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# Goals in teaching the history of linguistics

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**Abstract.** While once a required part of programs in Linguistics, courses in the history of the field have largely fallen into desuetude. When such courses are offered, they tend to attempt to cover thousands of years of history or a vast range of diverse related fields in a single term. There is perhaps a place for such courses, but I argue here that a rather more limited and focused offering has a particularly important role to play in the education of future linguistic theorists.

**Keywords.** history of linguistics; "Bad Guys"

**1. Introduction.** The original impetus for this panel discussion came from the observation that while courses in the history of our field were once a regular — even obligatory — part of Linguistics degree programs, they have virtually disappeared from the curricula of most major universities.[1] While some of the other panelists have addressed ways to encourage our faculty colleagues to provide such offerings, and documented the absence of material on the history of linguistics in introductory texts, I have nothing of substance to contribute on this topic. I will, rather, concentrate on the potential content of such courses and the reasons I think they ought to be an essential part of educational programs for potential linguists.

The other presentations in this panel are largely devoted to organizing and encouraging courses that will provide a comprehensive history of our field, exposing students both to its internal development and to its connections with other domains of inquiry. In some cases, such courses are seen as providing background on linguistics to students who will focus on some area other than theory: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, speech therapy, etc. Often, they are focused on undergraduates comparatively new to the field or beginning graduate students.

Exposing these students to the broad history of the field in a single term (as is generally the case), though, it is impossibly hard for such a class to develop a complete view of any of the positions discussed: there is just too much to cover. The syllabus offered by Sam Rosenthal (this volume), for instance, generally devotes only one or two hours of class to any given topic, and to get from the Greeks to Optimality Theory in 15 weeks, depth inevitably has to be sacrificed. Given the huge number of names and diverse agendas of the figures in the charts offered by John Goldsmith (this volume), students might be able to internalize some of the networks of influence, but as for understanding what it means for Linguist A to be "influenced" by Psychologist B or *vice versa*, that is pretty unlikely over the course of a single term unless the student already knows quite a lot.

I do not mean to suggest that this sort of course doesn't have a role to play in Linguistics programs. For one thing, more students take linguistics courses than will eventually focus on theoretical work, and it is worthwhile for many of them to have some background on what linguistics is and how it came to be, and not simply an exposure to current concepts and methodologies.

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[1] Without meaning to disparage other institutions, I have confirmed that as of this writing, no course in the history of linguistics is currently offered at these "major" universities: MIT, UMass, Harvard, UC Berkeley, Stanford, Maryland, Penn, Chicago, Ohio State, Cornell, Yale, and UCSD. UCLA has such a course on the books, but it has not been offered in recent years. John Goldsmith (this volume) notes that he offered such a course at the University of Chicago until his retirement in 2020.

There are other goals, however, that should be kept in mind with regard to the training of our future colleagues.

**2. History of linguistics classes I have known.** In my own academic history, I can recall three courses in the history of linguistics. First, as an undergraduate studying with a hard-core descriptivist, I had a reading course in which I was assigned six things: Sapir (1921), Bloomfield (1933), Trubetzkoy (1939) (in the French translation by Cantineau), de Saussure (1916) (in Wade Baskin's English translation), Hoenigswald (1960), and Hjelmslev (1943) (in English translation by Whitfield). I learned something, though not a lot, from each of these — with the exception of the Hjelmslev, which made no sense to me at the time. I have the impression that in spite of the many praises (but rather fewer substanive references) that it received from descriptivists, my experience with that one was not uncommon.

Then at the 1966 Linguistic Institute, I took a course in history of Linguistics from John Lyons (later Sir John), which I found extremely enjoyable. This was a course that covered history from the Greeks on, and while I learned a lot about the overall trajectory of the field, I can't say it greatly deepened my appreciation of the views of any individual scholars. It did, however, make me feel that as a graduate student I wanted to focus on this and write a dissertation on the history of linguistics. An ambition that was not directly fulfilled, but which I have come back to.

