

History and Historiography of Linguistics: Status, Standards and Standing

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Abstract:

The paper deals with the status of linguistic historiography as an interdisciplinary undertaking with its internal organization, and with the methodological and epistemological standards it has to meet.

Key-words: Linguistic historiography, metahistoriography, epistemology, methodology

Resumo:

O artigo define a historiografia linguística como uma empresa interdisciplinar, com sua organização interna, e com os padrões metodológicos e epistemológicos a serem atingidos no trabalho historiográfico.

Palavras-chave : Historiografia linguística, meta-historiografia, epistemologia, metodologia

1. Linguistic historiography: defining the field

Following its professional organization, which started in the 1970s, the historiography of linguistics has witnessed a spectacular growth in the number of practitioners – especially in Europe, and, during the past two decades, in the Americas –; the field can also rejoice over the existence of a number of high-standard specialized journals¹. Still, a number of misgivings about the field, the goals and methods of linguistic historiography continue to exist, not to speak of

¹ **Historiographia Linguistica** (1974–); **Histoire, Épistémologie, Langage** (1979–); **Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft** (1991–). Another major factor in the process of institutionalization of the field has been the triannual organization of international conferences on the history of the language sciences (the first *ICHoLS* conference [International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences]), organized by E.F.K. Koerner, was held in Ottawa in 1978). It should also be pointed out that we now have at our disposal a series of multi-authored comprehensive overviews of the history of linguistics: see, e.g., Auroux (ed. 1989–2000), Auroux; Koerner; Nederehe; Versteegh (eds. 2000–2006), Lepschy (ed. 1994–98), Schmitter (ed. 1987–2007) and Sebeok (ed. 1975). See also the useful readers edited by Hymes (ed. 1974) and Parret (ed. 1976). For a short check-list (of readers, manuals, and collections), see Swiggers (1987a).

condescending attitudes on behalf of scholars who are prone to cultivate their ignorance of the history of linguistics. It may therefore be worthwhile to set straight a number of matters that deal with the scope and potential of linguistic historiography².

I will start with a definition of the field³. Linguistic historiography is the interdisciplinary study of the evolutionary course of linguistic knowledge; it encompasses the description and explanation, in terms of discipline-internal and discipline-external factors (the impact of which may be ‘positive’, i.e. stimulating, or ‘negative’, i.e. restraining or relegating), of how linguistic knowledge or, more generally, linguistic know-how was arrived at and has been implemented. This definition entails three corollaries:

(1) Linguistic historiography is a discipline which lies at the intersection of *linguistics* (and its methodology), *history* (history of socio-cultural and institutional contexts), *philosophy* (ranging from the history of ideas and *epistémés*⁴ to the history of philosophical doctrines), and the *sociology of science*⁵. To put it briefly: linguistic historiography offers a description and explanation of the history of contextualized⁶ linguistic ideas.

(2) Linguistic historiography has to start from a heuristic⁷ phase, and proceeds, through a stage of “argumentative” analysis and historical-comparative synthesis, towards a historically grounded hermeneutics of linguistic knowledge/know-how. It asks, and tries to answer, questions such as: how has linguistic knowledge been gained? how has it been formulated? how has it been diffused (within ‘participating’ circles)? how has it been preserved? why has it been preserved (or lost), and in what way? what have been the relationships (in terms of influence, power, short- or longlivedness, etc.) between coexistent or subsequent “stretches” of linguistic knowledge?

² The reader may be referred to the following set of publications dealing with methodological and epistemological problems in the field of linguistic historiography: Dutz (1990), Grottsch (1982), Hullen (ed. 1990), Koerner (1978, 1989, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2007), Schmitter (1982, 2003), Schmitter; Van der Wal (eds. 1998), Swiggers (1981a,b, 1983, 1984, 1990, 1991a, 2004, 2006, 2009).

³ For short overviews of the field and its methods, see Swiggers (1998, 2003a).

⁴ I am using here Foucault’s (1966, 1969) term, which offers a vast potential of applications to the history of linguistic ideas (cf. also SWIGGERS, 1997).

