The Handbook of Historical Linguistics

Edited by

Brian D. Joseph and Richard D. Janda
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I think we agree: the past is over.*
George W. Bush, May 10, 2000 (quoted in the *Dallas Morning News*)

Who can produce a book entirely free of mistakes?
Theodosius Grigorievich Dobzhansky, 1970

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* Here, “we” = (i) Bush, then governor of Texas, and (ii) John McCain, US Senator from Arizona and formerly Bush’s main competitor in the Republican primary elections preceding his successful campaign for the US presidency.
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Preface

Any large-scale work like this typically involves a huge amount of effort on the part of a great many individuals, and such is certainly the case with the present volume. Given the enormous debt of gratitude owed by the editors to all the participants in this massive project, we are moved to adopt (and adapt) the phrasing which Peter Schickele (1976: xvii) was led to use in expressing his thanks for the help he had received with one of his books (though of a very different nature):

A project of this scope could not be realized without the aid of many people... [ – ] or rather it could, but it would be dumb to do it that way when there are so many people around willing to give their aid. It is impossible to thank by name every single person who helped... but it would be a... shame if... [the editors] didn’t mention those to whom... [they are] most deeply indebted.

Most importantly, the authors represented here have all been very cooperative and, on the whole, quite prompt. Inasmuch as this work has developed over a long period of time – the initial proposal for the volume was first put together in 1994 – we especially thank all parties involved for their indulgence and patience at moments when the book occasionally seemed to be barely inching its way toward the finish line. To a great extent, the single longest delay resulted from our working through several conceptions of our introductory chapter, which we finally came to see not as a mere curtain-raiser to open the volume, but as an attempt to wrestle with significant but rarely addressed questions concerning the general nature of historical linguistics, even if this extended the work’s gestation period beyond what any of us originally expected or could easily have imagined.

Still, even with the passage of so much time – or even precisely because of it – we are encouraged by the following apposite words (brought to our attention by William Clausing) from Nietzsche’s 1886 book Morgenröte: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile (“Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality”),
which we here give after an excerpt (p. 5) from the 1997 translation by R. J. Hollindale (edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter):

Above all, let us say it slowly. . . . This preface is late, but not too late. . . . – what, after all, do five or six years matter? A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both. . . . just as much as. . . . [the] book, are friends of lento. It is not for nothing that one has been a philologist; perhaps one is a philologist still – that is to say, a teacher of slow reading: in the end, one also writes slowly. . . . [. P]atient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists; it asks: learn to read me well!

Whether just understandably human or else all too human in explanation, the lengthy preparation-time expended on this volume makes it hard for us to list exhaustively all the input and assistance that have gone into making the final product what it is. Still, we would like to single out by name a number of people and institutions for special thanks. Most of all, we gratefully acknowledge the support of our respective families and relatives, the sore trying of whose patience must sometimes have led them to wonder whether our jobs required them to be Jobs. We are also extremely appreciative of the help provided over the years by several research assistants, especially Toby Gonsalves, Steve Burgin, Mike Daniels, and Pauline Welby. To the staff at Blackwell Publishing, particularly Beth Remmes and Tami Kaplan, we are forever indebted for their unusual tolerance of our persistent tinkering, their willingness to accommodate their schedules to our work habits, and their enthusiasm for the project in the first place (from the earliest moments of Philip Carpenter’s first conversations with us through Steve Smith’s encouragement along the way). Finally, we thank the Department of Linguistics, along with the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, both at The Ohio State University, for providing significant support in the form of subsidies for postage and xeroxing, computer accounts, and access to research assistants.

It is traditional to offer a dedication for a book; how could a volume on historical linguistics not embrace such a tradition wholeheartedly? Since a dedication to our families could not even begin to express adequately our appreciation for their long suffering through seemingly endless discussions of individual chapters and related issues, followed by the thrashing out of draft after draft of the introduction, we promise them other compensation for their sacrifices. Hence we must turn elsewhere for an appropriate object of our dedication – though not completely.