At MIT in 1967, I took the so-called "Bad Guys" course, 23.781, as offered by Paul Kiparsky. A bit of background on this course, discussion of which in the literature has not always been quite accurate.[2] In the first two years of the MIT Linguistics Program (1961–63), Chomsky taught this course, and it was indeed devoted to showing that most previous work (especially by American descriptivists) was misguided and ultimately wrong. Later (from 1963–65), the course was taken over by Paul Postal, who continued that tradition — perhaps even more vitriolically, if one is to judge his opinion from Postal 1968, a book largely dealing with the same matters. Quite separately, in the program's third year, Chomsky taught a course on the material in Chomsky 1966, "Cartesian Linguistics". The tone and focus here was quite different from that in "Bad Guys" of the time. It should also be mentioned, contrary to some suggestions, that none of these offerings were in any way related to the subsequent "Linguistic Wars" (R. A. Harris 1993), which arose somewhat later and focused on quite different issues.

On Postal's departure from MIT, Kiparsky took over 23.781 (1965–67). In his hands, this (required!) history course was somewhat more focused, while still mostly centered on phonology. The description in the 1965–66 MIT course catalog reads "An expository and critical survey of modern structural linguistics. The work of Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield, the Prague Circle, and other developments in general linguistics during the past half-century. Contemporary trends and their immediate backgrounds." The last sentence indicates the course as "presentist" in the typology of John Josephs (this volume), but Kiparsky's "presentism" was quite different from that of Chomsky and Postal.

The main goal of the course as Kiparsky saw it was not to castigate the errors of our predecessors, but rather to understand what the people under discussion were trying to do. This was different from the other courses I had taken, and I think I learned a lot more from it about how and why my own work might develop.

[2] I am grateful to Barbara Partee for help and information on these matters.

**3. Motivations for history courses for serious students.** For programs enrolling graduate students (and some advanced undergraduates) who will be actively engaged in developing theories of phonology, syntax, and semantics, I think there is a quite fundamental role to be played by a history course: helping them to understand where their present occupations have come from, and how the field has come to have the character it does. This was Kiparsky's goal, and I think it serves as a model for an important component of a program training future workers in the core areas of linguistic theory.

Succeeding in that in a way adequate to the education of prospective phonologists, syntacticians, and semanticists must involve a variety of things that are difficult to cover well in the standard comprehensive survey, because they require a more extensive focus on particular developments than is possible while covering all of history. More specifically, it is important to understand how some of their predecessors, based on very different presumptions, dealt with much the same problems they address today.

For instance, a number of earlier linguists uncovered states of affairs structurally just like those that motivated Halle's (1959) famous argument against phonemics from Russian voicing assimilation. They realized the significance of such examples, but came to very different conclusions from their own perspectives.

Halle's argument provided a sort of Creation Myth for Generative Phonology: Russian voicing assimilation includes both phonemic and sub-phonemic effects, and a unified account of these which includes a structural level of representation representing exactly contrastive differences must force the statement of this regularity to be broken into unrelated parts. On this basis, phonologists were persuaded to abandon such a phonemic level altogether, and focus on morphophonemics.

While this analysis was widely seen as strikingly original and innovative, that view is somewhat problematic.[3] In fact, a number of previous phonologists had observed facts with essentially the same structure as those cited in Halle's argument, noted their significance, and come to quite different conclusions depending on the point of view from which they approached them.

Ułaszyn (1931), and before him, Ščerba (1912), observed similar examples, and responded by attempting to redefine phonemic representations so as to accommodate them.[4] Bloomfield (1962), discussing a similar case in Menomini, goes to some length to find evidence (from exclamations and the pronunciation of foreign words) that the apparently sub-phonemic outputs of a vowel lengthening process are really contrastive after all. Bloch (1941), on the other hand, considered an example of this sort, and argued that the requirements of phonemic analysis superseded our intuition of a common source of contrastive and non-contrastive outputs, and thus that phonemic theory had saved us from being seduced by an apparently "neat parallelism". Another writer of the period, Hamp (1953), viewed a similar example in Celtic as suggesting the importance of morphophonemic over phonemic representations, but he was not widely followed in this conclusion. In all of these cases, a complete appreciation of the importance of a set of phenomena under discussion would benefit from an understanding of the ways in which antecedent scholars had approached it.

