

THE BACKGROUND OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTIC STUDY

PRECURSORS OF HISTORICAL STUDY

Two basic questions about language (still unanswered!):

- i. What is its origin?
- ii. Why are there many languages rather than only one?

Early explanations: study pp. 23-27.

Note: *descriptive* studies of these questions, e.g., a descriptive grammar of Sanskrit (by Panini, around 400 BC.)

Concerning the above questions, many linguists today believe that there is substantial evidence of monogenesis: genetic classification, which sees language families (eg. Indo-European) as unrelated to any other family, has been challenged (J. Greenberg, M. Ruhlen, among others).

Study the Handout!

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

The notion that similar languages are related and descended from an earlier, common language (protolanguage) goes back to the late 18th century when Sir William Jones suggested that

the similarities of Sanskrit to ancient Greek and Latin could be accounted for by assuming that all three were descendants from a common ancestral language: Proto Indo-European.

Note: There were numerous “comparative” efforts from much earlier times!

e.g. Ottar of Heligoland (9th century) discovered that there was a relationship between Saami (Lappish) and the “Bjarmas” (Carelian, Permic);

J. Tröstler (17th century) compared Hungarian with Greek, Swedish and Finnish (concluding that Hungarian was related only to German -- wrong!)

Philip Johan Strahlenberg (17th century) compared 32 languages!

etc.

Systematic comparisons directed towards clarifying of the Indo-European language family:

Rasmus Rask
Franz Bopp
Jacob Grimm

Study pp. 27-29

Johannes Sajnovics: *Demonstratio idioma Ungarorum et Lapponum idem esse* (1770):

- he first proved that Saami and Hungarian are related
- he was the one first used morphological correspondences (e.g. *-n* Loc. marker; *-b* comparative marker in both Saami and Hungarian)

Was he the founder of comparative linguistics? Controversial issue!

Samuel Gyarmathi: *Affinitas linguae hungaricae cum linguis fennicae originis grammatica demonstrata* (1779). He compared the following languages: Finnish, Sami, Hungarian, Estonian, Samoyed, Vogul and Ostyak, laying the basis for establishing the Finno-Ugric language family.

(Note: our book is incorrect (p. 27) -- not only Finnish and Hungarian were compared by him).

GERMANIC OBSTRUENTS: GRIMM'S LAW

- a. voiceless stop > voiceless fricative

PIE **p *t *k* > Gmc. *f θ x/h*

- b. voiced stop > voiceless stop

PIE **b *d *g* > Gmc. *p t k*

- c. voiced aspirated stop > voiced stop

PIE **bh *dh *gh* > Gmc. *b d g*

Study the Handout!

Problems: Exceptions!

- i. voiceless stops never become fricatives when they follow another stop or a fricative (see examples on pp. 29-30).

Important generalization is missed -- sounds must be examined in context!!!

- ii. Grassman's Law: aspirated stops become unaspirated before an aspirated stop in the following syllable in Greek and Sanskrit.

Sanskrit cannot be equated with PIE -- a common fallacy! Sanskrit has undergone major changes as have all IE dialects!

- iii. PIE voiceless stops sometimes appear as Germanic voiced stops

Goth. *fadar* < PIE *pater* 'father'

Verner's Law:

voiceless stops between vowels > voiced stops or fricatives, when the preceding vowel is unaccented

Accent and other suprasegmental phenomena have to be examined!

THE NEOGRAMMARIANS

The Neogrammarians (Junggrammatiker 'young grammarians') were a group of scholars working mostly on IE languages in Leipzig in the last quarter of the 19th century.

K. Brugmann: language is not only physical -- the *psychological basis* of language is just as important. Only by considering the psychological basis of speech can we understand sound change.

Two principles:

- i. sound change takes place according to laws -- no exceptions!

- ii. analogy (see later) plays an important role in languages

Hermann Paul : *Principles of historical linguistics* (1880)

- with respect to sound change he makes explicit the acceptance of an articulatory motivation (ease of articulation)
- however, he does not consider sound change to be a purely physical phenomenon: he emphasizes the psychological relation that holds between sounds (e.g. regressive assimilation, dissimilation etc.).
- For Paul, the “idea” of the sound yet to be uttered affects the articulation of the preceding segment.

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

Cours de linguistique générale (1916)

Structural systems of the present, and historical changes of the past, have to be studied in isolation, separately.

Saussure’s influence caused a general reaction against any type of diachronic investigation and especially of diachronic explanation of synchronic facts.

Comment!

STRUCTURALIST THEORIES OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

L. Bloomfield wanted to place linguistics among the sciences. It is not surprising that the basic assumption of the neogrammarians (sound changes are regular and exceptionless) was accepted by him -- but he rejected the *psychological basis* concept.

- iv. Sound change is mechanical, and only the physical (phonetic) context can be considered as explanation for the change.
- Sound change as a dynamic phenomenon cannot be studied (too slow!): “the process of linguistic change has never been directly observed ... such observations with our present facilities is inconceivable.” (1933)
 - “free variations could not in principle be constrained” -- they are of no linguistic significance.

Are free variations indeed free variations?? See the *Sociolinguistic approach* below.

C. Hockett (1958): “No one has yet observed sound change; we have only been able to detect it via its consequences...” He attempts to explain sound change in terms of random free variation in articulation. The speaker rarely hits an articulatory target (a *frequency maximum*), but the range of possible articulations is limited (*expectancy distribution*).

The *expectancy distribution* (and hence the *frequency maximum*) may drift within the phonological space -- new targets are being established: language change!

Comment!

GENERATIVE EXPLANATIONS

P. Postal. 1968. *Aspects of phonological theory*.

Sound change is merely a manifestation of *grammar change*



an alternation of linguistic forms and/or a change in the system of rules relating underlying structures to surface forms

King (1969) and Klima (1965) have developed a model of linguistic change.
Generalization: languages simplify, since children develop ‘optimal’ (= maximally efficient and simpler) grammars.

But children acquire more complex structures, thus they reconstruct their own grammar.

See the Handout!

SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

A. Meillet (Saussure’s student), Oslo lectures (1925):

- “ a language cannot be understood if we do not have an idea of the conditions under which the people who use it live”
- “ what interests the linguist is not the norms but the way in which the language is used”
- about French: “ What is important for the linguist is to know how the people who speak French behave in relation to the rules”.

(Study p. 35)

W. Labov. *Sociolinguistic patterns* (1972):

- the only way to understand language change is *to study it in progress*
- 20th century linguists have studied language as if it were a homogeneous entity, whereas in actuality it is heterogeneous
- free variations are important and relevant; in fact, *there are no free variations!*
- the fact that the grammars of individuals incorporate many variables is nowhere given attention in historical linguistics.
- the grammar consists of rules of the type

/x/ → (a, b)

/x/ → [a] in social context “A”

/x/ → [b] in social context “B”

Language change occurs, when

- one of these variables, as a consequence of its association with some positive social index, comes to be favoured over the other
- one of these variable becomes stigmatized and hence eliminated

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Basic problems with *all* theories concerning language change:

- What are the motivations that activate language change?
- Why does a particular change occur at a given point in the history of the language?

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| The actualization problems remains unaddressed! |
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