

Who do we have to convince of the purpose and utility of history of linguistics courses in the curriculum?

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Abstract. This short commentary proposes that there is a need for convincing our colleagues in linguistics departments to include history of linguistics classes in our programmes. Once they are there, it is suggested that we also consider tailoring these classes to modern populations of students.

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1. Introduction. The 2024 NAAHoLS panel on *Teaching the History of Linguistics* covered many topics; which particular topics/periods one should teach in a history of linguistics (HoL) course; who the major players are in the HoL, whether one should focus on the trajectory or the outcome of scientific advances, and how all of this information should be integrated into our pedagogical materials. As I discussed in my comments during the panel, the amount of work my fellow panelists have produced on the history of our field is invaluable. Each of them have written volumes on different aspects of the HoL with distinct foci and coverage. It would be virtually impossible to teach a HoL course without appealing to the detailed insights and links between scholars and schools of thought that they have carefully assembled. As a linguist who has only been recently called upon to teach a HoL course, I am very appreciative. To quote John Goldsmith's contribution to this collection "Teaching the history of linguistics often involves talking about a large number of people - linguists and scholars in related fields - who are only hazily recognized by students, and often the teacher is no better off." I am a linguist tasked with teaching the HoL who is neither a historical scholar nor someone who was ever lucky enough to take an HoL class. One might ask what I can offer to this conversation, given my lack of expertise. What I will try to do here is to give the perspective of someone who is of the opinion that students should be learning about the history of their field, while also representing the majority of current linguists; those who have had to pick up their knowledge of the HoL in piecemeal fashion. The title of this short paper is inspired by the opening of the description of the panel itself *This panel will present a discussion of History of Linguistics (HoL) courses, their purpose and utility in the curriculum, student preparation for taking them, and challenges in teaching them.* This short commentary aims to do two things. First, I want to discuss the state of HoL courses, in Canada in particular, and how to engage our colleagues in retaining (or (re)introducing) HoL courses into our curricula.¹ Secondly, I want to discuss the current students we have, and offer some pathways to fostering their interest in the HoL.

2. Who is teaching the history of linguistics (in Canada)? We can break this question down into two sub-parts. First, which universities are teaching history of linguistics classes? Second, who are the linguists who are teaching history of linguistics classes?

2.1. WHERE CAN A STUDENT TAKE A HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS COURSE? In response to the first question, I searched through the websites of all universities in Canada that offer classes

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¹ As one can see in Stephen Anderson's contribution, the state of affairs of these courses in curricula is similar in the U.S.

in linguistics. There are around 22 universities that have programs that could logically include a HoL course (who have linguistics programmes, rather than a few linguistics classes in independent programmes), and among them less than a third, only six, offer an HoL course. Among these six universities, HoL is a required course for only two; the Université du Québec à Montréal, and the Université Laval (both francophone universities in Québec). To put this in perspective, note that Canada has around 10% of the population of the United States, and around 10% of the number of linguistics departments that the US has (according to the LSA website). In the Canadian universities that do have HoL courses, these courses are undergraduate-level courses with varying prerequisites; from a single introduction to linguistics course (UQAM) to six courses (syntax, phonology and 4 other ling courses at Saint Marys University in Nova Scotia). At the time of our NAAHoLS panel, I was worried that the HoL course at UQAM (*Courants linguistiques contemporains*) would be lost from our programme, as we are undergoing a programme reform. This reform is still ongoing, but it looks like this course is safe, and will even be given in the final year of our undergraduate degree (rather than the first); a modification that will allow for more depth in its content. From the discussions during the panel session, queries to linguists in Europe, and the comments in other contributions in this collection, this dearth of HoL courses on offer is not specific to Canada. It is therefore clear that before we can talk about what to teach in these courses, we have to make sure they are taught. I don't think the main issue is convincing students to take these courses. I think we have to convince our colleagues to offer them. If we model the importance of situating linguistic thought in its historical context then the students (who might not currently understand the utility of such courses, given their rarity) will follow our lead. I have a few thoughts on how an HoL course should be inserted into current curricula. In the panel description it was asked how to wedge HoL courses into our doctoral programmes. I am of the opinion that the doctoral level is too late, as students are often already well indoctrinated into a framework at this point, and therefore might benefit more from exposure to the historical tug-of-war between schools of thought while they are still forming their own scientific personalities. I really do appreciate Sam Rosenthalls suggestion to overlap the goals of an HoL course with that of a student's larger research project. I think that having an HoL course overlap with a final undergraduate research project or honours thesis, or the period wherein students are writing their masters thesis proposal, is the optimal time; they have some knowledge of the theoretical tools under their belts while not yet being so deep into a particular research project that they don't have time to sit back and consider how else it might be done or what the bigger questions impacting their project might be. Doctoral programmes are also those within which we require the fewest courses. Our colleagues might balk at sacrificing domain-specific depth for an HoL course at this later stage. One supplementary question that arises from this is that, if we are to promote teaching the HoL at the undergraduate level, should textbooks include more HoL? As discussed during Margaret Thomas' contribution, introductory textbooks are not generally good at covering the history of our field in a comprehensive way. I am not convinced that attempts to include the HoL in other textbooks (phonology, syntax etc.) would do any better, as authors of these books (and teachers of these courses) are already trying to pare down content to fit into a too-short semester. I do think, however, that we need more options with regards to course-sized HoL textbooks. The only current option of an appropriate size is Robins *A short history of linguistics*, the 4th edition of which came out in 1997. Although earlier editions have been translated into French (as *Breve histoire de la linguistique: de Platon a Chomsky*), the latest has not (as far as I can find), leaving non-anglophone students like my own without access to more recent developments. Goldsmith