⁵ See especially the insights provided by Fernández Pérez (1986) and Murray (1994). On the interdisciplinary competences required by linguistic historiographical work, see Malkiel; Langdon (1969); and cf. Simone (1995). For an interesting perspective offered by a sociological approach of the history of philosophy, see Collins (1998).

⁶ For a methodological discussion of the issue of ‘contextualization’, see Law (1998). For studies illustrating the contextualized history of linguistic ideas in Antiquity, see Swiggers; Wouters (eds. 1996). Law’s manual for the history of linguistics (LAW, 2003) is an attempt at offering an account of linguistic ideas in their socio-cultural and political context.

⁷ With respect to the issue of heuristics, one cannot deny that historiographers of linguistics have too often relied on the “great texts” of the past. Therefore, our history has been a highly conventional one (as well as Europe-focused), excluding very often the “minor” productions (e.g., school grammars, practical dictionaries, information found in encyclopedias and general reference works). However, the sources considered “marginal” often throw light on the institutional, ideological and personal background of linguistic views and theories. Here we often touch upon the emerging state of ideas and models, as well as “hidden” self-appreciations or reflections on scientific practices which are never found in the canonical published sources. On this issue, see De Clercq; Swiggers (1991).

(3) Linguistic historiography asks linguistically relevant questions about historical “language-related practices”⁸: as such, historiographers of linguistics can, or should, offer insights to linguists interested in “what they are doing”⁹.

2. Organigram of the field

Rather than commenting on extant endeavours¹⁰ or possible practices in linguistic historiography – in terms of (a) types of data dealt with, (b) “depth” (or coverage) of the analysis, or (c) the more or less focusing on “internal”, or, on the contrary, “external” factors in the historical course of linguistics – it may seem more useful to consider the organization of the field in terms of input/output relations.

The following organigram visualizes the organization of the field:

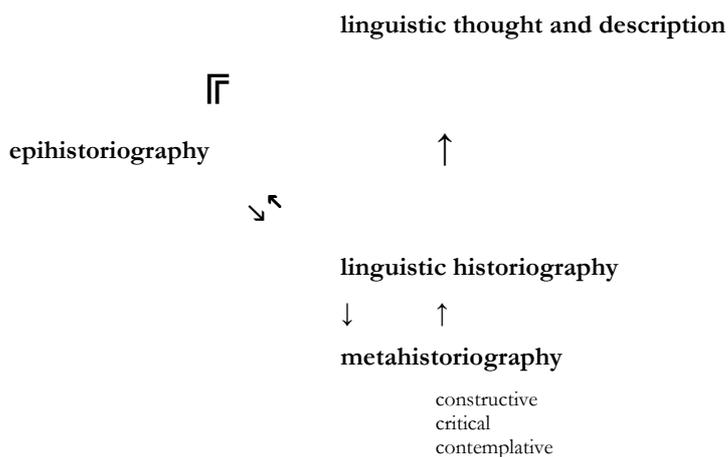
language structures/facts

↑

⁸ For a praxis-oriented approach of the history of linguistics, see the volume edited by Desmet; Jookien; Schmitter; Swiggers (2000).

