

## Four decades in historical linguistics (for 40@40, *Diachronica* 2024)

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I entered graduate school in 1984, the year *Diachronica* was born. Students in my department were mostly syntacticians or Indo-Europeanists; I was one of the latter. I had memorable classes in syntax, phonology, Iroquoian, Oceanic, and the history of linguistics, but most were on Indo-European (IE). This included a year of IE phonology and morphology, multiple semesters of Hittite, and semester courses on many subjects: Anatolian languages; Avestan; Gothic; Greek dialects; Italic dialects; Old Irish; Vedic Sanskrit; and IE law, poetics, and syntax (a semester each). One seminar focused entirely on a draft of the English version of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov's *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans* (1995). In short, my historical linguistics education was somewhat traditional and decidedly privileged. From within, it felt like neither: it was just graduate school.

My IE linguistics teachers were Cal Watkins, Joki Schindler, and (replacing Joki in 1987) Mark Hale. From all three, I learned lessons I try to apply in my own work and to convey to my own students. From Cal, I learned how to ground linguistic research in the evidence of texts studied in their rich cultural contexts. From Joki, I learned how to reason with precision about the interplay of morphological and phonological change. From Mark, I learned how to analyze syntax and its interactions with phonology and pragmatics in languages known only from literary corpora. All three were inspiring in the quality of their work, intimidating in the breadth and depth of their knowledge, and generous to their students.

I also absorbed certain biases while in graduate school. These were mostly not explicitly taught and they were not all shared by all my teachers, but I did somehow internalize them. When I consider changes in the field of historical linguistics, I think about my unlearning of these biases. I had only the experiences I had, so it is sometimes hard for me to disentangle how many of the following four changes are shifts in my awareness and how many are shifts in the field as a whole. No doubt there is a mix of explanations.

The first and most parochial shift involves boundaries in IE linguistics. For a Harvard IE student in the 1980s, the biggest annual event was the East Coast Indo-European Conference, an invitation-only affair held each year at a different university. It was exciting and connecting — but limiting. Colleagues who believed that Proto-Indo-European had four laryngeals rather than the correct number, three, were not invited to speak. Tolerating such heresies would inhibit progress, it was said, reducing the meeting to pointless debates over long-settled questions. This seemed reasonable to me at the time, like boundary maintenance elsewhere in linguistics that I unthinkingly accepted; nor did it yet call to mind counting angels on a pinhead. Today, in any case, this and other conferences are more eclectic, and are stronger for it.

A second shift, more significant for historical linguistics as a whole, involves language contact. Four decades ago, an odor of disrepute enveloped contact-based diachronic explanations, hypotheses about substrate effects on early and ancestral languages, and even studies of creole diachrony. Attempts by Kretschmer (1896) and successors to find traces of a pre-Greek “Pelasgian” language made a cautionary tale, recounted like a ghost story at a campfire. Treating contact and creolization processes as “unnatural” inevitably marginalized those who studied them (Garrett 2023:314). All this began to change in the 1990s,

thanks to many linguists (e.g., Thomason and Kaufman 1988, van Coetsem 1988, Nichols 1992, Mufwene 1996, Ross 1996). Today, it is common to attend to both descent and diffusion in language change, or to disentangle their intertwined effects (e.g., Labov 2007, Babel et al. 2013, Cathcart et al. 2018). IE research itself features creative, respected explorations of early interactions with possible contact and substrate languages (e.g., Lubotsky 2001, Meiser and Hackstein 2005, Schrijver 2014, Kallio 2017).

A third shift is similar. Despite its IE roots (Meillet 1921, Kuryłowicz 1965), grammaticalization long seemed to occupy the periphery of historical linguistics. My sense as a PhD student was that this research area was *déclassé* and that venues seen as encouraging it — *Diachronica*, for one, and the International Conference on Historical Linguistics — were to be avoided. I did not see that this was a symptom of the broader disdain for “functionalist” linguistics among “formalists,” including Indo-Europeanists focusing on “Analogisterei” (Fick 1883:583) and Lautwandel. Grammaticalization has now moved to the center and is taken seriously by historical linguists of all stripes (e.g., Haspelmath 1999, Eckardt 2006, Kiparsky 2012, Deo 2015); *Diachronica* and ICHL are meeting places for the whole field. These changes too have been beneficial.

Finally, our field has been transformed by its quantitative turn. Statistical methods came to historical linguistics from analyses of cultural traits by Kroeber (e.g., 1919), subsequently extended to linguistic traits (e.g., Kroeber and Chrétien 1937) and popularized by Swadesh (1952) and others. Lexicostatistics and glottochronology as such were in disrepute by the 1980s, thanks to the demonstrably false assumption of a constant rate of lexical change as well as skepticism about diachronic inferences from vocabulary. Since 2000, however, statistical methods adapted from biological systematics, applied to both vocabulary and non-vocabulary traits, have led to new results in language families around the world (e.g., Haynie and Bowern 2016, Michael and Chousou-Polydouri 2019, Greenhill et al. 2023) — nowhere more effectively than in Austronesian (e.g., Gray and Jordan 2000, Gray et al. 2009). Ironically, despite the central role of Indo-European in the development of historical linguistics, that language family has experienced whiplash in statistical phylogenetics, with a prominent analysis (Gray and Atkinson 2003) subsequently revised (Bouckaert et al. 2012, 2013), rebutted (Chang et al. 2015), and counterrebutted (Heggarty et al. 2023). Who knows what the future holds?

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