

## Representation of the history of linguistics in American college textbooks, 1950–2020

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**Abstract.** Many students of linguistics get their first classroom exposure to the field in courses with titles like *Introduction to Linguistics* or *Survey of Linguistics*. Such courses commonly employ textbooks that communicate the scope and methods of the discipline, and tacitly set students' standards for what the discipline values. This article examines textbooks that have been employed from the 1950s to the early 21st century in U.S. college courses that introduce students to linguistics. The goal is to bring to light how the presence—or absence—of historical material shapes students' assumptions about the value of the history of linguistics.

**Keywords.** history of linguistics; teaching of linguistics; historical content of textbooks

**1. Introduction.** My topic is how textbooks that introduce U.S. college students to linguistics represent the history of the field. A course textbook can be a powerful tool for setting forth the scope, goals, and methods of a field to beginners. Olson (1980: 194) goes further, depicting textbooks as 'devices for putting ideas and beliefs above criticism'. How are U.S. college students oriented to the history of the discipline, on their first exposure to the scientific study of language? That is, when they exit a course like *Introduction to Linguistics*, are they primed to look at linguistic concepts, terms, and issues as having their own life histories—some assembled incrementally, some erupting suddenly then dropping out of sight, some periodically surfacing and submerging, some sliding laterally into linguistics from adjacent disciplines? Or are students socialized to believe that their attention need only go to present-day ideas and beliefs, which (although sometimes controversial or unsettled) are 'above criticism', thereby blunting whatever curiosity they may have about how the current field came to be what it is?<sup>1</sup>

**2. Method.** I approached this question by inspecting 26 textbooks surveying the discipline of linguistics, published between 1947 and 2021 and directed at the U.S. higher-education market. They all presuppose a readership approaching the study of language *ab initio*; they all address what their authors took to be the core terms, concepts, subfields, and sometimes applications of the linguistics of the day. By beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, I hoped to compare representations of the history of the discipline across a 70-year interval. As it turned out, although authors like Edgar Sturtevant (1875–1952) and H. A. Gleason (1917–2007) certainly presented different material to novices and harbored different presuppositions about language compared with scholars writing in the 2000s, their incorporation (or non-incorporation) of historical content differed little.

In each of these 26 books, I scrutinized the language authors used to present earlier language scholarship, and tried to read between the lines to determine what they implicitly transmitted to readers about its value. I semi-arbitrarily defined 'earlier' language scholarship to mean the study of language from at least 30 years prior to the publication of the text. I also looked for what was *not* present, that is, for where an author could have, but chose not to, provide a

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a both an outgrowth and a summary of Thomas (2016).

historical tableau. And I kept in mind that competition for space is always high, forcing authors to privilege certain information above many candidates.

**3. Four conventions in textbook representations of the history of linguistics.** Working through these complexities, I perceived four conventions. Some authors completely, or almost completely, erased the history of linguistics. Others infused textbooks with short, discontinuous, references to it—sparsely or prolifically. Still other authors segregated historical material into a separate section of their text. Finally, a few used the history of linguistics as a basic organizing principle.

Since at every step an author can decide whether to include or exclude historical material, a four-part taxonomy like this risks over-simplification, by imposing discrete categories on a multi-dimensional phenomenon. An alternative approach might be to analyze the content of a text into a scatterplot across four quadrants representing different treatments of historical material. The character of a textbook would then emerge as a pattern of observations of varying density across the four quadrants. In this brief report, however, I will make an overall assessment of each of the 26 books, sorting them into one of four semi-autonomous conventions for representing the history of linguistics, as depicted in Table 1.

