

Presentist, trajectorial and heliocentric approaches to teaching the history of linguistics

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Abstract. This paper considers options for positioning the present in relation to the past in teaching the history of linguistics. It proposes three approaches as having been demonstrably practiced (presentist, trajectorial and heliocentric), plus a fourth (antiquarian) that is less likely to be publicized. They are exemplified and explored through a look at how the history of linguistics has been taught *within* the history of linguistics, in particular by William Dwight Whitney (a presentist), Ferdinand de Saussure (a trajectorialist) and Noam Chomsky (a heliocentrist). Key questions that arise include: What strategies and tactics can be inferred from their treatment of their predecessors? And to what extent can the teacher determine the course orientation, given that students, coming to it with their various backgrounds, experiences and expectations of the science, will receive it in different ways?

Keywords: history of linguistics; scientific ideologies; William Dwight Whitney; Ferdinand de Saussure; Noam Chomsky

1. Introduction. Teaching the history of a subject involves, implicitly if not explicitly, positioning its current state relative to how it used to be. A teacher who presents the status quo as the pinnacle of scientific soundness is likely to have a different sense of its past than one who is dissatisfied with the current state, who sees the holes in the scientific cheese, as it were. Over several decades of interacting with colleagues who teach and research the history of linguistics, I have come to see us as differing between those who

- (1) start from the current state of the field, and construct a narrative of how we got here,
- (2) take some decisive historical moment, at any time between antiquity and the recent past, as the fulcrum of their account of the field's development.

Within (1) a second division, subtler in nature, separates those who

- (1a) base their syllabus on the burning conceptual and methodological issues of the day, reconstructing their genesis and evolution – moving from now to then,
- (1b) focus on the trajectory, rather than its end points – moving from then to now.

Approach (1a), which I call **presentist**, tends to align with faith in steady scientific progress, which, to be sure, most students find appealing. (1b), the **trajectorial** approach, does not necessarily question progress, but is less likely to construct a narrative of *steady* progress. Rather than emphasizing the brilliance of *How We Work Now*, trajectorists hope that the trajectory will point the way to *How We Work Next*.¹

As for (2), in calling it **heliocentric** I take my cue from the French syntactician Lucien Tesnière (1893–1954), who analysed sentences, even extremely complex ones, as having a single *soleil* ‘sun’ (Tesnière 1933: 233), with all other elements best understood in terms of

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¹ Let me be clear that I am not proposing these as exclusive kinds, just as a terminology for discussing differences in approach that I have observed with some regularity. I fully expect such commentary as this paper may generate to include critical questioning of the categories by citing examples that blur the lines. That is what typologies are for.

their relation to it. The heliocentric approach, like the trajectorial, does not necessarily deny progress over the long term, but does refute its steadiness.

Some teaching of the history of linguistics might be characterized as (3) **antiquarian**, though I have never heard anyone stake a claim to that approach. Even if teaching the history of, say, Indian or Arabic or Latin linguistics, one would still be likely to cover modern interpretations of the medieval grammars, but there may be people who prefer to stick just to the original ancient and medieval sources. That leaves us with this typology:

(1a) Presentist (1b) Trajectorial (2) Heliocentric [(3) Antiquarian]

In suggesting a link between the orientations and views on scientific progress, I imply that the choice of orientation can be strategic, in that it can support a particular view of the field which the teacher wants to transmit. My expectation would be, pending any evidence to the contrary, that the choice of orientation is not *just* strategic, but honestly reflects how the teacher envisions the current state of the field and assesses the stages it passed through along the way. Someone whose linguistic work falls outside the current mainstream may well trace a trajectory in which approaches related to their own are highlighted, perhaps in order to establish a scientific pedigree for it. If Noam Chomsky's *Cartesian linguistics* (1966), with its heliocentric orientation, was partly motivated by the desire to establish a pedigree more venerable than that of the structuralist generation (as per Joseph 2010), I see nothing to suggest that Chomsky does not believe entirely in the history as he perceives it.

2. Examples. Presentist histories are not hard to find: open most introductory linguistics textbooks, and you may well come across one – though as shown by Margaret Thomas in her survey in this issue, some textbooks have no history section. Baker & Hengeveld (2012) is a case in point;² in its index, the only linguists born before the 20th century are Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), and the entire reference to the latter is: ‘The arbitrary and conventional character of the word is – according to de Saussure (1916) – a basic property of natural language’ (p. 240), which is reasonably accurate, if minimalist.³ Saussure does not make it into the 4th edition of Yule's *The study of language* (2010), but Sapir is joined there by Sir William Jones (1746–1794) and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), plus Paul Broca (1824–1880) and Carl Wernicke (1848–1905).

