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Don Ringe and Joseph F. Eska
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Historical Linguistics

Toward a Twenty-First Century Reintegration

Bringing the advances of theoretical linguistics to the study of language change in a systematic way, this innovative textbook demonstrates the mutual relevance of historical linguistics and contemporary linguistics. Numerous case studies throughout the book show both that theoretical linguistics can be used to solve problems where traditional approaches to historical linguistics have failed to produce satisfying results, and that the results of historical research can have an impact on theory. The book first explains the nature of human language and the sources of language change in broad terms. It then focuses on different types of language change from contemporary viewpoints, before exploring comparative reconstruction – the most spectacular success of traditional historical linguistics – and the problems inherent in trying to devise new methods for linguistic comparison. Positioned at the cutting edge of the field, the book argues that this approach can and should lead to the reintegration of historical linguistics as one of the core areas in the study of language.

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in memory of Henry Hoenigswald

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Preface

What this book tries to do

This book is intended for students with some prior training in linguistics. It attempts to integrate three scientific approaches to the analysis of language structure and language change: the Neogrammarian tradition of historical linguistics (especially in its mathematically rigorous codification by the late Henry Hoenigswald), the modern study of language change in progress pioneered by William Labov, and the generative tradition of linguistic theory inaugurated by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle. In addition, we have tried to adduce some of the rapidly expanding scientific research on language acquisition, since it seems increasingly clear that most language changes arise as errors in native language learning.

Such a synthesis is long overdue. At least in North America, the generative paradigm has become overwhelmingly dominant and Labov's study of language change in progress is recognized as a major subfield of linguistics; a large majority of our colleagues at least recognize that both those lines of research have led to enormous progress, even if numerous details remain the subject of lively debate. If historical linguistics is to benefit from these advances and to offer new insights of its own, it must be reintegrated into the field as a whole. We hope that this book will take that process forward.

Methodological preliminaries: the nature of hypotheses

While any science must be based on careful observation, the mere accumulation of facts does not lead to scientific progress. Patterns of fact must be made the basis of hypotheses which, in order to be useful, must extrapolate significantly beyond the facts on which they are based; the predictions of those hypotheses are then tested against further facts and the hypotheses are either refined or discarded, the laws of logical inference being respected throughout the process. It is NOT necessary for a hypothesis to account for all the facts in hand at the time it was formulated; on the contrary, a complex hypothesis based on

“messy” facts is much less likely to be testable than a simple hypothesis which accounts for many, but not all, of the known facts.

The last principle is more important than is sometimes realized. A simple illustration is provided by the regularity of sound change. In the 1870’s a group of young linguists called the “Neogrammarians” realized that the *observed* regularity of sound change in a given dialect is statistically overwhelming; that led them to the hypothesis that there is a *process* of “sound change” that is *exceptionless*, and that apparent exceptions are the results of other, independent processes that have very different effects. Numerous linguists objected to the hypothesis that “sound change is regular,” arguing that it was on the wrong track unless all apparent exceptions could be convincingly explained. But it became clear long ago that the regularity of sound change is a very good scientific hypothesis: large classes of known exceptions had been convincingly explained by 1900, work on sound change in progress and dialect contact has explained many more, and the residue of irregularities that are still puzzling can largely be ascribed to the fact that detailed information about speech communities of the past is almost always too poor to enable even a guess at any unusual linguistic events that might have occurred. Rejecting the hypothesis that there is a process of regular sound change isn’t merely hypercautious or outdated; it’s dead wrong, because it reveals a fundamental confusion about how science makes progress (see already Bloomfield 1933: 355–64).

We emphasize this because it seems clear to us that the same confusion persists to such a degree that it can be considered endemic in historical linguistics. We hope that this book, by taking theory seriously without losing sight of data, can help to correct the problem.

Authorship

Joseph Eska was responsible for the first draft of [Chapter 9](#); Don Ringe was responsible for the first draft of the other chapters. However, we have both repeatedly read and commented on all the chapters; Eska’s contributions to the first eight chapters have been especially significant.

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