In a sense, virtually all our efforts in editing this handbook have confronted us with the inescapable fact that the best work in linguistic diachrony nearly always involves various sorts of collaboration – collaboration that is at times even family-like (parental or filial, between teachers and students; fraternal or sororal, among colleagues and competitors), but more often just amicable, and almost invariably cooperative in several senses. For example, in cases where investigators of language change express violent disagreement with
their predecessors, a closer look tends to reveal that a strong rebuttal of an earlier position may still crucially presuppose some determinative phrasing of scholarly questions, an indispensable collation of the facts, or pioneering paleographic spadework by the previous researcher being criticized. Just as often, advances in historical linguistics arise via the progressive, mosaic-like accumulation of contributions that gradually come to cover all relevant aspects of, and perspectives on, a particular diachronic problem. Increasingly, too, breakthroughs in various specializations have brought such complexity to linguistic diachrony as a whole that a single person cannot gain or maintain expertise in all of its subfields, and therefore a collaborative approach becomes inescapable. In all of these instances, scholarly cooperation and collectivity really do provide demonstrable benefits for individuals, since they allow the weaknesses of one researcher to be compensated for by the strengths of another. After all, as the author of the Argentine gaucho epic Martín Fierro put matters (albeit within a very different context) – cf. Hernández (1872: 33, lines 1057–8; our translation): “It’s not unusual for one person to be short of something that another person has more than enough of.”

One aspect of collaboration has to do, of course, with interdisciplinary research. A solid beginning in this direction already exists in the many writings which compare diachronic or synchronic linguistics with biology (especially its evolutionary aspects) and paleontology. In a field which calls itself “historical linguistics,” focusing on change over time, one might also expect to encounter substantial cross-contacts in which (diachronic) linguists react to the work of historians and other students of time and change – especially philosophers, but also anthropologists, psychologists, and physicists. In preparing our introductory chapter, though, we were surprised to find so few recent discussions by linguistic diachronicians of intersections between our field and the work of historians or other specialists on time and change. The extensive scope of our introductory essay is therefore due in large part to our having attempted to discuss a judicious selection of directly relevant historical and time- or change-related work. Since we are not specialists in those fields, our remarks concerning them should be taken as suggestive leads intended to goad our readers into joining us in exploring links with those other disciplines. Their doing so will promote collaboration more than sufficient to make up for any castigation we may receive at the hands of those with greater sophistication in the above-mentioned fields.

At this juncture, however, we can probably best promote interdisciplinary approaches to language change by acknowledging briefly, with admiration and astonishment, the standard set for linguists by those (non-linguistic) historians who sift through what seem like not only mountains but even mountain ranges of written and other evidence in their studies of earlier times. We have in mind here, besides a number of studies mentioned in our introductory chapter, such volumes as Gerhard L. Weinberg’s meticulously documented The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany (1970–80) and his even more comprehensive A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II (1994), or David Hackett Fischer’s
Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America (1989) – as broad as it is deep – and his more specialized Paul Revere’s Ride (1994). Thus, for example, though Fischer (1994) focuses on a subject which might seem already to have been strip-mined to oblivion by earlier historians, he succeeds in reaching original conclusions by basing its 17 chapters of connected narrative and analysis (pp. 1–295) on 124 pages of documentation, the latter including 19 appendices (pp. 297–325), 12 historiographical summaries (pp. 327–44), 46 categories of primary-source listings (pp. 345–72, with an overview on p. 345), and 841 notes (pp. 373–421). Even more exemplary is the documentation in Weinberg (1994b) – more than 3,000 notes (of two sorts, filling over 180 pages), supplemented by 23 maps and a 24-page bibliographical essay on the variety of published and archival sources consulted (the major abbreviations alone taking three pages to list) – given that its wealth of unpublished material allows Weinberg to establish multiple points of detailed fact which in turn justify more global conclusions of great novelty and insight. In the presence of such scholarship, we do not see how any historically minded researcher could react otherwise than as Beethoven said he would do (here in our retranslation; cf. Thayer et al. 1908: 455–8 on the tangled transmission of the composer’s remarks) in expressing his esteem for Handel: “I would bare my head and fall to my knees!”

Still, regardless of the degree to which they do or do not individually cross inter- or intra-disciplinary boundaries, we are convinced that the chapters of this volume together demonstrate the value, utility, and necessity of collaboration in work on language change: no single author, living or dead, could possess the expertise in all branches of historical linguistics needed in order to author alone a handbook like this. Similarly, the combination of planning, advisory commenting, and introduction-writing carried out by the editors has been possible only through a highly collaborative effort. And sometimes even the names of collaborating authors and/or editors can undergo a kind of fusion. In a number of our own joint works (supplementary to our independent writings), although all of these have been produced via absolutely equal participation, there have even occasionally been variations in the ordering of our names (a case in point being that for the editorship of this handbook as a whole versus that for the authorship of this preface and the introduction). Such variable orderings have caused bibliographical conundrums occasionally finessed by references to “J and J.”