2.1. HOW SAUSSURE TAUGHT THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS. In his own course on general linguistics at the University of Geneva, Saussure was a trajectorist.⁴ The posthumously assembled *Cours de linguistique générale* here represents quite faithfully what is found in his

² I use this and Yule (2010) as convenience samples – they were the two introductory textbooks which colleagues in offices near mine had on hand the day I was drafting this, lending the sample a certain aleatory magic. We do not use a textbook in our introductory course, but assign readings drawn from a wide range of sources.

³ In Saussure (1916), the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign (which is not limited to words) is indeed a basic property of language (‘natural’ here is anachronistic), though with important provisos about how the language system exists in order to limit arbitrariness, producing ‘relative arbitrariness’ (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 67–70, 131–134).

⁴ The history of linguistics was covered most extensively in his second course (1908–09), and more briefly in the third (1910–11). The source materials are cited here in the standard form of reference to Engler's critical edition, CLG/E (Saussure 1968 [1916], for these lectures pp. 1–18; translations of these are mine). For the early 19th century Saussure largely followed the narrative laid out in a course on the History of Modern Linguistics given by Hermann Osthoff (1847–1909), which he attended during his first term at the University of Leipzig (see Joseph 2012: 194–195). His 34 pages of notes on Osthoff's course, held at the Bibliothèque de Genève, are dated November 1876, and cover just the first two ‘chapters’ of the course (as the notes label them), on the ‘History of the knowledge of Sanskrit in Europe’ and ‘The comparative science of languages; Fr. Bopp’. It appears that Saussure did not attend the following ‘chapters’ on ‘The historical science of languages; J. Grimm’ and

students' notes. Besides it being the natural instinct of a historian of linguistics to look to how things were done in the past, it is instructive to see how this founding figure of modern linguistics situated himself relative to his predecessors.

The *Cours* opens with the chapter 'A glance at the history of linguistics', a title taken from Saussure's notes and implying that much more could be said, but will not.⁵ It starts with the Greeks, and sweeps quickly forward to 'philology' in the late 18th century, before Franz Bopp (1791–1867) enters with 'comparative philology'. The word philology already smelt of the mausoleum, as Saussure knew when choosing it; giving your intellectual ancestors a designation, however venerable, which you do not apply to yourself is a powerful way of placing distance between you and those who, doing more or less what you do, got there first.⁶ The philological 'there' they got to is not our linguistic 'here'.

After discussing Bopp at some length, Saussure turns to Grimm and a handful of other German linguists whom he calls 'emulators of Bopp' (CLG/E IIC93).⁷ He deems August Schleicher (1821–1868) 'the most important after Bopp in this first period' and 'the first to codify the science founded by Bopp', and says that Schleicher 'marks the second half of this first period' (CLG/E IIC95, IIR133), about which Saussure is generally disparaging. This retrospective creation of 'periods' – the equivalent of generations – is another common tactic of historical positioning (see Joseph 2015). He pushes this further by using the word *école* 'school' (Saussure 1995: 91–92).⁸ The great failing of this school was that 'It failed to seek out the nature of its object of study' (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 3, based on CLG/E IIR145, G2.40b). That search is going to be Saussure's prime concern. This historical introduction performs some of the functions of the literature review in a dissertation: it establishes a gap that needs to be filled, while also letting the author perform his knowledge of the field and its development, thereby qualifying himself to do the filling.

In both the second and third courses Saussure says that 'Not until around 1870 did scholars begin to seek out the principles that govern the life of languages' (1959 [1916]: 4, based on D2; also in IIC3). Notebooks from the second course show him wavering between 1870 and 1875 (CLG/E IIR135, G2.36a, IIC97) – the later date being just 33 years prior to the lecture he was giving, and a year after he himself started studying linguistics. Such a short time span might seem to mark him as a presentist, except that he is not claiming that contemporary linguistics has established 'the principles that govern the life of languages', only that it has made a start toward seeking them. We could call him a trajectorist with presentist tendencies; the mark of a true presentist is a triumphalism in describing the current science which we do not find in Saussure.

