

History of linguistics as a path to dissertation progress and contextualization of research

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Abstract. In our doctoral program (one which largely trains students in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and L2 acquisition, rather than phonological, syntactic, and semantic theory), history of linguistics leads students to a deeper understanding of linguistics than is possible without it. Through this course, our students gain, in one semester rather than several, a broad perspective on the evolution of linguistic theories and methodologies. The course also serves as an opportunity for students to delve into the history of their own subfield and for them to frame the literature review portion of their own dissertation. The outcome of having this course is that our graduates have a broader perspective on general linguistics than they would have if they remained entirely focused on their own specialization, and that they come to understand where their own doctoral research program fits in the wider discipline of linguistics.

Keywords. history of linguistics; doctoral student training; syntactic theory

1. (My) introduction to the history of linguistics. As a graduate student at Cornell University, I took courses in contemporary syntactic and phonological theory, but was not exposed to any historical survey of linguistics. My introduction to the history of linguistics was limited to one book and came about shortly after finishing my Ph.D. in 1985, when I encountered the second (1986) edition of Fritz Newmeyer's *Linguistic theory in America*. Even without the benefit of a course, the book opened my eyes to a deeper understanding of what I'd been studying for four years prior. It was principally through that book that I came to understand how the syntactic theory of the 1960s had evolved into the syntactic theory I had been studying in the 1980s.

2. Teaching history of linguistics – called up to service. It wasn't until 2001 that I was asked to teach a history of linguistics course. By this time, I had been at the University of South Carolina for 10 years and was tenured as an associate professor. Our program's course on the topic was titled "History and Methodology of Linguistics" and intended to introduce "basic resources of the discipline" and focus on "the development of linguistics in terms of dominant issues and analytical methodology with emphasis on paradigm shifts." Fifteen years after finishing my dissertation, I didn't have much of a clue how to teach this, and so I reached out for help.

Prior to my being asked to teach the course, it had been taught by another member of our Linguistic Program faculty, Donald S. Cooper. Cooper had earned a Ph.D. in 1971 at Harvard, specializing in Slavic linguistics, but had reinvented himself by the 1980s as a speech scientist specializing in laryngeal muscle phonation.¹ With his multifaceted and extensive background in several subfields of language and linguistics, Cooper had an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of linguistics and taught an excellent history of linguistics course. However, since completing his doctoral studies in 1971 and moving into speech science, he didn't know much about linguistic theories from the 1970s onward. And so, his semester-long course started with Pāṇini

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¹ Cooper, Donald S. 1971. *Studies on possessive adjectives in Old Church Slavonic*. Harvard dissertation. Author profile on Scopus Preview: <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=35481037600>.

and ended with Edward Sapir. While Cooper was more than generous with course materials and notes, providing me with copies of everything that he used, it was clear that I needed to update the course if I was to take it up.

In this regard, I was aware that Fritz Newmeyer, having written *Linguistic theory in America*, also taught a history of linguistics course and (as I knew him from having taken my first syntax course with him in 1981) I contacted him to ask if he might share resources with me. He, too, was more than accommodating and sent me all the course notes for his version of history of linguistics, which began with Edward Sapir and ended with *Lectures on Government and Binding*.

Taking what I was able to get from Cooper and Newmeyer, each, distilling what seemed to be the best of the two courses, and splicing them together end-to-end, I was able to synthesize a respectable syllabus and taught the material quite successfully (learning from it myself, the first couple of times, as much as my students did). Since that time, the syllabus has been periodically updated and now covers the following topics in a semester-long course:

- History of Science and Linguistics
- Panini and Indian Linguistics
- Classical and Medieval Linguistics
- 17-18th c. Linguistics
- 19th c. Linguistics
- Saussure
- The Prague School and the Copenhagen School
- Firth and the London School
- American Structural Linguistics
- The Eve of Generative Grammar
- Early Generative Grammar
- Generative Semantics and the Linguistic Wars
- The Further Development of Generative Grammar
- Optimality Theory
- Functionalism vs. Formalism
- The Minimalist Program

3. Alternatives – Integrating the history of linguistics into a course. Through the incorporation of history of linguistics into my own teaching repertoire, I came to view history of linguistic theory as also important to the content of theory-focused courses, albeit in a more focused way and on a smaller scale. This was the inspiration behind the creation of a course that sought to examine the evolution of modern generative grammar through the lens of a few key constructions. This course, on the grammar of Raising and Control, examined these constructions from when they became central to syntactic theory in the 1960s, through their treatment in the Minimalist Program in the 1990s. It was speculated that holding the grammatical paradigms steady and restricting the empirical domain of course content, all while studying the evolution of theoretical thinking about these constructions, the course could serve to teach students the ways in which theoretical thinking changed and the justification for those changes.

After “test driving” the course a couple of times, Bill Davies and I fashioned it into a 2004 Blackwell book titled *The grammar of Raising and Control: A course in syntactic argumentation*. One special feature of the book, designed to provide students with a firmer understanding of the conceptual frameworks at each stage of generative syntax, is the inclusion of key excerpts from chapters and articles contemporaneous to the period being discussed. These excerpts are prefaced with explanatory material beforehand and appended with a reader-friendly exegesis of

what the authors were trying to bring across. The excerpted readings are drawn from Postal (1974), Chomsky (1973), Perlmutter & Postal (1972/1983), Chomsky & Lasnik (1977), Cole & Hermon (1981), and Lasnik & Saito (1991).