Now, in all humility, we readily admit that we are not now, nor are we ever likely to be, the best-known – and we certainly are not the first – J and J to collaborate in historical linguistics. Rather, both of these distinctions seem likely to be held in perpetuity by Karl Jaberg (1877–1958) and Jakob Jud (1882–1952); cf., for example, Bronstein et al. (1977: 102–3, 111–12). Besides publishing many individual works, these two giants of Romance dialectology and its diachronic implications co-authored the monumental Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz (1928–40); this “Linguistic and Material Atlas of Italy and Southern Switzerland” consists of eight primary volumes, plus three
supplemental ones, and it contains more than 1,700 maps. (It in turn served as the main model for the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (Kurath et al. 1939–43), whose staff Jud helped to train.) Most importantly, though, the joint productions of this earlier J-and-J pair provide exactly the model for linguistic diachronicians’ (and variationists’) collaboration to which we aspire and which we so highly recommend; cf. Malkiel (1959: 259):

[T]he two Swiss scholars were . . . different in temperaments, tastes, and ambitions. It was their ability to bridge this . . . discernible gap in embarking on a joint venture, with thorough mutual respect for . . . [each other’s] accomplishments and inclinations, that assured the[ir] . . . success. . . . Jaberg . . . and Jud exemplify a team who succeeded in maintaining their bonds of loyalty . . . through different stages of their . . . lives, despite . . . occasional disagreements on matters of detail. No severer test of a person’s tact and delicacy has ever been devised.

While Jaberg and Jud had the luxury of frequently conferring in person as they carried out their joint work on dialectology and diachrony, the field of historical linguistics – especially, again, historical Romance linguistics – provides several equally encouraging instances of long-distance collaboration (a difficult circumstance of which we two have become acutely aware while finishing the joint editing of this volume via messages, phone calls, and mailings back and forth across the Atlantic).

One of the most inspiring such examples involves the international exchange of scholarly papers and epistolary consultations between a German-born Austrian and a Spaniard who, despite their very different backgrounds, circumstances, and ages, remained in touch as they each matched their long lifetimes with publication lists characterized by not only length but also longevity (i.e., active shelf-lives). Given that mail delivery by train between major European cities – especially before the rise of air transport during and following World War II – was once astoundingly rapid (even by today’s standards), a question/answer pair of messages traveling by rail from Graz to Madrid and back could be exchanged faster than many twenty-first-century scholars read and answer their e-mail via the Internet. Thus, in the decades straddling the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, it often took only two days for a letter from Hugo (Ernst Maria) Schuchardt (1842–1927) to reach Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869–1968) when they were corresponding about their prolific contributions to so many fields. Schuchardt wrote on Romance dialects and Vulgar Latin, but also more generally; he specialized in analogy, etymology, and sound-“laws” – regarding the last of which he took on the Neogrammarians, as in his 1885 *Über die Lautgesetze: gegen die Junggrammatiker* – and he was an initiator of creole and language-contact studies (cf. Baggioni 1996). Menéndez Pidal, too, was a dialectologist, but he is best known for founding historical philology in Spain through his tireless activities in editing medieval texts, developing (from 1904 through its twelfth edition in 1966) an increasingly detailed *Manual de gramática histórica española* (“Handbook of Spanish Historical Grammar”), publishing
on stylistics, founding a journal, training students, and presiding for more than thirty years over the Royal Spanish Academy (cf. Portolés 1996).

The poignant culmination of the mutually supportive communications between Schuchardt and Menéndez Pidal arguably came when the Austrian, in his early eighties, was asked to contribute an original study as a collegial offering for the festschrift (three volumes, later published as Comisión organizadora 1925) then being prepared in honor of his Spanish correspondent. Schuchardt responded with a poem explaining that, although his arms were too weak to carry the heavy dictionaries needed for a work of scholarship, and his eyes too tired to read the tiny print of their contents, he could still send a simple greeting in verse to the man who had edited – and done so much else to promote the study of – the twelfth-century Spanish epic “El cantar de mio Cid” (“The Song of My Cid”), itself a poem celebrating Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (c.1043–99), the noble warrior-champion (in older Spanish, campeador) who had become known as el Cid (from Spanish Arabic as-sūd “the lord”). In his boyhood, wrote Schuchardt (1925), the story of el Cid had provided him with a radiant paragon of heroism to whom he dedicated childish verses. But then Ramón Menéndez Pidal’s editions of that epic narrative had firmly linked the fame of Don Rodrigo with the name of the poem’s energetic and academically fearless editor – Don Ramón – thus again justifying use of a salutation from long ago to address a warrior-champion of philology: “Mío Cid Campeador.” In light of such a magnanimous gesture, it is our wish that every historical linguist should be able to correspond, and even to collaborate, with an altruistic, truly encouraging colleague of this sort.5

