

Goals for teaching the history of linguistics

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Abstract. A history of linguistics course is as an opportunity to revisit some important linguistic concepts students have learned. Students are usually exposed to the larger goals of linguistic theory, but it is not the primary focus in syntax and phonology courses, for example. By examining the historical development of these concepts, e.g., phonemes, transformations, universal grammar, linguistic relativity etc., a history of linguistics course can be used to explore the *nature of linguistics* and the connections between linguistics and other disciplines.

Keywords. history of linguistics; teaching; linguistic theory

I want to begin by mentioning my unique situation at Oakland University. The history of linguistics course at Oakland University is the capstone and writing intensive course for the major. Since all seniors are required to take this course, I use this as an opportunity to revisit some important concepts they had learned. Also, there are some concepts that they might not have been exposed to at all. One goal for me in a history course is to expose the students to the larger goals of linguistic theory. They are often exposed to these larger goals in some classes, but it is neither the primary focus in syntax and phonology courses, for example, nor is there any guarantee how much exposure they receive. By examining the historical development of certain concepts, e.g., phonemes, transformations, universal grammar, linguistic relativity etc., I can concentrate on the goals of linguistic theory and the connections between linguistics and other disciplines. I believe that knowledge of the history of the field can greatly enhance the students' understanding of linguistics and inform their own work.

A history of linguistics course suffers many of the problems that arise in teaching the history of science, namely that students and departments feel that there are many other courses they ought to take. Many students do not feel that there is much value in learning the history of the field when compared to taking another theory class. I think one way to overcome this problem is by carefully considering the goals of a history of linguistics course. Rather than teaching a timeline of the development of linguistics, the idea should be for students to appreciate the *nature of linguistics* (which I will define later) by understanding how linguistics has developed.

Courses in phonology and syntax, in particular, are mostly concerned with teaching theory and the students are tested by applying the theory to specific problems. The students, as a result, become proficient with the constructs of the theory without necessarily understanding them. This is the classic problem of not being able to see the forest through the trees. Historical issues might arise in class in order to serve as the justification for changes in the theory, but not much more than that. For example, in phonology class I motivate stress as relative prominence by looking at problems posed by stress phonology for feature matrices but I don't test the students on this nor can this really be called historical. History, in such cases, is treated as a means to an end. A related problem that emerges is that students believe that the theory they have learned, whichever theory, is the only way to study linguistics. I also find that students often fail to have a proper understanding of certain the concepts they learn. For example, most students will define a phoneme

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as a sound that enters into a meaning contrast, but this ignores the psychological component of its definition and the justifications for its definition. A course in the history of linguistics is an opportunity to examine the development of concepts such as the phoneme and emphasize its more abstract aspects.

My goal of providing the students with the opportunity to delve deeper into certain concepts is embedded in a larger goal, which is to understand the *nature of linguistics* (based on the *nature of science*, a term I adapted from science education). There is no single definition of the nature of science so I have taken the AAAS 1990 definition cited by Abd-El-Khalick and Lederman (2000). The main tenets of the nature of linguistics that I try to explore are the following: (1) A science of language is possible but it cannot answer all the questions pertaining to language, (2) linguistics is empirically and logically based but it also involves imagination and inventive explanations, (3) linguistics should be understood in its philosophical context and its connection to other disciplines.

The nature of linguistics naturally emerges from a course in the history of the field. It is not possible to discuss developments in linguistics without discussing the goal of creating a scientific study of language. By studying how the field has developed, students understand that linguistics, like any science, is a process. This allows students to consider fundamental issues, which should lead them to question aspects of the syntactic or phonological theories they are taught. Students rarely, if ever, see alternative frameworks for syntax and phonology. A history course is the opportunity for students to explore alternatives.

My history of linguistics course is organized in a rather straightforward manner. I begin by discussing Greek views of language and the Indian and Arabic grammatical traditions. I then discuss the Neo-grammarians, American and European structuralism, and generative grammar. Part of understanding the nature of linguistics is understanding that attempts to develop a science of language do not occur in a vacuum and that scholars are inspired by ideas from other disciplines, for example, Saussure's language as a social fact (Culler 1976) or Chomsky's (1957) use of formal grammars. This can be used to stimulate discussions of inventive explanations in linguistics. Students should learn to appreciate, for example, the leap from formal grammars to TGG among the other elements mixed in. At the same time, this is an opportunity for students to consider how the same premises can lead to other possible outcomes. For example, by following the development of contrast from Saussure (Culler 1976) to Jakobson (based on Jakobson, Fant, and Halle 1952) to its use today students can imagine different ways contrast can be implemented.

I make two departures from a typical history course. When discussing linguistic relativity in the section we do on Sapir, I digress and we read a few chapters from John McWhorter's (2014) *Language Hoax*, which includes a critique of neo-Whorfian research. Given that linguistic relativity is a contentious issue it important to discuss the debate without necessarily resolving it.

The first two thirds of the course follows the typical progression through linguistics. I stop at generative grammar circa 1970. At that point we read Chomsky's (1959) review of Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior* and spend the rest of the semester examining the principles of Chomsky's linguistic program, that is, innateness and universal grammar (Chomsky 1965, 1986). This includes reading Fodor's (1989) views on modularity. The course ends with reading excerpts from Rumelhart and McClelland (1985) and Pinker and Prince's (1988) reply.

Discussing UG and its consequences offers an excellent opportunity to discuss different philosophical traditions (rationalism and empiricism) and psychological traditions (behaviorism and the emergence of cognitive psychology) that have influenced linguistics. These theories are raised at various points throughout the semester, for example, it is impossible to discuss

Bloomfield's structuralism as presented in a textbook, such as Seuren (1998), without raising behaviorism.

As I already mentioned, a history of linguistics course can be construed as a course on the goals of linguistics, which allows for digressions from a strict timeline. This might make the course more attractive to students.

Language is inextricably human and, as a result, many academic disciplines have sought to explain it. I am not aware of any course where the broad philosophical claims of linguistics are discussed. A history class seems to me the perfect opportunity for this type of discussion through linguistics' connections to psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and mathematics. Students are potentially in a much better position to evaluate, not just particular theories to which they might be exposed, but also Chomsky's generative enterprise and its concomitant claims about the mind.

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