



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Historical Linguistics: A Cognitive Grammar Introduction*

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This book appears primarily intended as a textbook for a course in historical linguistics, as evidenced by the exercises included at the end of each chapter. Following a helpful introduction that defines language change, chapters 2 through 7 give examples of change in different linguistic domains.

Chapter 2 gives general examples of all sorts of language change, while chapter 3 focuses on lexical change, noting the role of polysemy in facilitating such developments. Chapter 4 addresses phonetic change in a clear and helpful manner, distinguishing between unconditioned changes—like the English Great Vowel Shift—and conditioned changes, such as those involved in French *elision* or reduction of unstressed vowels to shewa.

In chapter 5, on phonological change, the book begins to show its Cognitive Grammar framework. Phonemes are described through the lens of prototype theory. This means that phonemes—as prototypes—can be categorized differently in different contexts. Diachronic shifts tend to optimize the phonological “space” in the language (p. 111). Categories may be lost when phonemes merge, especially when few minimal pairs are at stake, as in Latin’s loss of vowel length (pp. 101–2). Categories may be added when allophones split. Sometimes the conditioning disappears (because of other changes in the language), but allophones that remain may be reanalyzed as phonemes, as is the case with umlaut phenomena in most Germanic languages (p. 106).

Morphological change (chapter 6) may occur for several reasons. Neologisms might be coined through affixes (see p. 122 for the examples with the suffixes -ible/-able). In other instances, morphological boundaries may be reanalyzed, as when “a napron” became “an apron” or the mass noun “pease” was reanalyzed as a plural “peas” that gives a singular “pea.” Formerly bound morphemes can become free, such as the increasing use of “-ish” in English (p. 127). There is also a strong tendency for analogical change, in which irregular forms are replaced or reanalyzed as regular forms over time; the most common forms do not change, but rare forms gradually adjust to common patterns (p. 131). Ironically, regular sound changes tend to produce irregularity, while analogical changes create regularity in the language (p. 138).

With syntax (chapter 7), there is a historical problem: we cannot test grammaticality in old texts. The corpus that has been preserved is our only access to the syntax of the past. Nevertheless, assuming that preserved examples are broadly representative, it is possible to trace development over time. Cognitive linguistics is useful here, too: prototype theory and patterns of cognition help shape reanalysis of forms. For example, “that” in older texts was initially used only with a direct object (“he saw that [thing]”), later expanded to point to abstract ideas (“he saw that [idea]: his sister was correct”), and eventually came to function as a complementizer (pp. 164–65).

Why has cognitive linguistics been used in this historical linguistics textbook? Historical linguistics has long been associated with philology, but what is needed to understand both the causation and mechanisms of change is a “well-developed and articulated synchronic theory of how Language functions” (p. 15). Cognitive linguistics is one such theory. It offers a framework grounded in human cognition, and it is primarily “founded on the basic semanticity, the essential meaningfulness, of all aspects of Language,” as opposed to most other theories “which posit structure, rather than meaning, as basic” (p. 16). That said, readers need not be well-versed in cognitive linguistics to read this book; its influence is limited chiefly to prototype theory and categorization.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the spread of linguistic changes, which is usually driven by social rather than linguistic factors. Language change is like a traffic jam: it is caused by human actions but usually unintentional (171–72). Changes spread when they are influential or prestigious—though different changes may be “prestigious” in different groups in society. The new (marked) form must “pick up a certain momentum” (p. 180), but its success depends not just on frequency but also on salience (p. 181). Some changes will become viral, others fade.

The final chapter (chapter 9) lays out a methodology for doing historical linguistics. There are two main branches of research: textual data (which involves phonology and corpus linguistics) and reconstruction. The latter can be either comparative (between related languages) or internal (e.g., comparing noun and verb pairs such as “bath/bathe” and “mouth/mouth” and hypothesizing that the voiced fricatives in the verbal forms were all originally intervocalic). Key principles include identifying language relationships, recognizing the regularity of sound change, seeking a single plausible source for variant forms, and applying Occam’s razor to prefer the simplest complete solution (192–94).

While the final chapter aligns most closely with what many might traditionally associate with historical linguistics, the preceding chapters lay important foundations for understanding the types of change(s) and the mechanisms that give rise to them. Readers looking for a manual for

reconstructing PIE may be a bit disappointed, but those seeking insight into how and why languages change over time will find much potential for learning.

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