We are hopeful, then, that these kinds of productive close cooperation among investigators of language change will turn out to be at least as common and as fruitful later in the new century and millennium as they are now, and as they were in previous centuries. Such a pooling of strengths and resources is dictated not only by the above-mentioned growing complexity of differing specializations within research on linguistic diachrony, but also by the fact that – as our introductory chapter emphasizes in several places (especially its concluding sections) – a sharing of labor between studies of changes completed in the past and studies of ongoing changes in the present seems likely to provide the surest basis for progress in our field. And these dual foci of attention virtually demand a maximum of coordinated joint work – of collaboration.

We therefore dedicate this book to the spirit of cooperation and collaboration in historical linguistics – past, present, and future. This attitude is embodied (if not directly expressed) by the following anonymous poem in Sanskrit, the language whose growing importance in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century philology is generally viewed as having provided perhaps the major impetus for the ensuing development of historical linguistics into a science. The verses in question were anthologized by Böhtlingk (1870: 175) as no. 940 (no. 346 in his earlier, shorter edition); we present them first in devanagari script and then in transliteration, followed by our more metrical and referentially broader adaptation of the translation by Brough (1968: 69;
no. 62). We know of no more eloquent way to symbolize the interconnectedness of (i) time and history, (ii) scholarship via friendly collaboration, and – by implication – (iii) language:

\[
\text{ādāu tanvyo brhanmadhyā vistārīṇāḥ pade pade} \\
\text{yāyinyo na nivartante satām mātṛyaḥ saritsamāḥ}
\]

Quite lean at first, they quickly gather force, and grow in richness as they run their course; Once started, back again they do not bend: Great rivers, years, and ties to a good friend.

Richard D. Janda
The American Library in Paris

Brian D. Joseph
Columbus, Ohio

NOTES


2 The original Spanish of Hernández’ gaucho narrator (1872: 33) states: “No es raro que a uno le falte / lo que [a] algún otro le sobre.”

3 Weinberg (1994) is unique in combining presentation of details like Hitler’s 1940 order to ready plans for invading Switzerland – a project, “[o]riginally code-named operation ‘Green’, renamed ‘Christmas Tree’ when the former . . . was applied to the planned invasion of Ireland” (pp. 174, 982nn.219–23) – with discussion of such higher-level conclusions as the tactical failure (and not just the strategic error) of Pearl Harbor’s bombing: “The ships were for the most part raised; by the end of December . . . [, 1941,] two of the battleships . . . imagined sunk were on their way to the West Coast for repairs . . . [, and ultimately all but the Arizona returned to service” (pp. 258–62, 1004–5nn.338–57). The story- and script-writers of the 2001 film Pearl Harbor should have read Weinberg (1994) first.

4 Thayer et al. (1908: 455–8) give the German version of what Beethoven said as: “Ich würde mein Haupt entblößen und . . . niederknieen!”
Schuchardt’s (1925) original German is as follows: “Einst, in meinen Kinderjahren . . .[,] / Strahlte mir der Cid als Vorbild / Wahren Heldentums entgegen, / Und ich weih’ ihm kind’sche Verse . . . / Mit dem Ruhm von Don Rodrigo / Habt Ihr, Don Ramón, den Euren / Fest verknüpft . . . / . . . Nun . . . / steigt wie einst der Gruß empor: / Mío Cid Campeador.” For the previously mentioned information about the speed of early twentieth-century mail delivery by train between Austria and Spain, we are indebted to Bernhard Hurch, who now holds Schuchardt’s chair at the University of Graz (where there is a Schuchardt archive which maintains a site on the World-Wide Web).

