

Historical-Comparative and Variationist Linguistics

The topic of this presentation is the study of the principles of linguistic change, a topic where in recent decades a lot of very important discoveries have been made, however not in the field of what we call the traditional historical linguistics, but rather in a different linguistic discipline, usually called variationist linguistics – also known as quantitative sociolinguistics, Labov's sociolinguistics/paradigm etc. This is a linguistic discipline that studies language variations and change in its social context and which is in a lot of ways complementary and interrelated to historical linguistics and traditional dialectology.

Researchers working in historical linguistics, with Indo-European being most popular field here, are mostly preoccupied with various aspects of reconstruction of PIE and history of specific IE languages. It is hard to believe that very significant findings will appear here in the future or that the reconstruction of PIE will look much different than today in let's say a hundred years from now, even though there is no doubt that there is still a lot of work to be done here, especially in some areas. It is, of course, different in less studied language families, where proto-languages are far from well reconstructed. For instance, in the Niger-Congo (or Niger-Kordofanian) language family, there are problems that are not encountered in IE. There are 15 hundred Niger-Congo languages and only approximately 10% of those have some kind of grammar, there are no old manuscripts as in the case of IE, the internal branching is much more complicated than in IE and very hard to reconstruct etc. So it is of no wonder that in Africa, a lot of historical linguistics amounts to Swadesh lists and lexicostatistics, which can be considered at most an aiding first step method. However, when one has to operate with let's say 500 modern languages (and not a couple of them attested 2000 years ago as in the case of IE)¹, the use of lexicostatistics is hardly surprising. Further work on the reconstruction and historical development of language families like these, and later work on possible long range comparison (even if the end result is that no reliable long range reconstruction is possible), is surely one of the main tasks of historical-comparative linguistics in the future.

However, all things considered, the most important questions concerning historical linguistics (and, indeed, linguistics in general) lie elsewhere, as already said. As all historical linguists know only too well, language is constantly changing. Since this is one of the main characteristics of language, this question is not only important for historical linguistics but for the study of language in general. The odd present situation, which was stated in the call for this conference, that historical linguistics is being pushed to the margin more and more is, considering all of this, even more strange (although historical linguists are perhaps at least partly to blame here as well). Considering the importance of language change and of language variations for the phenomenon of language in general (since there are no languages that do not change, there are no languages without variations, and, contrary to traditional dogmas, there is no real description of language

¹ Guthrie's famous reconstruction of Bantu (around 500 lgs) was based on 25 'test languages', more or less randomly chosen.

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without acknowledging its variations, which are on the other hand deeply connected to the process of language change), it should be vice-versa, that is – linguistic disciplines that engage in describing and studying language change should be among the most important linguistic fields.

Variationist linguistics, as a field that deals with research of language variation and change, has been one of the most interesting and propulsive linguistic branches in the last couple of decades. This is confirmed by numerous important discoveries, such as: near mergers, lexical diffusion, work on transmission and diffusion of language changes, principles of chain shifting, continuing language change in the context of modern highly interconnected world, relation of language change and gender etc. This fact is of great deal of importance for traditional historical linguistics, although not always acknowledged as such. Many of these discoveries were made by the founder of variationist linguistics, William Labov himself, in his magnificent trilogy *The Principles of Linguistic Change* (1994, 2001, 2011). It must be stressed that Labov in his *opus magnum* does not confine himself to dealing with studies of variationist kind alone, his work is already highly 'interdisciplinary' in a sense that he deeply acknowledges and uses the important conclusions reached by traditional historical linguistics and in a way also vindicates the Junggrammatiker, which are today very often scorned by many non-historical linguists. The very use of traditional historical linguistics in this context is one of the proofs that today's position of historical linguistics among linguistic disciplines (or, perhaps, rather in the linguistic real world institutional setting) is undeserved.