Date 1st edition	Author	Title	Addit'l. eds.	No. of copies <sup>2</sup>
(ALMOST) FULL ERASURE OF HOL, $n = 9$				
1955	Gleason	<i>An introduction to descriptive linguistics</i>	2 eds	1755
1958	Hockett	<i>A course in modern linguistics</i>		1377
1972	Trager	<i>Language and languages</i>		474
1972	Wardhaugh	<i>Introduction to linguistics</i>	2 eds	840
1989	Finegan & Besnier	<i>Language: Its structure &amp; use</i>	7 eds	1200
1996	Napoli	<i>Linguistics: An introduction</i>		389
2006	Fasold & Connor-Linton (eds.)	<i>An introduction to language &amp; linguistics</i>	2 eds	587
2014	Genetti (ed.)	<i>How languages work</i>		346
2014	Hazen	<i>An introduction to language</i>		717
SCATTERED REFERENCES TO HOL, $n = 9$				
1947	Sturtevant	<i>Introduction to linguistic science</i>		1183
1964	Hall	<i>Introductory linguistics</i>		594
1974	Fromkin & Rodman	<i>An introduction to language</i>	11 eds	3911
1977	Greenberg	<i>A new invitation to linguistics</i>		507
1979	Akmajian <i>et al.</i>	<i>Linguistics: Intro. to lang. &amp; communication</i>	6 eds	3121
1985	Yule	<i>The study of language</i>	8 eds	3653
1989	O'Grady <i>et al.</i>	<i>Contemporary linguistics: An introduction</i>	6 eds	1449
2015	Rowe & Levine	<i>Concise introduction to language</i>	6 eds	438
2021	Bruhn de Garavito & Schwieter (eds.)	<i>Introducing linguistics: Theoretical &amp; applied approaches</i>		67

<sup>2</sup> Data retrieved from WorldCat.org, March 2024; this column gives the total number of copies with the same author and the same title reported to be held in libraries worldwide in all formats and editions, including ebooks, micro-forms, and translations.

SEGREGATION OF HoL, $n = 6$				
1962	Hughes	<i>The science of language...</i>		944
1967	Langacker	<i>Language &amp; its structure...</i>	2 eds	1827
1968	Bolinger	<i>Aspects of language</i>	3 eds	1972
1999	Hudson	<i>Essential introductory linguistics</i>		358
2000	Fromkin (ed.)	<i>Linguistics: An introduction to linguistic theory</i>		377
2009	McGregor	<i>Linguistics: An introduction</i>	3 eds	342
HoL AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE, $n = 2$				
1966	Fries	<i>Linguistics: The study of language</i>		322
1967	Dinneen	<i>An introduction to general linguistics</i>		1070

Table 1. Twenty-six US-published introductory textbooks in linguistics, c. 1947–2021, sorted according to their treatment of the history of linguistics (HoL)

3.1. ERASURE. First, some textbooks entirely (or almost entirely) sublimate the history of linguistics, presenting terms and concepts of linguistic analysis as if they were independent of historical context. Gleason (1955: 257–270), for example, writes at length about the notion of the phoneme, but without acknowledging that the concept had any historical development or faced any challenges. He consistently uses present-tense verbs, as if the notion has always existed, for all students of language, and that phonemes, like elements in chemistry, are timeless natural phenomena. Hockett (1958: 461–525) introduces readers to the methods of historical linguistics, but not to how internal reconstruction or the comparative method were worked out over time, who worked them out, the motives of scholars in doing so, or what competitors their ideas faced. Likewise, Finegan and Besnier (1989: 37) present the International Phonetic Alphabet (again, using present-tense verbs) without indicating that it has evolved over more than 130 years since emerging in a specific transnational context. Finegan and Besnier nowhere deny that IPA has a history; they just flatten an intrinsically curved space, diverting readers away from wondering how its past has shaped it. Elsewhere in the text, Finegan and Besnier drop a few names, remarking that ‘Plato and Aristotle, as well as other Greek and Indian philosophers’ were curious about language (pp. 5–6). But they do not provide information about them or their distinctive contributions. A reader could easily conclude from Finegan and Besnier’s sentence that Plato, Aristotle and ‘other Greek and Indian philosophers’ all asked the same questions about the nature of human language, and all arrived at the same answers. In these ways, erasure of the history of linguistics presents students with an unnaturally controversy-free tableau: by downplaying debates or backgrounding struggles or false starts that sometimes stretched over decades or centuries, textbooks introduce students to an apparently static discipline wherein all the important discoveries have already been made.