Coupled with additional readings, the book has proven to serve well as the basis for a second semester course in syntactic theory. Students who follow the syllabus (in our program, typically not students whose primary field of study is syntax) come away with a rich understanding of theoretical concepts and the ways in which data informs theory. They are also better equipped to be consumers and understanders of syntactic literature than they would be had they simply worked their way through a standard syntax textbook or slogged through a less structured collection of chapters and articles. One can see from contents of the 2004 book how it both tracks the progress of generative syntax over 30+ years and maintains a focus appropriate to a course in syntactic theory (as opposed to a more general course in history of linguistics):

Part I: Classical Transformational Grammar: Laying the groundwork

Introduction: Building the foundations of a syntactic analysis

1. Laying the empirical groundwork.
2. Transformational Grammar and Rosenbaum's analysis.
3. Postal's *On Raising*.
4. Extended Standard Theory:
Chomsky's "Conditions on Transformations"
5. The *On Raising* Debates:
Bresnan, Postal, and Bach

Part II: Extensions and Reinterpretations of Standard Theory

Introduction: Branching paths of inquiry

6. Relational Grammar:
Perlmutter and Postal's "The Relational Succession Law"
7. Revised Extended Standard Theory:
Chomsky and Lasnik's "Filters and Control"

Part III: Government & Binding Theory

Introduction: The interaction of principles and possible analyses

8. Chomsky's *Lectures on Government and Binding* and the ECM analysis of Raising
9. Development of and problems for the ECM account:
Kayne (1981) and Cole & Hermon (1981)
10. Are all these really raising constructions? Cross-linguistic issues

Part IV: The Minimalist Program

Introduction: Neo-Raising, Neo-ECM, and the Raising/Control distinction

11. Functional projections and the rise of the Minimalist Program

12. The return to a Raising-to-Object analysis

13. The separation/unification of Raising and Control

4. Making the teaching of history of linguistics relevant. Principle concerns surrounding teaching the history of linguistics involve determining whether it is needed and what it contributes to students' training in the discipline. A further concern involves making room for it in the curriculum, when so many other courses might take precedence. I would argue that it is too valuable, if taught well, to leave out, and that it can be fitted into graduate students' training if it is made useful and relevant.

First, it is clear to me, based on my own experience, that a course in the history of the field contributes immeasurably to the training of a linguist in any subdiscipline. Such a course opens a student's eyes to the fact that the questions and problems that preoccupy most theoretical thinking about language are usually not novel, even if the methodologies and empirical discoveries are so. There is an enormous advantage to be had in being able to see the field from 20,000 feet while one is engaged in beating a path through the minutia of one's own research questions and hypotheses. To put it simply, a student who has a fuller awareness of the field is going to be a better linguist at the end of it all.

This can be even more important for students whose training is not narrowly focused on aspects of linguistic theory, as in our own Linguistics Program at the University of South Carolina. While some linguistic programs have their students take two to three semesters each of phonetics-phonology, syntax, and semantics-pragmatics, programs whose students specialize in language acquisition, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics cannot usually afford to require quite so much theoretical training. Students in these programs might only get one or two semesters each in the core subfields and will not likely have a very deep understanding of theoretical questions and concepts generally. It is in these programs that a history of linguistics course is likely to have the greatest benefit. Through it, a student with only a course or two each of phonology and syntax might gain a deeper understanding of the enduring linguistic questions and be able to consider them in their own research, without getting lost in the fine details of Optimality Theory or the Minimalist Program.

It is important, though, to keep in mind that a history of linguistics course offered on this basis and for this purpose is not intended to train historians of linguistics. For this reason, it is imperative to make the course relevant to, and useful for, students' own progress towards their degree. To achieve this in my own history of linguistics course, I have determined it useful to have our students use the course as an opportunity to begin working on their dissertation literature review chapter. The requirement is stated as follows:

Research project (40% total): Students will be required to write a term paper as a final project. **This paper, ideally, should be something which will ultimately turn into the literature review chapter of your dissertation.** Or you may write on any aspect of the history of linguistics.

It is a given that every subfield of linguistics has a history and that there is a history of research and discovery that undergirds any worthy dissertation. Considering this, it is perfectly reasonable and fitting for participation in a history of linguistics course to involve a requirement that students explore the intellectual history of the research questions that form the basis of their dissertation project. Having the course require this helps ensure that the course helps them to progress in their degree and is not a distraction from it.

5. Prerequisites for teaching history of linguistics. Once one is convinced of the value of history of linguistics, the next question that must be faced in any program is “who will help us teach it?” One can almost hear the response. “Not I,” says the untenured syntactician. “Not I,” says the psycholinguist with the huge NSF grant. “Not I,” says the applied linguist who must oversee all student practicums.

It is inevitably true that not everyone can easily offer such a course. Faculty who are not focused on some aspect of linguistic theory will not likely be able. Such a course is going to fall to phonologists and syntacticians, primarily. Likewise, early career faculty are not likely to be able to carry the burden of such a course. As my own experience proved, a decade past the Ph.D. was barely enough time to develop the maturity and wisdom to handle it. All that said, a history of linguistics course should be within the teaching range of any midcareer or senior academic whose specialization is in linguistic theory.

Yet, even with the ability to offer such a course, it is still not straightforward to develop it and teach it. I know that I could not have attempted doing it without the charity of senior colleagues such as Donald Cooper and Fritz Newmeyer, and this was indeed the motivation for organizing a session on the topic at an LSA Annual Meeting. It is hoped that the supplementary materials (syllabi and bibliographies) offered through *PLSA*, together with the papers in this special issue, will provide exactly the kind of resources that might make it easier for willing faculty to consider offering a course on the history of linguistics and for programs to consider requiring it.

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