changes undergone by language and by the earth, for instance, being alternatively destructive and reconstructive, furthering a cyclical rather than linear view of linguistic and geological history. There were, finally, comparable problems facing the classifiers of linguistic and geological phenomena, distinctions at all levels of generality here being even fuzzier than in the animal and plant kingdoms.

What our casual observations along such lines were, thus, promising to add up to was the prospect of a complex web of relationships between sciences whose subject matters could not, on the face of it, be more dissimilar. These affinities, so far as we had been able to document them (with Naumann meanwhile aided by a geologist, Gottfried Hofbauer), seemed to us to have received considerably less coverage in histories of linguistics and of geology than they deserved. To be sure, the common denominator of uniformitarian methodology had long been on the historiographical record (see e.g. Wells 1973/74 and Christy 1983); the parallel deepening of linguistic and geological time had had more attention lately (e.g. in Rossi 1979); and some conceptual borrowings had been commented on (e.g. in Rudwick 1979). But there evidently was more to this inter- or transdisciplinary issue than had so far met the historians' eye.

Our own future research, following up the leads we had by then, would hopefully help determine just how much more there was to it. It seemed to us, however, that the magnitude of the issue, with many ramifications of the relations between the sciences of language and of the earth yet to be explored, also called for collaborative efforts on a larger scale, ideally involving historians of linguistics as well as of geology. Our (Naumann and Plank's) planning of some kind of collaborative endeavour began in late 1987, and it soon turned out that a fair number of colleagues, upon being introduced to the research we had so far been doing, could be persuaded to take a closer look at a historiographical topic, at its core or its periphery, that may at first have seemed unusual to many. Our concerted effort then culminated in a conference which the Werner Reimers Foundation enabled us to convene at Bad Homburg (Germany) on 2-5 October 1989.

With the present volume we offer a selection of the papers prepared for that occasion, revised in light of discussions at the conference. In this manner, we humbly hope, there is opened to our view a subject interesting to man who thinks; a subject [...] which may afford the human mind both information and entertainment. This encounter of language with earth is, however, a première, and débuts, like first offences, are seldom flawless.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Werner-Reimers Foundation for inviting us to Bad Homburg from various parts of the terraqueous and multilingueous globe, and to Konrad von Krosigk and his staff for being such magnificent hosts to the conference from which this volume derives. Our series editor and our publishers have done much to smooth the way into print. Support of Naumann and Hofbauer's work from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft is also gratefully acknowledged, as is the assistence that Hofbauer, who was mainly responsible for rendering the manuscript camera-

ready, has had from Petra Ramming, Annette Spang, and Ute Stöhr. Plank takes the blame for some of Naumann's and the abstracts' and for all of Wagenbreth's and his own English, and, with James Hutton, most of the credit for this preface.

It is with deep sadness that we record the death of Thomas Frank, who, with characteristic courage and serenity, gave his last paper, on "James Hutton's phonetics and his geology", at the Bad Homburg conference but did not live to complete it.

Bernd Naumann—Frans Plank—Gottfried Hofbauer

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