3.2. SCATTERED REFERENCES. A second convention for representing the history of linguistics is a common one, namely, to weave into a textbook short references to the past, often separated from the main narrative by (for example) positioning a quotation from an older source as an epigraph at the head of chapter, or by encasing a quotation from an earlier text in a sidebar outside the margins of a page. This material usually appears without any integration into the superordinate text, obscuring whatever presupposition the author holds about the relationships of historical to modern ideas. Typically, however, the decision to cite an older source seems to be driven by the textbook author’s perception that the cited material either provides a precedent for modern ideas, or (conversely) comprises evidence for their novelty. Moreover, references to language study in

the past that are entered into textbook in this way—or, when they are part of the running narrative, and not physically separated from it—do not follow chronological order, so that they do not inform students about the development of concepts and terms over time, nor about their rejection and replacement. In the fifth edition of O’Grady et al.’s textbook (2005), for example, a short discussion of Grimm, Verner, and the Neogrammarians (pp. 280–282) is followed 40 pages later by references in passing to Boas, Sapir, and Bloomfield (pp. 326–327); 140 pages after that, Broca and later Wernicke appear (pp. 468–469; p. 475); 100 pages later, O’Grady et al. include a couple of paragraphs about the communicative capacities of Wilhelm van Osten’s horse Clever Hans (p. 575, with the date cited as 1905). When earlier language study is presented in a discontinuous sequence of references like these, even textbooks that contain relatively more frequent citations from earlier texts do little to build a reader’s awareness of the history of linguistics.

A passage from the sixth edition of Fromkin and Rodman’s influential textbook (1998: 318–319) also illustrates the limitations of a ‘scattered references’ approach. A sub-section entitled ‘Stages in language acquisition’ begins by quoting Augustine’s (1907: 8) famous autobiographical recollection of learning to speak. As many have noted, it is a particularly shocking passage, without precedent; no one else would write about child language learning in this way for a long time. But Fromkin and Rodman present the passage without any comment or analysis, as if its apparent modernity can be taken for granted. Moreover, their placement of ellipses conceals the fact that Augustine frames his words as a second-person address to God. This is probably in an effort to secularize the passage for a modern readership. But its effect is to remove another layer of challenge that a modern reader would otherwise confront: by parading Augustine’s words past us 21st century readers without context, Fromkin and Rodman avoid having to either account for the idiosyncratic modernity of this passage, or to help a reader make sense of its late 4th century content.

3.3. SEGREGATION. A third convention for representing the history of linguistics in textbooks is to include an independent chapter or section that presents information about the history of the field. In my sample, textbooks that take this approach devote from as few as 2 to as many as 39 pages to the topic. Many authors assume a teleological stance that conceives the history of linguistics as a protracted search which, after a long sequence of misapprehensions and dead ends, culminates in the modern shape of the field. Hughes (1962: 49), for example, reviews language study in the ancient world, Middle Ages, and Renaissance, then sums up everything that came before Sir William Jones’s address to the Asiatick Society in 1786 as ‘centuries of fumbling’. One cannot deny that there has been ‘fumbling’ as scholars have wrestled with human language—but it didn’t stop in 1786.

What else stands out in this cohort of textbooks is the prevalence of the themes likely inspired by Chomsky’s influential *Cartesian linguistics* (1966). Among authors whose texts that I assigned to this rubric, Bolinger and Hudson highlight the Port Royale *grammaire générale*, Thomas of Erfurt, Descartes, and Humboldt. Langacker, Bolinger, Hudson, and Fromkin all contrast ‘rationalism’ with ‘empiricism’; criticize Bloomfieldian behaviorism in familiar terms; and depict generative grammar as a revolution in language science.