In contrast to the preceding endnoted remarks, we should inform our readers that (with rare exceptions) no original non-English versions are given for any of the quotations included in the following introductory discussion of the topics and contents found in this volume. This decision to use only translations (which are uniformly our own, if not otherwise attributed) in the general introduction to the book reflects not our preferences, but the need to achieve at least some economies of space in an already lengthy essay.
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In this introduction to the entire present volume – a collection of chapters by scholars with expertise in subareas of historical linguistics that together serve to define the field – we seek to accomplish three goals. First, we present and explicate what we believe to be a particularly revealing and useful perspective on the nature of language, the nature of change, and the nature of language change; in so doing, we necessarily cover some key issues in a rather abbreviated fashion, mainly identifying them so that they may together serve as a frame encompassing the various subsequent chapters. Second, we introduce the book itself, since we feel that in many respects this volume is unique in the field of linguistic diachrony. Third and finally, we seize the opportunity provided by the still relatively recent turn of both the century and the millennium to step back for a moment, as it were, and use the image of historical linguistics that emerges from the representative set of papers in this handbook for the purpose of reflecting on what the present and future trajectory of work in our field may – and can – be.
Thus, in the first part of this introduction, we do not hesitate to address extremely general, even philosophical, issues concerning language, change, and language change – whereas, in its second part, we focus on more concrete matters pertaining to the volume at hand, and, in its third part, we present a modest, minimal synthesis that aims to assess what are likely to be the most promising avenues and strategies for investigation as research on linguistic change continues to move forward to (the study of) the past. As we pursue these three goals, we intentionally do not at any point give chapter-by-chapter summaries. Rather, we weave in references to chapters as we discuss major issues in the field, with references to the authors here represented given in small capitals when they occur.

The particular thematic organization of our discussion, however, does not alter the fact that the major sections into which this book is divided follow fairly traditional – and thus for the most part familiar – lines of division: the twenty-five chapters that follow are grouped into sections in such a way as to fall into three main parts. First, in part II, the major methodologies employed in studying language change are presented, with emphasis on the tried-and-true triad of the comparative method, internal reconstruction, and (the determination of) genetic relatedness. Second, in parts III through VI, discussions of change in different domains and subdomains of grammar are to be found: these respectively cover phonology, morphology/lexicon, syntax, and pragmatics/semantics, in that order. In each case, the topics are approached from two or more different – and sometimes even opposing – perspectives. Third, in part VII, various causes of change, both internal and external – and cognitive as well as physiological – share the spotlight. In all of these sections, the long tradition of scholarship in historical linguistics in general is amply represented, but a final indication of the dimensions of the scholarly tradition in these areas can be found in this volume’s composite bibliography, which collects all the references from all the chapters and this introduction into a single – and massive – whole.

1 Part the First: Intersections of Language and History in this Handbook

1.1 On language – viewed synchronically as well as diachronically

1.1.1 The nature of an entity largely determines how it can change

[A language . . . is a grammatical system existing . . . in the brains of a group of individuals . . . ;] it exists perfectly only in the collectivity . . . , external to the individual.

[A] Language . . . is . . . a set of sentences . . . [−] all constructed from a finite alphabet of phonemes . . . [− which] may not be meaningful, in any independent sense of the word, . . . or . . . ever have been used by speakers of the language.


Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly.

Avram Noam Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965: 3)

The range of possible changes in an entity is inextricably linked with the nature of that entity. This is a truism, but that status does not make such an observation any less significant – or any less true. On a more abstract level, it is directly supported by the differential predictions concerning linguistic diachrony that follow from the above-cited characterizations of language (in general) associated with de Saussure (1916) versus Chomsky (1957, 1965). On the Saussurean view that langue is essentially the union of different speakers’ linguistic systems, an innovation such as one speaker’s addition of an item to some lexical field (e.g., color terminology) may count as (an instance of) significant language change, since any alteration in the number of oppositions within some domain necessarily modifies the latter’s overall structure. But no such conclusion follows from the Chomskyan focus on a language as a set of sentences generated by an idealized competence essentially representing an intersection defined over the individual grammars within a community of speakers.

As a more concrete example, consider the diachronic consequences of Lieber’s (1992) synchronic attempt at Deconstructing Morphology, where it is argued that, in an approach to grammar with a sufficiently generalized conception of syntax (and the lexicon), there is in essence no need whatsoever for a distinct domain of morphology. On such a view, it clearly is difficult – if not impossible – to treat diachronic morphology as an independent area of linguistic change. An idea of how drastic the implications of this approach would be for studies of change in particular languages can be quickly gained by picking out one or two written grammars and comparing the relative size of the sections devoted to morphology versus syntax (and phonology). For example, nearly two-thirds (138 pp.) of the main text in Press’s (1986) Grammar of Modern Breton is devoted to morphology, as opposed to only 14 percent (30 pp.) for syntax and 21 percent for phonology (44 pp.). Nor is such “morphocentricity” (cf. also Joseph and Janda 1988) limited to “Standard Average European” languages or to what might be thought of as more descriptive works. Thus, for example, in Rice’s (1989) highly theoretically informed Grammar of Slave (an Athabaskan language of Canada), the relative proportions are roughly the same: 63 percent (781 pp.) for morphology versus only 27 percent (338 pp.) for syntax and 10 percent (128 pp.) for phonology.