and Laks' *Battle in the Mind Fields* is recent and insightful, and translated (as *Aux origines des sciences humaines*), but at over 1000 pages that cover a single century (1840-1940), it is of a size that makes it difficult to use as a coursebook. All other books that are currently on the HoL market are either too specific for a general overview course, or likewise much too long. This leaves those who are tasked with teaching these courses with the daunting task of reading through a large amount of material and trying to winnow it down themselves. This can be an overwhelming hurdle for professors for whom the HoL is not their specialization, and the history of linguistics is unfortunately the specific area of specialization of only a small group of linguists. This brings me to a discussion of the second question above.

2.2. THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND THROUGH THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS. The state of affairs in the previous subsection is not new; very few of my peers (mid-career tenured professors of linguistics in Canada) have had the opportunity to take a course on the history of our field. As the teaching of the HoL has waned, so has the number of people that can easily teach it. Current professors, in my experience, have a good knowledge of the history of their subfield over the last century or so, but very few could teach a class on the history of other subfields, or a more than cursory class on less-than-recent history without a lot of effort. As fewer students receive training in the HoL, this situation will only get worse. It is a terrible thing for any group of people to lose their history, and I believe this is something the field has to actively fight against. More departments need to offer these courses, more summer schools need to offer HoL courses, and as I mentioned above, more textbooks need to be written in order to facilitate the reintegration of HoL courses into departments where time is at a premium and current professors don't always have the luxury of mounting new courses that are outside of their specific domains of expertise.

3. What do the students need to know about the history of linguistics? The above sections discuss the state of the few courses we have left on the HoL. On the other side of this is a discussion of who our students are and whether we need to update our thinking about the content of our HoL courses. It has already been pointed out in the other contributions to this collection that there are different perspectives one can take (e.g., in this collection Anderson proposes more focused and in-depth courses, Goldsmith proposes a focus on the interrelation between linguistics and adjoining fields, Joseph discusses the presentist, trajectorial and heliocentric approaches to teaching the HoL). With regard to the goals of an HoL course, I am in closest agreement with Sam Rosenthal; an HoL course is an opportunity to give the students more in-depth tools for thinking critically about the relevant scientific perspectives. I am also in agreement with John Goldsmith in that there are a large number of important historical figures to highlight and it is a serious task to introduce key players in a way that highlights not only what they have added to the field, but their place in it.

I would like to add a more pointed discussion here of the latter question. Most current work on the history of linguistics focuses on advances up to and including the 1970s. Some go beyond this into the 1990s, but the discussion of later years is more cursory. This is understandable, in that we have not had the luxury of time to allow us to see where the dust will settle with regards to debates and trends that are currently underway. To take one example, Optimality Theory (McCarthy et al. 2003) has undergone a birth, heyday, and fracturing into a plethora of descendants (none of which maintain the core premise tested by the original: that derivations are strictly parallel and not serial (Vaux 2008)) which each maintain (or add) distinct theoretical premises and tools. We are also in an era where empiricism is on one of its historical upswings (e.g., Labo-

ratory Phonology, Large Language Models, Corpus Linguistics) alongside a steady interest in pushing the bounds of our underlying theoretical tools (e.g., Minimalism, Nanosyntax, CVCV Phonology, Substance-Free Phonology). Authors of books and teachers of HoL courses may be more hesitant to teach what one might consider to be ‘very recent history’.

But, we lose something very important, and increasingly crucial in the eyes of our students, when we ignore ‘very recent history’: the influx of women to the field, especially in the more formal and typically male-dominated areas like theoretical syntax, the diverse trends in linguistic science that currently exist throughout the world and the focus in relevant areas on language revitalization from an indigenous perspective, and the influx of work on gender in language and how it relates to changing views of gender in society. These topics also open a discussion of what we want the field to become in the future. Scientists have always positioned themselves in relation to what needs to be accomplished, with what was (or is) ‘wrong’ with the way things were being done at the time and with what they could (and can) do to advance the field. Given the relative youth of linguistic science it is unfortunate that, as far as I can tell, most HoL courses and volumes do not situate the current reader/student in their place in this history. Any history class will have central group of players who are ‘old white men’ for obvious reasons. We therefore need to work at including more diversity in a non-tokenizing manner. Focusing more heavily on the last 50 years of progress (and of course linking that progress to its deeper historical origins) is one way to naturally diversify the cast of characters introduced in our HoL courses. I feel that ensuring that our students feel seen and highlighting the power they have as current actors in the advancement of linguistic science may engage their interest in ways that will render the study of historical events more relevant. As I prepare to give *Courants linguistiques contemporains* again, I plan to look to reframing the narrative to situate linguistics not only in relation to its sci-entific/philosophical place in recent and not-so-recent history, but also with regard to the factors that influence its current sociological, political and economic trends. I hope this will allow the students to feel more a part of the narrative and encourage them to be excitedly engaged. This is, of course, a plan that can only build upon what has been taught before, and only history will tell how it all plays out.

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