

A History of Modern Linguistics: From the beginnings to World War II. By JAMES MCELVENNY. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. Pp. ix + 202. ISBN 9781474470025. \$29.95.

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This book covers a century and a half of major developments in linguistics and should be of wide interest. Its author has also written a book on the English writer C. K. Ogden's linguistic and philosophical circle (McElvenny 2018) and articles and book chapters on the history of linguistics, and he has edited or co-edited six volumes in this field (e.g. McElvenny 2023). His excellent podcast *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences* is mainly structured around interviews with linguists and language scientists and often covers periods that are treated in this book (<https://hiphilangsci.net/category/podcast/>). All this experience shows plainly in James McElvenny's new contribution to the field.

I approached *A history of modern linguistics* as a linguist with experience in Indo-European historical linguistics and philology who has reoriented himself toward documentary linguistics in the Americanist tradition established by Franz Boas and developed by his successors over many generations. In these areas I am most likely to appreciate subtleties and to perceive gaps or weaknesses. Other readers may be more attentive to our field's links with philosophy and psychology, or to how structuralist linguistics in the 1930s and 1940s prefigured the formalism of the 1950s (not to mention its heirs in the generative era). But whatever your interests in the foundations of linguistics, M's lucid, clearly organized book is likely to reward your reading. And though not a textbook, it will be especially valuable for students.

For M, 'modern' linguistics begins with the institutionalization of the field via the creation of German university positions in the early nineteenth century — the era of Friedrich Schlegel and Franz Bopp. Many such scholars worked on what we now call Indo-European languages. Other figures, like the Uralicist Sámuel Gyarmathi (1799), had other kinds of jobs and intellectual networks and fall outside this book's scope. It ends after World War II, with Zellig S. Harris's *Methods in structural linguistics* (1951). Harris was Noam Chomsky's teacher, as M observes near the end of Ch. 16, the implication being that the next, tumultuous episode in the history of linguistics needs its own story. In the 1950s and 1960s (a lifetime ago), the 'modern' era thus yielded to what we may call 'contemporary' linguistics. In short, as M explains (1), this is a more focused book than Robins's classic *A short history of linguistics* (1967), whose story begins in Greek antiquity, and broader than Morpurgo Davies's unmatched *Nineteenth-century linguistics* (1998).

M's book has 17 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion (9 pages). Some chapter titles name subjects that all linguists will see as central, whether or not the details are familiar; others are less canonical. The 15 central chapters (averaging 10 pages each) can be arranged in four main parts. Chs. 2 ('Comparative-historical grammar') through 7 ('Critiques of Neogrammarian doctrine') mainly follow nineteenth-century historical linguistics. European structuralism is the focus of Chs. 8 (on Ferdinand de Saussure: 'Language as a system'), 9 ('The

phoneme'), and 10 ('Prague Circle structuralism'). Complementing these, Chs. 11 ('The beginnings of functionalism'), 12 ('Meaning and British linguistics'), and 13 ('Functionalism in Central Europe and North America') largely concern meaning. The material of Chs. 14 ('The beginnings of American structuralism'), 15 ('Linguistic relativity'), and 16 ('The culmination of American structuralism') should be self-explanatory. Chs. 1-16 end with suggestions for further reading. There are no notes: this is for the general linguistic reader.

This book's greatest strength is its attention to broader intellectual contexts. Unlike many insider histories, this is not an account of how successive linguists' claims about language were grounded empirically or articulated in their writing. It is an intellectual history of linguistics in dialogue with other disciplines in their varied scientific and historical contexts. 'The character of linguistic scholarship was also influenced', in M's words (179), 'by the social and political environment outside the academy.' Half the discussion of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (14-17) thus concerns historicism as a response to Enlightenment rationalism and how this helps clarify the Grimms' varied projects. The chapter on Boas has an interesting exposition of his intellectual debts to Adolf Bastian and to Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt (144-150). And Eurasianism and Gestalt psychology are identified among other ideas informing the Prague School (102, 105-106). These do not appear in Anderson's magisterial history of twentieth-century phonology, whose different focus instead affords space for linguistic details supporting topics like Nikolaj Trubetzkoy's ideas about contrast (Anderson 2021:115-119).

In discussing Saussure's famous (1878) monograph on Proto-Indo-European 'coefficients sonantiques' (81-83), M emphasizes his 'conception of languages as systems' and how it anticipates the structuralism of his later *Cours de linguistique* (1916). He does not rehearse Saussure's evidence (e.g. the morphophonemics of Sanskrit and Greek nasal presents) or the argumentation in what Meillet called 'the most beautiful book of comparative grammar ever written' (1913:123, a judgment endorsed by Morpurgo Davies 2004:15). While some readers may miss such details, overall they would have added hundreds of pages. I appreciated the scale and scope of this book.