While Lieber’s morphological nihilism is admittedly an extreme position, it is by no means an isolated one. After all, morphology is so recurrently partitioned out of existence by syntacticians and phonologists alike that it has
even been called “the Poland of grammar” (cf. Janda and Kathman 1992: 153, echoed by Spencer and Zwicky 1998: 1). On the other hand, while phonology and syntax themselves – along with phonetics, semantics, and the lexicon – seem to be in no danger of disappearing from accounts of linguistic structure, there is constant variation and mutation (not to mention internecine competition) within and among the major approaches to these domains. Hence, even if there were unanimity among historical linguists concerning the mechanisms and causes of language change, most (if not all) diachronic descriptions of particular phenomena would still remain in a state of continuous linguistic change, as it were, due to the never-ending revisions of synchronic theories and hypotheses.5

The present volume attempts to make a virtue of necessity by promoting such manifestations of diversity and (friendly) competition. Subject only to practical limitations of space, time, and authorial independence, we have – for selected individual aspects of language change – tried to match each chapter that depends on a particular synchronic perspective with one or more opposing chapters whose approach is informed by a specific alternative take on linguistic theory and analysis. For example, chapter 14, which is imbued with David Lightfoot’s commitment to approaching syntactic change from a formal starting-point, can be juxtaposed with chapter 17, which reflects Marianne Mithun’s exploration of functional explanation in both synchronic and diachronic syntax. This handbook thus follows an inclusive strategy that omits no traditional subfield of historical linguistics (as opposed, say, to the exclusions which would result from accepting the diachronic consequences of Lieber’s whittled-down approach to synchronic grammar).

1.1.2 Pruning back the view that languages change like living organisms

However, in contrast to works like Pedersen’s (1924) book-length account of what was achieved mainly by Indo-Europeans during the nineteenth century, or like much of James Anderson’s (1991) encyclopedia-article overview of linguistic diachrony, the present volume is most assuredly not a history of historical linguistics – and it is especially not a history of general linguistics.6 As a result, the various contributors to this book (apart from this introduction) make virtually no mention of certain positions concerning the nature of language and language change which were once quite common but have now been largely discredited, though not completely abandoned. Perhaps the most prominent such position involves approaches which find it productive to treat languages as organisms.

In the view of Bopp (1827, here quoted from 1836: 1), for example, languages must be seen “as organic natural bodies that form themselves according to definite laws, develop, carrying in themselves an internal life-principle, and gradually die off” (translation after Morpurgo Davies 1987: 84; see also the discussion and references there – plus, more generally, Morpurgo Davies
In this, Bopp followed the treatment of Sanskrit and other things Indic by Friedrich von Schlegel (1808/1977), whose own positive use of “organic” (German organisch) – roughly meaning “innately integrated but able to develop” (as opposed to “adventitious and merely ‘mechanical’ [mechanisch; cf. pp. 51–52]”) – was due less to his admiration (from afar) for comparative anatomy than it was to his familiarity with German Romantics (see Timpanaro 1972) like Herder (cf., e.g., 1877–1913: vol. 1, 150–2) and the natural philosopher von Schelling (1798, 1800). Going even further, August Schleicher (1873: 6–7) advocated treating linguistics as literally a branch of biology parallel to botany and zoology (for discussion, see Koerner 1978a, 1989; Tort 1980; Wells 1987; Collinge 1994a; Desmet 1996: 48–81 et passim; Morpurgo Davies 1998: 196–201 et passim; and their references on Schleicher):

Languages are natural organisms which, without being determinable by human will, came into being, grew and developed according to definite laws, and now, in turn, age and die off; they, too, characteristically possess that series of manifestations which tends to be understood under the rubric “life”. Glottics, the science of language, is therefore a natural science; in total and in general, its method is the same as that of the other natural sciences.