⁹ One may be reminded of Saussure’s effort, in his general linguistic work, to make linguists aware of what they were actually studying and of how they should proceed. In a letter (dated January 4, 1894) he wrote to his former student Antoine Meillet: “*Mais je suis bien dégoûté de tout cela et de la difficulté qu’il y a en général à écrire seulement dix lignes ayant le sens commun en matière de faits de langage. Préoccupé surtout depuis longtemps de la classification logique de ces faits, de la classification des points de vue sous lesquels nous les traitons, je vois de plus en plus à la fois l’immensité du travail qu’il faudrait pour montrer au linguiste ce qu’il fait, en réduisant chaque opération à sa catégorie prévue, et en même temps l’assez grande variété de tout ce qu’on peut faire finalement en linguistique. [...] Cela finira malgré moi par un livre où, sans enthousiasme, j’expliquerai pourquoi il n’y a pas un seul terme employé en linguistique auquel j’accorde un sens quelconque. Et ce n’est qu’après cela, je l’avoue, que je pourrai reprendre mon travail au point où je l’avais laissé*”. [“Mas estou bem desgostoso de tudo isso e da dificuldade que existe em geral de se escrever dez linhas que tenham senso comum em matéria de fatos de língua. Preocupado sobretudo, há muito tempo, com a classificação lógica desses fatos, com a classificação dos pontos de vista sob os quais nós os tratamos, vejo cada vez mais a imensidão do trabalho que seria necessário para mostrar ao linguista o que ele faz, reduzindo cada operação à sua categoria prevista e, ao mesmo tempo, à enorme variedade de tudo o que se poderia fazer, finalmente, em linguística. [...] Isso acabará, contra minha vontade, em um livro em que, sem entusiasmo, eu explicarei por que não há um só termo empregado em linguística ao qual eu atribua um sentido qualquer. Não é senão depois disso, confesso, que poderei retomar meu trabalho do ponto em que o deixei.”, tradução de Cristina Altman, USP.]

¹⁰ For a critical analysis of a number of manuals for the history of linguistics, see Grottsch (1982) and Schmitter (1982).



<p> ▮▮ symbolizes a relationship of ‘material integration’ (factual information) ↑ symbolizes the relationship between description and object (of description) ↓ ↑ symbolizes cross-fertilization or mutual enrichment </p>

The basic components of this organigram can be succinctly defined as follows.

- *Linguistic structures/facts*: these are the (selected) facts¹¹ or clusters of facts relating to language structures and language situations (in the past) that have been the object of linguistic thought and description;
- *Linguistic thought and description*: this level includes all types of practices and conceptualizations¹² dealing with (even fragmentary) analysis, regulation, comparison, (historical/geographical/typological) classification, (esthetic) appraisal of languages. The cover term “linguistic thought and description” thus includes a wide range of linguistically (more or less) relevant “operations” on language structures; these range from the level of folk-linguistics (folk etymology; linguistic puns and games) and the development from notation techniques to sophisticated models for language analysis, and methodologies for (world-wide) language comparison. The historical course of “linguistic thought and description” constitutes the *history of linguistics* (to be interpreted in its “ontological” meaning).

¹¹ For a discussion of the singularity of historical facts in general, see Veyne (1971).

¹² Swiggers (1991b) offers a framework for the study of linguistic conceptualization as underlying the formulation of (language-related) knowledge; it is based on the idea that formation of new concepts basically involves a transfer or displacement of ideas (cf. TOULMIN, 1960 and SCHON, 1963). In such a view, the constitution of linguistic knowledge basically involves a process of transposition or metaphorization. In Swiggers (1991b) I have distinguished between three levels of metaphorization: (a) flat or superficial metaphorization; (b) metaphorization involving a transfer between adjacent cognitive domains; (c) metaphorization rooted in a schematization of language structures or in a global view of language. For a study of diagrammatic or tabular symbolization in linguistic theories, see Roggenbück (2005).

- *Linguistic historiography*: the descriptive-explanatory account¹³ of linguistic thought and description in the past (the “past” extending into the historiographer’s present perfect)¹⁴;
- *Epihistoriography*: this “lateral” branch of historiography concerns the history of the “agents” (individual language scholars¹⁵ as well as groups), and “material products” (papyri, manuscripts, books, articles, electronic texts, etc.), the latter forming the deposit of linguistic knowledge¹⁶. In addition, the epihistoriographical component also integrates the material documentation produced by historiographers, as a means for sustaining and strengthening metahistoriographical research.
- *Metahistoriography*: the field of reflexive activities taking as their object historiographical practices and products¹⁷. It is possible to distinguish three basic tasks (and, hence, components) of metahistoriography: (a) constructive; (b) critical; (c) contemplative. Constructive metahistoriography aims at developing models for the history-writing of linguistic thought and description, and at articulating a coherent, comprehensive and accurate metalanguage. Critical metahistoriography consists in evaluating, at the level of empirical documentation and at the level of methodological and epistemological principles, extant products of linguistic-historiographical practice. Contemplative metahistoriography is concerned with defining the object and status of linguistic historiography, with the foundation and justification of formats and profiles of historiography, and with “transcendent” problems, such as the concept of “historical fact”, or the notion of “truth” in the history of linguistics.