So the question is – what is exactly to be done here? How to relate traditional historical linguistics to the variationist approach? Although variations were at times disregarded as not important it is now clear that variations are always present in a language, that they are a normal trait of any language and that they are deeply intertwined with the process of language change, that is that they are often actually indicators of the process of language change at a certain point of language development. Variation is, of course, present not only in today's languages but can be observed in historical records as well. Thus, we can expect variations to be present in for instance PIE as well. For instance, PIE *-me/o(n/s)(i) in 1st person pl. might in part be due to language variation. The other possible example is, for instance, the dat. pl. *-b^hos/b^hyos/mos. This has to be taken into account in reconstruction, although this is impossible to prove, since this could be due to a number of other factors.

One other phenomenon that has to be taken into account is the existence of lexical diffusion, again a topic heavily dealt with by Labov in his 1994 monograph concerning the issue of the regularity controversy, although as a secondary phenomenon compared to regular sound change of the Young Grammarian style. It is interesting to note here that there are some differences here in various subfields of historical linguistics – thus, in IE linguistics it is usual to, at least methodologically, adhere to the strict principles of regular sound laws (the famous Neogrammarian principle *Die Lautgesetze kennen keine Ausnahme*) but in Romance historical linguistics, with their tradition stemming from linguistic geography (the principle *Chaque mot a son histoire*), this is sometimes not

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regarded as so important, which can then be observed in different methodological approaches to some problems in IE and Romance historical linguistics.

There are a number of examples where certain results, discovered in the field of variationist linguistics, have to be taken into account by traditional historical-comparative linguistics as well. One such example is the discovery of near mergers (i.e. the case when two phonemes become phonetically so close that the speakers do not differentiate them in perception but in production only – a process that can later be reversed and lead again to a clear distinction of these phonemes), which helps us solve not only some cases in living languages but also some previously unclear cases in the history of for instance English language, and which is also important for theoretical linguistics in general because it crushes the dogma that distinct production automatically means distinct perception.

Obviously, cooperation is needed when researching the principles of linguistic change and answering perhaps the central question of linguistics – why does language change? This is certainly one of the most important questions about language (related to the question – **how** does language change exactly?) and one cannot say that it has been properly answered to this day. This remains one of the crucial problems in linguistics. So a closer cooperation of experts working in the field of traditional historical linguistics and researchers working in the field of variationist approach is needed. Historical linguists should pay more attention to the very principles of linguistic change, together with tackling various particular problems in the historical development of various languages and language families. This should be one of the main goals of historical linguistics in the future – using all its accumulated knowledge and data to work together with other linguistic disciplines in the research of linguistic change in general. Unfortunately, many historical linguists, especially Indo-Europeanists, are completely unaware even of mere existence of variationist linguistics and its discoveries.

One more thing needs to be said. Although we have spoken in the terms of traditional historical linguistics, variationist linguistics, traditional dialectology etc., all of these are linguistic disciplines shaped by specific historical conditions in the academia. If we disregard the institutional and historical background of these disciplines, there is no need whatsoever for such a rigid and clear separation of these disciplines, although this kind of traditional separation is usual (if often detrimental) elsewhere, for instance in social sciences, where traditionally one deals with history, sociology, economics, political science, instead with a unified field of historical social science (as per Immanuel Wallerstein, for instance).

Similar to that, the old Saussurean dichotomy, fundamental to structural linguistics, which held that the synchronic study of language was an endeavor entirely separate from the diachronic study of language change, cannot be maintained either. Traditional assumptions that language structure should be treated as invariant and that variability in language is to be dismissed as unstructured and of little theoretical value is invalid, as was clearly proven already by Labov's early works, which have shown, to quote Milroy & Gordon, that "the trajectories of specific linguistic changes could be inferred from the observation of patterns of variation in contemporary speech communities" [Milroy &

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Gordon 2003: 1–2]. The rigid separation of synchronic and diachronic linguistics, as constructed by de Saussure, who was ironically also a great historical linguist, is one of the causes of the today's not-so-good position of historical linguistics in the study of language in general. However, that kind of clear-cut separation is today untenable.

Historical and diachronic linguistics, as well as the study of language change, cannot reasonably be separated from synchronic studies and other linguistic disciplines. Since variations and language change are one the most important traits of every human language, the study of these phenomena is necessarily one of the most important tasks of linguistics. This also means that historical linguistics has a great chance to gain back at least a part of its lost grandeur and influence. However, in order for that to be done, historical linguists first must get out of their self-imposed isolation.