Similar comments apply to the re-analysis of segmental structure in phonological form as a network of associations among featural units ("Autosegments") as opposed to a purely colum-

[3] For discussion of these matters, see Anderson (2000, 2021: 414ff.).

[4] See Manaster-Ramer (1984) for some discussion of Ułaszyn's approach.

nar representation. Goldsmith (1979) suggested this revision of the representational formalism of Chomsky & Halle (1968) on the basis of tonal phenomena, among others. In this connection, it is quite instructive to consider the views of Firth (1948) and his colleagues in the British school of Prosodic Analysis, largely unknown to current students. These scholars came to rather similar (but different) conclusions on the basis of facts quite parallel (sometimes identical) to ones underlying the innovations of Autosgemental Phonology, but approached on quite a different basis. Goldsmith (1992) discusses these connections, as well as those between Firthian analyses and Zellig Z. Harris's (1951) theory of "Long Components".

It is also important to explore the history of particular concepts we take for granted in theorizing, because in their origins these were often based on assumptions we would no longer find persuasive. For me, the structuralist notion of the morpheme, taken over essentially unexamined by generative linguists more interested in phonology and syntax, is an excellent example: descriptivists were persuaded that their notion of the phoneme was a monumental intellectual achievement, and treating components of word structure in an essentially parallel way just seemed like common sense on their view. The abandonment of that picture of phonological structure, however, ought to result in a re-examination of the nature of "morphemes", something that would be aided by a better sense of history. Not all will agree with my perspective on the conclusions we should draw from this (Anderson 2015), but an understanding of the relevant history is surely important regardless.

Similarly, the historical origins of the notion that phonological primes (features) should be exclusively binary requires examination. Trubetzkoy (1939) describes a variety of types of opposition, not simply binary ones, but his account was rejected by Jakobson on the basis of concerns from Information Theory.[5] Though this position continued into theories of Generative Phonology, it is surely worthy of re-examination, something that will only happen if phonologists understand the history of the concepts involved.

**4. Conclusion.** In conclusion, I think that at the graduate level, there is a place for history courses that are more narrowly focused than the "From the Greeks to OT" model, and therefore deeper in the areas most relevant to current work. I guess my model for such a course would be based on my book, *Phonology in the Twentieth Century*, of which the second revised and enlarged edition (with pictures!) was published recently, and which can be downloaded (for free!) from Language Science Press (https://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/327). But that is just one model, and intended particularly for prospective phonologists, and there are surely others. Something similar should be done for syntax, and probably semantics, but I am not the one to design those.

My intention here is simply to put in a plug for somewhat narrower, but deeper, courses as part of the graduate education of prospective theorists. These could be either "presentist" or "trajectorial" in terms of John Joseph's typology — personally, I favor the latter, to the extent I can keep them apart — but something of the sort seems important to the development of serious theoretical positions.

I have taught courses like this at UCLA, Stanford, and Yale — although, unfortunately, I cannot say that my students were uniformly enthusiastic about signing up for them. Goldsmith (this volume) notes a similar reluctance on the part of his students to devote their attention to the history of the field, as opposed to its current practice. I do think, though that their education

[5] See Cherry, Halle & Jakobson 1953, Jakobson 1961 for the role of these considerations in Jakobson's development of the theory of Distinctive Features.

benefited. Other, more charismatic teachers than me might have better luck — if they tried.

And more Linguistics programs ought perhaps to exercise their authority to ensure that their graduates have a proper sense of the way the current form of our discipline is a function of its past. Nineteenth century Neogrammarians famously taught that the only scientific approach to a language was an analysis of its history, of how it came to be. In the twentieth century, Saussurian, Bloomfieldian, and later Chomskyan teaching held to the contrary that the synchronic reality of the linguistic system was the primary object of inquiry in linguistics. More recently, the apparent insight has been renewed that the study of general properties of language, potential universals, must take into account the paths of historical change through which languages have developed (Anderson 2016, 2025, Cristofaro 2019, 2024). Analogously, an understanding of the concepts and practices of the field as we find it can benefit from an acquaintance with the historical developments that have given rise to them.

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