I also appreciated M's attention to the history of functionalism, often 'relegated to the margins of disciplinary linguistics' (109). Ch. 11 discusses Philipp Wegener's ideas in their context, including his influence on Hermann Paul's understanding of semantic change. The linguist J. R. Firth and the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski are the subjects of Ch. 12. A lucid account of Firth's ideas explains prosodies, hints at word-and-paradigm morphology, and shows how these flow from Firth's sociopolitical contexts in British colonialism and then in the Second World War. Malinowski's ethnographic work in the Trobriand Islands represents another site of colonialism that led to an attention to language in context.¹ Both Firth and Malinowski, M adds (124-125), acknowledged a debt to Wegener; both seem to foreshadow the contemporary

¹ M describes Malinowski's way of presenting texts (124) without explaining how (or if) it differed from that of Boas and his students, whose conception of culture centered texts (Epps et al. 2017), often presented in very similar ways. Malinowski had a high opinion of his own originality: Stocking (1995:13-14) called him 'the self-proclaimed inventor of modern fieldwork', whereas Boas's student Lowie (1937:230) wrote that Malinowski's 'field technique conforms to Boas's standards'.

pragmatics tradition. And some of the British linguistic and philosophical currents that surrounded them recur in M's fascinating discussion of the broader contexts of the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' in Ch. 15 (157-161).

In a few places I might have told the story differently. For example, M highlights the regularity of sound change as a neogrammarian idea and rightly emphasizes that its flip side is analogical change (60-63).² But I think he underrates analogy. The neogrammarian journal was called *Morphologische Untersuchungen* ('Morphological Investigations'), and it published important studies of morphology, including Hermann Osthoff's (1878) analysis of numeral contamination. Even the elegant paper in which Karl Verner (1877) teased out the Germanic sound change that now bears his name depends on identifying and setting aside the numerous apparent counterexamples that result from paradigm leveling. 'Once [Grimm's Law] was elaborated to include greater phonetic detail,' M writes (62), 'the apparent exceptions disappeared.' But it was the uniformitarian recognition that analogical changes operate at all linguistic stages that made Verner's discovery possible.

A mark of success in a concise history is that readers think of topics they wish its author had covered, or had written about in more detail. The gap that strikes me is in dialectology, areal and contact linguistics, and other precursors of what came to be called sociolinguistics (Bright 1966). The late nineteenth century saw many dialect studies, often by students of the neogrammarians testing their teachers' claims about regularity (e.g. Winteler 1876). In connection with Indo-European reconstruction and the putative regularity of sound change, M does (72-75) discuss the notorious irregularity of the Rhenish fan and the neogrammarian critic Johannes Schmidt's (1872) wave model of diffusion.³ But the first fieldwork-based analyses of linguistic diffusion date from the same period (e.g. Trautmann 1880, Gauchat 1902); the early twentieth century was the heyday of European dialectology (e.g. Gilliéron & Edmont 1902-12, Jaberg & Jud 1928-40). Max Weinreich's earliest work (e.g. Haylperin & Vaynraykh 1928-29) and the founding of the Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut (YIVO) in 1925 belong to the same milieu. All these in turn anchor Uriel Weinreich's work (Weinreich 1953, Weinreich et al. 1968), just as the Linguistic Atlas of New England (Kurath 1939) is the essential starting point for William Labov's (1963) brilliant Martha Vineyard study; see also Koerner 2001. In short, the transformation of sociolinguistics *avant la lettre* into the field that arose in the 1960s is parallel to the shift from American structuralism to the generative phonology and syntax of the 1960s. Nor were these trends isolated from each other: Uriel Weinreich himself was a student of Jakobson and André Martinet in the 1940s (and the latter's colleague in the 1950s) and was greatly influenced by Chomsky in the 1960s (Bleaman 2017); and Labov's and Martinet's concerns with structural patterns are closely linked. I would happily read whatever M might write (maybe in a future expanded edition) about dialect geography, contact linguistics, and allied fields, both in

² It is not quite accurate that analogy was 'a cover term for any kind of change that fell outside the purview of the sound laws' (62), since the neogrammarians also recognized non-law-like (irregular) pronunciation changes (e.g. dissimilation, metathesis) as well as changes due to borrowing. But M is right to say that neogrammarians (not to mention some modern successors) sometimes explain an exception 'by pulling an analogy out of a hat' (71).

³ M briefly mentions Sprachbünde, too, in connection with Eurasianism (102).

themselves and in relation to structuralist linguistics.

Throughout the history of modern linguistics, there has been a tension between technical precision and the broader dimensions of language research. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in M's words, 'comparative-historical linguistics ... became increasingly narrow and technical in scope, concentrating ever more on the minute details of grammatical forms.' August Schlegel in 1831 mocked this 'Pedanterei' while others supported 'the scientific study of languages for their own sake' (M 14, 35). More than a century later, in a 1955 letter to the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (a former president of the Linguistic Society of America), his daughter Ursula K. Le Guin wrote that contemporary linguistics seemed 'self-contained' and 'very narrow' (her emphasis); he responded that 'precision has become an obsessive end in itself' for many linguists.⁴ Plus ça change: the story of linguistics has always included the challenge of finding distinctive, effective analytic tools that will lead to new ideas about a phenomenon, language, that matters to everyone and affects so many aspects of human life. All too often, we are disciplinary gatekeepers while asking outsiders to be interested in our work.

I recommend *A history of modern linguistics* to colleagues and students in linguistics and all allied fields. This book as a whole has a big story to tell, but it will also reward selective reading. Whatever their goals, thoughtful linguists will find questions of interest and echoes of the present day in James McElvenny's lively, stimulating discussion of our past.

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⁴ See Garrett 2023:19. Le Guin is known as a novelist and poet, of course, and as a conlanger (Le Guin 2019, Le Guin & Barton 2018): she was not a linguist. But she grew up around anthropology and linguistics and was a critical reader of her father's work on statistical methods in historical linguistics.

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