Yet one immediately wonders how such pioneering figures of historical linguistics could overlook the ineluctable fact that, as already pointed out by Gaston Paris (1868) in an early critique (p. 242):

[all] of these words (organism, be born, grow . . . , age, and die) are applicable only to individual animal life . . . [E]ven if it is legitimate to employ metaphors of this sort in linguistics, it is necessary to guard against being duped by them. The development of language does not have its causes in language itself, but rather in the physiological and psychological generalizations of human nature . . . . Anyone who fails to keep in mind this fundamental distinction falls into obvious confusions.

De Saussure (1916: 17, here quoted from 1983: 3–4) reacted to the organicism of Bopp and Schleicher in a rather similar vein: “[T]he right conclusion was all the more likely to elude the[se] . . . comparativists because they looked upon the development of languages much as a naturalist might look upon the growth of two plants.” But Bonfante (1946: 295) expressed matters even more trenchantly: “Languages are historical creations, not vegetables.”

While we are here constrained to extreme brevity (but see the above references), present-day diachronicians can draw from the organicism of many nineteenth-century linguists an important moral regarding cross-disciplinary analogies (and envy). It is certainly the case that, during K. W. F. von Schlegel’s and Bopp’s studies in Paris (starting respectively in 1802 and 1812) and during the period of their early writings on language (respectively c.1808ff and 1816ff), such natural sciences as biology, paleontology, and geology were quite well established and abounded with lawlike generalizations, whereas such social
sciences as psychology and sociology either had not yet been founded or were still in their infancy. Von Schlegel’s and Bopp’s formative experiences at this time were thus set against a general backdrop which included the wide renown and respect accorded to, for example, Cuvier’s *principe de corrélation des formes* (formulated in 1800 and usually translated as “principle of the correlation of parts”; cf., e.g., Rudwick 1972: 104, and 1997: passim), which stressed the interdependence of all parts of an organism and thus functioned so as both to guide and to constrain reconstructions of prehistoric creatures. Hence it is not surprising that, lacking recourse to any comparably scientific theory of brain, mind, personality, community, or the like, such linguists as von Schlegel, Bopp, and later Schleicher were irresistibly tempted to adopt an organismal (or organismic) approach when they found lawlike correspondences across languages (or across stages of one language) and began to engage in historical reconstruction.8

This trend can be seen as following from a variation on a corollary of Stent’s (1978: 96–7) assertion that a scientific discovery will be premature in effect unless it is “appreciated in its day.” In this context, for something to lack appreciation does not mean that it was “unnoticed . . . or even . . . not considered important,” but instead that scientists “did not seem to be able to do much with it or build on it,” so that the discovery “had virtually no effect on the general discourse” of its discipline, since its implications could not “be connected by a series of simple logical steps to canonical . . . knowledge.” (It was in this sense, e.g., that Collingwood (1946/1993: 71) described Vico’s 1725 *Nuova scienza* (“New Science”) as being “too far ahead of his time to have very much immediate influence.”) In the case at hand, the relevant corollary is that scholars tend to interpret and publicize their discoveries in ways which allow connections with the general discourse and canonical knowledge of their discipline. More particularly, however, scholars in a very new field – one where canons of discourse and knowledge still have not solidified or perhaps even arisen yet – are tempted to adopt the discourse and canons of more established disciplines, and it is this step that nineteenth-century organicist diachronicians of language like von Schlegel, Bopp, and Schleicher seem to have taken. Seen in this light, their actions appear understandable and even reasonable.

What remains rather astonishing, though, is the fact that, even after the (more) scientific grounding of psychology and sociology later in the nineteenth century, a surprising number of linguists maintained an organicist approach to language. As documented in painstaking detail by Desmet (1996), a “naturalist linguistics” was pursued in France during the period from approximately 1867 to 1922 by a substantial body of scholars associated with the École d’anthropologie and the Société d’anthropologie de Paris, publishing especially in the *Bulletins* and *Mémoires* of the latter, in the *Revue d’anthropologie* or *L’homme*, and in the *Revue de linguistique et de philologie comparée* (*RdLPC*), a journal which they founded and dominated. Thus, at the same time as the Société de linguistique de Paris continued to enforce its ban on discussions concerning the origin(s) of language(s), a cornucopia of lectures, articles, and even books on issues
connected with the birth and death of language(s) as viewed from an organicist perspective (along with issues related to language vis-à-vis race) flowed from the pens of such now little-known scholars as Chavée, Hovelacque, de la Calle, Zaborowski, Girard de Rialle, Lefèvre, Regnaud, Adam, and Vinson (the last of whom had 237 publications in the RdLPC alone; cf. Desmet 1996).