3. Approaches and profiles

The study of linguistic knowledge/know-how in its historical course lends itself to *two basic types* of analysis¹⁸: (1) an “itemizing (or: itemizing-immanent) approach, focusing on the emergence of specific linguistic insights, their formulation and diffusion, their possible transformation (adaptation or “exaptation”), their survival or disappearance; (2) a typologizing approach focusing on moulds (or modelizations) of linguistic knowledge.

¹³ As history-writing, all instances of linguistic historiography will to some extent involve a “narrative” account (see SCHMITTER, 1994).

¹⁴ I.e. the past is a bundle of segments that run to the “present”, the changing stance of the observer.

¹⁵ For a very useful collection of succinct biobibliographical accounts on scholars in the history of linguistics, see Stammerjohann (ed. 2009).

¹⁶ On the requirements of providing critical editions and commentaries on source-texts, see Gómez Asencio (2007).

¹⁷ For a wide-ranging discussion of the contents and theoretical challenges of metahistoriography, see Schmitter (1990, 2003) and Swiggers; Desmet; Jooken (1998a, b).

¹⁸ For a parallel drawn with history of a language vs historical grammar, see Swiggers (1983). As a matter of fact, the twofold approach of the history of linguistics – as a succession of formal thought-contents and techniques coupled with them, and as the development of a “linguistic culture” – has its parallel in the diachronic study of language: there also, there is the methodological choice between historical grammar and the (socio-cultural) history of a language, with both approaches highlighting different aspects of one complex evolution.

Approaches of the first type¹⁹ favour the analysis of (a) theories and concepts put forward by individual authors; (b) the emergence and spread of specific terms²⁰/concepts; (c) the reception of doctrines, insights or techniques. Approaches of the second type will focus on the (often slow) elaboration of “(research) programs”²¹ in the history of linguistics, on the continuity of a “word-oriented approach”²² in Western linguistics from Antiquity till the 19th century, or on the general evolution from referentially-based models to intensionally-based models, as it appears from the history of the word classes and their accidents in Western linguistics.

There is no real antagonism between the two types of approaches, and to some extent they can be combined within one and the same study. It is clear, however, that the itemizing approach will be more inclined towards a history of linguistic ideas and of “linguistic achievements”, hence a history of *res gestae*, whereas the second type of approach will tend towards a history of models and programs, i.e. a history of linguistic *agendas*.

Also, the two types of approaches can be linked with diverging *profiles* of history-writing: whereas the itemizing approach is much more liable to an “atomistic” or “conceptual-structural” treatment, the typologizing approach is likely to use an “architectonic-axiomatic” or “theory-correlative” profile²³. But then again, a “socio-correlative” way of history-writing will impose itself for both types when the research focus is on the social and institutional contextualization of linguistic ideas.

4. Synopsis of the linguistic historiographer’s terminology

¹⁹ For an example of a type of study focusing on the emergence and the evolution of a particular concept (and technique), viz. subject-predicate analysis, see Elffers-Van Ketel (1991).

²⁰ A number of historiographical studies on linguistic terms can be found in Colombat; Savelli (eds. 2001).

²¹ In Swiggers (1981a, 1991a; cf. 2004) I have argued for the use of a descriptive set of four research programs that can be discerned throughout the history of linguistics: the *correspondence* program (language viewed in its correlation with thought and reality); the *descriptivist* program (language viewed as being constituted of formal and functional entities and relations that can be captured in a descriptive account), the *socio-cultural* program (language viewed in its relation to social strata and socio-cultural configurations), and the *projection* program (language viewed as consisting of “districts” that can be described in terms of an intensional-logic or extensional-logic framework). In the publications referred to, the reader can find a description of each of these four programs in terms of their (a) scope, (b) area/angle of incidence, and (c) technique(s).

²² See, e.g., Law (1990).