'The philosophical science of languages; W. Humboldt', or the final one, 'The fusion of the first two disciplines', i.e. the comparative and historical.

⁵ In placing this section at the start the editors of the *Cours* followed the structure of Saussure's third course, although the material derives mainly from the second, where it came later on (lecture of 21 Jan. 1909; see Saussure 1997: 70–94, 151–161).

⁶ Turner (2014) brilliantly traces the centuries-long splintering of 'philology' into the various disciplines, including linguistics, which together make up what we now call the humanities. On the power of designation, see Bourdieu (1992: 239–243 *et passim*).

⁷ The notes labelled IIC and IIIC are those of Saussure's student Émile Constantin, which did not come to light until the 1950s and so were not included among those used by the editors of the *Cours*. Neither were those of Charles Patois contained in Saussure (1995). Riedlinger's notes are IIR, D = Georges Dégallier, G = Léopold Gautier.

⁸ This word is in Riedlinger's notes only – first with reference to the Neogrammarians, with a quibble about the word not being appropriate to apply to them – but then he continues to apply it to them and their predecessors.

He credits Romance linguistics with marking the ‘origin’ of ‘linguistics proper’ (1959 [1916]: 4–5, based on D2; also in IIC3) – again, just the origin.⁹ Then, ‘A first impetus was given by the American scholar Whitney, the author of *Life and Growth of Language* (1875)’ (1959 [1916]: 5, based on IIR160, G2.44a; also in IIC115–116), and soon followed up by the Neogrammarians, led by Saussure’s Leipzig teachers Osthoff and Karl Brugmann (1848–1919), with whom he had strained relations. In a manuscript (Saussure 2002: 259) he wrote that he ‘revered’ William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894),¹⁰ whom he met in Berlin in 1879 (Joseph 2012: 254–256), and Saussure will later reiterate Whitney’s key role in setting linguistics on the right track – but will then distance himself from Whitney’s characterization of a language as an ‘institution’, on the grounds that this implies a deliberate creation (Saussure 1959 [1916]: 10, 76), and the possibility of deliberate change, both of which Saussure denies.

In these presentations of the history of linguistics certain tactics can be discerned, though of course just by inference. By placing the start of linguistics in the 1870s, Saussure was signalling to his students that he himself had been there at its birth. It is noteworthy too that not a single 19th-century French linguist figures in his history, only Germans, plus Jones and Whitney. The second course lecture has passing mentions of Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) for having deciphered the Zend language, and Michel Bréal (1832–1915) as the translator of Bopp, and one non-French Francophone is discussed: Geneva’s Adolphe Pictet (1799–1875), Saussure’s kinsman and early mentor (CLG/E IIR130, G2.37B, IIC93). All this is omitted from the opening chapter of the *Cours*, though later chapters will see passing mentions of a handful of French linguists and a more substantial discussion of Pictet’s work. Does lingering resentment of his not having been appointed to a chair during his decade of teaching at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris play a part? Impossible to say; but is it possible to teach entirely objectively a history in which one has been an actor, even (or especially) in a minor role?

2.2. HOW WHITNEY TAUGHT THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS. Whitney himself leaves the history of linguistics till the very end of his 1875 book. In addition to most of the names Saussure will cite, he says that ‘Rask in Denmark, Burnouf in France, and Ascoli in Italy, have most right to be mentioned on the same page with the great German masters’ (p. 318). Yet Whitney believes that ‘a German science of language cannot be said yet to have an existence’ (p. 319). Linguists remain for him within ‘comparative philology’. Considering that the preceding 300 pages of this book have actually laid out the fullest vision of a modern linguistic science to that date, this is presentism, even if in the guise of a sort of futurism.

One other feature of both Whitney’s and Saussure’s historical summaries merits note: their virtual silence concerning a figure widely considered one of the great 19th-century linguists, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Saussure uttered the name so quickly that one student jotted it down and others did not.¹¹ Whitney (1872: 273) wryly calls Humboldt ‘a man whom it is nowadays the fashion to praise highly, without understanding or even reading him’. The typological approach developed by Humboldt was still very much in vogue in Whitney’s time, and indeed in Whitney (1875: 21–22) we read that

⁹ The *Cours* mentions Germanic alongside Romance, based on just one of the three sources; and only Romance appears in IIC3.