Still, while this movement itself died out in France c.1922 (aging and weakening along with its major proponents), one can still document occasional instances of explicitly organicist attitudes toward language and language change within the scholarly literature of the last decade of the twentieth century and on into the first decade of the twenty-first. Yet this is an era when the increasing solidity and number of accepted cognitive- and social-psychological principles leave no room for a Bopp-like appeal to biology as the only available locus for formulating lawlike generalizations concerning linguistic structure, variation, and change. Still, for example, Mufwene (1996) has suggested that, in pidgin and creole studies, there are advantages to viewing the biological equivalent of a language as being not an individual organism, but an entire species – which, expanding on Bonfante’s (1946) above-mentioned aphorism, we may interpret as implying that, rather than being a vegetable, each language is an agglomeration of vegetable patches!

More provocative have been various organicist-sounding works by Lass, beginning especially with his earlier (1987: 155) abandonment of the “psychologistic/individualist position . . . that change is explicable . . . in terms of . . . individual grammars.” Instead, Lass (1987: 156–7) claims that “languages . . . are objects whose primary mode of existence is in time . . . historical products . . . which ought to be viewed as potentially having extended (trans-individual, trans-generational) ‘lives of their own’.” More recently, Lass (1997: 376–7) has reiterated and expanded this glottozoic claim, suggesting that we “construe language as . . . a kind of object . . . which exists (for the historian’s purposes) neither in any individual (as such) . . . nor in the collectivity, but rather as an area in an abstract, vastly complex, multi-dimensional phase-space . . . having (in all modules and at all structural levels) something like the three kinds of viral nucleotide sequences.”

This sort of approach has already been compellingly and eloquently countered by Milroy’s (1999: 188) response to Lass’s (1997: 309 et passim) characterization of languages as making use of the detritus from older systems via “bricolage,” whereby bits and pieces left lying around get recycled into new things. After first asking how we can “make sense of all this without . . . an appeal to speakers,” Milroy further queries: “If there is bricolage, who is the bricoleur? Does the language do the bricolage independently of those who use it? If so, how?” Our own answer to Milroy’s rhetorical questions echoes former Confederate General George Pickett’s late-nineteenth-century riposte – “I think the Union Army had something to do with it” (cf. Reardon 1997a: 122, 237n.2, 1997b; Pickett 1908: 569) – to incessant inquiries concerning who or what had been responsible for the negative outcome of “Pickett’s Charge” at the battle of Gettysburg (July 1–3, 1863) during the American Civil War. That is, unlike

And this conclusion leads us to the above-mentioned moral for students of language change which, to repeat, is provided by the history of linguistics, even though considerations of space dictate the virtually total further exclusion from this volume of that topic. Namely, given that human speakers (and signers) are the only known organisms which/who come into question as plausible agents of change in languages, it is incumbent on historical linguists to avoid the trap of reacting to their potential disillusionment with current research findings in psychology and sociology by giving up entirely on psychology and sociology – and, along with them, on speakers – and so turning too wholeheartedly to the "better understood" field of biology. It is the latter move, after all, which has lured scholars like Lass (1997) into treating languages as organisms, or at least pseudo-organisms. Learning a lesson from what can now be recognized as needless wrong turns in the work of K. W. F. von Schlegel, Bopp, Schleicher, and later linguistes naturalistes, we can conclude that it is better for diachronic linguistics if we stand for an embarrassingly long time with our hands stretched out to psychology and sociology than it is for us to embrace the siren of biological organicism.11

It is thus no accident that the present volume apportions either entire chapters, or at least substantial portions of them, to various aspects of psycholinguistics (including language acquisition and the psychophysics of speech perception) – see the respective chapters by John Ohala (22) and Jean Aitchison (25) – and to central topics in sociolinguistics (like social stratification, attitudes or evaluations, and contact) – as in the respective chapters by Gregory R. Guy (8), Sarah Grey Thomason (23), and Walter Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (24).

1.2 On change – both linguistic and otherwise

All things move, and nothing remains still . . . ; you cannot step twice into the same stream.


Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.
“The more that changes, the more it’s the same thing” (often less literally as “The more things change, the more they stay the same” or “The more things change, the less things change”).

Alphonse Karr, Les Guêpes (“The Wasps”) (January, 1849), reprinted (1891: 305) in vol. 6 of the collected series