²³ By “*profile*” I understand the integration within the historiographical (narrative, cf. note 13) account of either (1) a focus on the chronological sequence of particular events in the course of linguistic history (atomistic profile); (2) a preference given to the internal analysis of a particular cluster of concepts corresponding to a “theory” or “model” (conceptual-structural profile); (3) a comparison of theories in terms of assumptions, hypotheses, theorems, empirical statements, predictions, etc. (architectonic-axiomatic profile); (4) a study of correlations between ideas (theories) and contexts, i.e. ecolinguistic, socio-cultural, political, institutional contexts (theory-correlative profile). It should be stressed that there is no absolute one-to-one (nor “exclusiveness”) relation between profiles and approaches: e.g., an architectonic-axiomatic profile can be applied in the frame of an itemizing-immanent analysis of a particular cluster of concepts (it will then also be directly useful for a typologizing approach).

The terminological apparatus²⁴ of the linguistic historiographer crucially relates to three areas of description and explanation:

(1) **Anchoring points and clusters**: here terminology deals with

(1a) *discrete entities*: texts²⁵, authors, users;

(1b) *continua*: networks, institutions, schools, circles, societies.

(2) **Evolutionary lines**: here the historiographer's terminology concerns

(2a) the *general evolutionary course*²⁶: change; revolution; progress/stagnation/regress; maintenance/loss/recurrence; continuity/discontinuity²⁷; innovation; anticipation;

(2b) *relationships in time*: source; model; influence; '*horizon de rétrospection*²⁸'; '(theory) clash';

(2c) *evolutionary segments*: research programs²⁹; traditions³⁰; *cynosures*³¹; paradigms³².

(3) **Contents, Formats and Strategies**.

(3a) *cover designations*: such terms will refer to a particular theory, model or approach;

(3b) *formats*: here terms will refer to specific

(3b₁) theoretical concepts and principles;

²⁴ On the metalanguage of the historian in general, see Ankersmit (1981) and Swiggers (1987b).

²⁵ In Colombat; Lazcano (eds. 1998–2000) one can find an identical-format description of a corpus of representative source-texts taken from the history of various linguistic traditions.

²⁶ The issue of the evolutionary dynamics of linguistics should in my view (cf. Swiggers 2004, 2006) distinguish between short-term, mid-term and long-term processes (cf. Braudel's distinction between *courte durée*, *moyenne durée* and *longue durée*; see BRAUDEL, 1949, 1967–70), and should be explained in terms of discrepancies and a difference in evolutionary pace between the various layers of linguistic thought and practice: a "theoretical" layer, a "technical" layer, a "documentary" layer and a "contextual-institutional" layer (cf. Galison's three-layer model for describing the evolution in micro-physics; GALISON, 1987, 1997).

²⁷ See Robins (1976) and Swiggers (2003). For a case-study, viz. the transformation (or 'conversion') of the concept of 'etymology', see Swiggers (1996).

²⁸ For the use of this notion in linguistic historiography, see Auroux (1987).

²⁹ Cf. note 21, *supra*, and see Schmitter (1998) and Swiggers (1981a, 1991a).

³⁰ The notion of 'tradition' can be understood (and can be made operational) in a variety of ways:

- 1) as a 'national' tradition (e.g. Noordegraaf [1990], focusing on the Netherlands), 'ethnic' tradition (cf. WALDMAN, 1975) or 'geographically defined' tradition (cf. MILLER, 1975); for a wide-ranging comparison of areal-ethnic traditions of linguistics, see Itkonen (1991);
- 2) as a tradition linked with a scientific paradigm or type of linguistic investigation (e.g., the tradition of historical-comparative grammar); this conception of tradition can of course be combined with a 'national' focus (cf. GÖBELS, 1999);
- 3) as a tradition of 'linguistic investment' in function of a cultural, ideological and/or political aim; an interesting complex tradition of linguistic investment tied up with a religious and political agenda is 'missionary linguistics', a tradition that has become an intensively cultivated field of research in recent years (cf. Zwartjes – Altman [eds. 2005]; Zwartjes – Hovdhaugen [eds. 2004]; Zwartjes – James – Ridruejo [eds. 2007]; and see Ridruejo [2007] for a synthetic presentation of the field and methods of missionary linguistics);
- 4) a tradition, understood in a very broad manner, which is defined by a focus on a subgenre of linguistic practice (e.g. the tradition of bilingual/multilingual lexicography) or by a 'topical' focus on a particular language (cf. HÜLLEN, 1999).