¹⁰ ‘*L’Américain Whitney, que je révère*’, translated as ‘for whom I have the utmost respect’ in Saussure (2009 [2002]: 185). Saussure’s references to Whitney are often preceded by ‘the American’ – an implicit honour, I expect, because American linguists were so thin on the ground in comparison with their European (especially German) counterparts. One set of lecture notes records Saussure saying here ‘*Whitney* (neither German nor philologist)’ (CLG/E IIR160; Saussure 1995: 92)).

¹¹ It is in Riedlinger’s notes (Saussure 1997: 72) but not in Patois’s.

Every single language has thus its own peculiar framework of established distinctions, its shapes and forms of thought, into which, for the human being who learns that language as his ‘mother-tongue’, is cast the content and product of the mind, his store of impressions, however acquired, his experience and knowledge of the world. This is what is sometimes called the ‘inner form’ of language – the shape and cast of thought, as fitted to a certain body of expression.

How extraordinary that Whitney does not cite Humboldt here or anywhere else in the book – a sign that the Humboldtian ‘inner form’ had passed into common linguistic currency. It is hard not to interpret the silence as a form of tactical distancing, yet this quote is virtually a profession of Humboldtian faith. Any distancing may have been as much or more from self-proclaimed Humboldtians (on whom see Joseph 2017) than from Humboldt himself.

2.3. HOW CHOMSKY (AND HIS SUCCESSORS) TAUGHT THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS. Again, Chomsky has famously been a heliocentrist, identifying a succession of figures from the past as the true founders of linguistic science, whose discoveries radiated light until being wrongly eclipsed by later doctrines, and which Chomsky claims to be restoring to their true and rightful place. This briefly included Saussure, until Chomsky read Humboldt, who has remained his brightest star, before, during and after his focus on the Port-Royal Grammarians in *Cartesian linguistics* (Chomsky 1966).¹²

Stephen Anderson’s contribution to the present issue includes a much needed history of the history of linguistics course at MIT, nicknamed ‘Bad Guys’ by students, who were required to take it. It was clearly a presentist course when Chomsky first taught it in 1961–63, prior to his reorientation as a heliocentrist. Despite the harsh critical reception of Chomsky (1966), it gave an unprecedented impetus to work in the history of linguistics, including the founding of the Longman series *Classics of Linguistics*, planning for which began just months after Chomsky’s book was published and included an invitation to him to prepare an edition of the Port-Royal Grammar (Joseph forthcoming). But Chomsky’s reorientation did not stop the MIT history of linguistics course from having a presentist approach when taught by Paul Postal and then in a very different incarnation, by Paul Kiparsky, as Anderson relates. The rubric for the course quoted by Anderson ends with ‘Contemporary trends and their immediate backgrounds’, which is a perfect description of the presentist approach.

3. Conclusion. My final point is that the orientation of a course is not entirely in the hands of whoever teaches it. Neither in law nor in literary studies is textual meaning located solely in authorial intent; it is co-constructed with the text’s receivers. I intend my own history of linguistics course to be trajectorial, though I am aware that my research trajectory may incline my students to experience the course as heliocentric – Plato, Saussure, Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), Emile Benveniste (1902–1976) and indeed Chomsky all get plenty of attention – and while in my mind you cannot have half a dozen stars in a solar system, students could be forgiven for imagining that Saussure is the epicenter of my linguistic galaxy. The recently published *Cambridge history of linguistics* (Waugh et al. eds 2023) was my first experience of having my trajectorial orientation bump up against a publisher’s presentism: CUP made clear that they wanted the book to be weighted toward What We Do Now. And there are advantages to that in teaching: I expect that more students will be engaged by a presentist approach than by others – with the proviso that students will

¹² The eclipse of Saussure by Humboldt can be followed in the four published versions of Chomsky’s plenary paper to the 9th International Congress of Linguists in 1962 (Chomsky 1962, 1964a b & c). Chomsky (1964a) is closest to the (1962) version; (1964b) contains all of the (1964a) revisions plus a considerable amount of new material on the history of linguistics; and (1964c) reproduces (1964b) with some very minor adjustments (see further Joseph 2002: 147–155). On Galileo as another of Chomsky’s distant scientific suns, see Collins (2023).

be more engaged when teachers are teaching to their own natural inclinations and strengths. That includes antiquarians as well, so to any reader who is that way inclined, I end with this conciliatory shout out to you. Or to thee, as you no doubt prefer.

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