Finally, textbooks that dedicate a section to the history of the discipline often undercut their investment. For example, Hudson (1999: xiv) remarks in the introduction to his 500-page text that, to accommodate a short semester, ‘No doubt many teachers will choose to omit...[the chapter] on the history of linguistics’. Bolinger (1968) includes a 33-page chapter in which he presents a five-stage sweep through the history of the discipline from ‘traditional grammar’ to ‘formal linguistics’. But this entire section disappears in the book’s second (1975) and third

(1981) editions. Similarly, a section on the history of linguistics in McGregor's first edition (2009) gets downgraded the book's subsequent editions by being displaced into the book's companion website.

**3.4. HISTORY AS A BASIC EXPOSITORY PRINCIPLE.** A fourth convention for representing the history of linguistics appears in only two of the 26 texts I surveyed: the use of historical narrative as a basic organizing principle. The origin of one of these textbooks, Fries (1963), is distinctive within my sample because it was not initially written as an introduction to linguistics. Rather, it reprints as a monograph what had been Chapter 2 of an earlier book, re-purposed to introduce readers to the field. Fries does not presuppose any earlier exposure to linguistics. He walks readers through the preoccupations of European and American language scholars from 1820 (Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm) to the 1960s (Zellig Harris and Noam Chomsky). Unsurprisingly, the scope of Fries (1963) is narrower than that of a typical 21st-century textbook, as there is nothing on topics the relevance of which has developed since the 1960s, such as sign languages, neurolinguistics, or language and gender. But Fries communicates to readers the basics of scientific study of language, citing parallel or sometimes circuitous developments, and promoting heterogeneity of outlook.

A second example of a textbook organized around the history of linguistics is Dinneen (1967). The author's Preface specifies that his book is not a survey of the history of linguistics (p. v), but rather as what he calls a 'cultural introduction to the study of linguistic science' (p. vi) which infuses historical consciousness at every step. By this Dinneen means that the book aims to communicate to students to the scope, boundaries, and techniques of the modern discipline by recounting how it developed. He argues for the value of his historical-cultural approach on four grounds: that it reveals to students that 'in a dynamic field like linguistics, all positions are also counter-positions'; that it communicates what linguistics is versus is not, and what it has been versus has not been; that it demonstrates the compatibility of modern scientific linguistics with traditional humanism; and that it may serve the goals of a diverse array of students enrolled in an introductory class (pp. v–vi). It might be debated whether the book fully achieves his goals, but Dinneen demonstrates a way to introduce contemporary students to the historical context of their object of study. However, neither Fries's nor Dinneen's book has been reprinted, and neither has had wide influence.

**4. Conclusion.** Contributions to this volume by Goldsmith, Anderson, and Rosenthal advert to the reluctance of modern students of linguistics to enroll in courses on the history of the field. Many attitudes and prior experiences not specific to linguistics may drive that reluctance, causing them to devalue any curiosity about historical matters that they might bring to the study of language. Moreover, the reflective mindset that historical expertise fosters can readily be buried under the crush of material students have to master in a fast-moving, interdisciplinary field. Textbook authors may take these forces for granted in their decisions to exclude or marginalize historical material from the curriculum for beginning students; in the words of Kuhn (1962), textbooks commonly 'truncate the scientist's sense of his discipline's history' because they 'refer only to that part of past work that can be viewed as a contribution to the present' (pp. 137–138).

Kuhn's characterization seems apt with respect to the reading matter typically presented to beginning students of linguistics, which has little contextual richness and generally reflects only current preoccupations. Few authors expose students to contradiction, debate, or rupture in earlier language study, or demonstrate how rarely an idea or observation about language survives and is built upon. Authentic language scholarship, however, encompasses generous numbers of

failures and dead ends, and rare successes; its entirety is worth acknowledging and analyzing with students as characteristic of intellectual life. Exposing students to discontinuity and complexity in the history of linguistics would predispose them to better tolerate ambiguity, and to accept their own struggles to do meaningful and creative work.

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