³¹ This term is used by Hymes (1974, p.21) in order to refer to a sociolinguistically conceived paradigmatic grouping: "In short, to use current terms, a 'sociolinguistic' approach to the history of linguistics is necessary, if it is to approach 'explanatory adequacy'. Such an approach might be dubbed the study of 'cynosures and contexts', insofar as it takes its starting point from the former. [...] In sum, one will deal with the occurrence of a paradigm, or cynosure, as more than an intellectual accomplishment; one will deal with it as a process of sociocultural change".

³² The relevance of Kuhn's concept for the history-writing of linguistics has been critically examined by Percival (1976); see also Kuhn (1977).

(3b₂) techniques and styles of description;

(3b₃) T-theoretical terms³³;

(3c) *strategies*: here the historiographer's terminology should include terms (or variants of these) such as 'displacement of concepts'³⁴; 'transfer/transposition' (of concepts/techniques); 'bargaining'³⁵; 'borrowing'; 'adaptation/exaptation/recontextualization' ('new lamps for old'); 'marginalization' or 'eclipsing stand', as well as terms referring to the description of the rhetorical strategies used in propagandizing a particular theory or attacking competing theories³⁶.

5. Perspectives

We have dealt here with the status of linguistic historiography as an interdisciplinary undertaking, with its internal organization, and with the methodological and epistemological standards it has to meet. As an academic discipline, the historiography of linguistics has made tremendous progress in the past few decades: within the encompassing field of the language sciences it has witnessed a spectacular growth, not only in the sheer number of publications, but also in the number of academic practitioners and of national or international professional associations and societies. However, there still remains much work to be done, not only in terms of empirical historiographical contributions and theoretical assessments, but also with a view at the further (and definitive) integration of linguistic historiography in academic curricula worldwide³⁷. More particularly, historiographers of linguistics, in collaboration with historians of ideas and practitioners in the field of social history, should (not cease to) stress the scientific 'standing' of the history-writing of linguistics: as an interdisciplinary inquiry, based on solid methodological foundations, into the history of linguistics, it contributes to fundamental insights into the achievements (as well as missed opportunities), rewarding pathways (as well as loose ends), principles (and pseudo-principles), techniques³⁸ (as well as *bricolages*), theorems (and

³³ On the use of this concept in the philosophy and history of science, see Stegmüller (1979).

³⁴ Cf. Schon (1963, p. 36, 41): "Every theory of the formation of new concepts is also about discovering the way the world is. [...] Metaphors, in this sense, are the traces left by the displacement of concepts. They bear witness to complex processes of displacement of concepts over time just as present living species bear witness to biological evolutions. [...] But the displacement begins with the intimation of such a similarity and may be justified after the fact by pointing out the similarity in terms which are themselves results of displacement. Observation of analogies is the result and partial justification of the displacement of concepts".

³⁵ French term: *marchandage*. For a study of bargaining strategies in the adaptation of the Latinate word-and-paradigm model for the description of the Gallo-Romance vernaculars in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, see Swiggers (1988).

³⁶ See, e.g., Harris (1989), and, more generally, Harris (1993).

³⁷ See Fernández Pérez (2001, 2007) for reflections and proposals concerning the academic implementation of the historiography of linguistics.

³⁸ See Swiggers (2003, and forthcoming) for an argumentation as to why linguistic historiography can be viewed as a particular application of *l'histoire des techniques* (as practised, e.g., by Marcel Mauss, André Leroi-Gourhan, André-G. Haudricourt, etc.).

assumptions) that have marked the evolutionary course of man's interest in the basic metaphor conveying sense (and non-sense) to life: language. An all too human history of pride and prejudice*.

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