Historical linguistics, 1924-2014

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Outline of the talk:

- Historical linguistics & the discipline of linguistics
- How things were in 1924
- Some major developments post-1924
- Historical linguistics in 2014 & beyond
Historical linguistics within the discipline:

It used to be much more prominent than it is now. For instance, articles in *Language*:

historical linguistics vs. other:
- vols. 1, 10, 20, 30: slightly more historical than non-historical articles
- vol. 40 (1964): more non-historical articles
- vols. 50, 60, 70, 80, 89: LOTS more non-historical articles
• e.g. vol. 70 (1994):

0 historical vs. 12 other
Historical linguistics & the discipline, cont.

Other indicators:

- 1925-1940: the overwhelming majority of LSA Presidents were historical linguists.

- At least through the early 1960s, some major US linguistics departments, e.g. Yale’s, required graduate students to take historical linguistics, including a heavy dose of Indo-European (Ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit).
When historical linguistics ruled, in and before 1924....

- Historical linguistic methodology inspired Darwin (in *The Descent of Man*).
- The emergence of the regularity hypothesis of sound change became the cornerstone of
- the wildly successful Comparative Method, used for establishing genetic relationships among languages and for reconstructing unattested ancestral languages.
• The main focus of historical linguistics throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century was Indo-European.

• Two long-extinct branches of Indo-European, Anatolian (including Hittite) and Tocharian, were still not thoroughly understood in 1924.
• In 1924, laryngeal theory was still very controversial; its triumph came later, after the publication of Jerzy Kuryłowicz’s *Etudes indoeuropéennes 1* in 1935.

• The larger significance of laryngeal theory—and of the controversy surrounding it—was that it was a profoundly structural hypothesis when Ferdinand de Saussure proposed it in 1879, and it thus foreshadowed his later status as the Father of Structural Linguistics.
All these and other features of historical linguistics, vintage 1924, made it already one of the most successful of all historical sciences, a position it still enjoys.
Leonard Bloomfield (among other earlyish-20th-century linguists) had a quite modern view of various historical linguistic issues, including the essence of the family tree model of depicting genetic relationships:
‘The earlier students of Indo-European did not realize that the family-tree diagram was merely a statement of their method; they accepted the uniform parent languages and their sudden and clear-cut splitting as historical realities. In actual observation, however, no speech-community is ever quite uniform...
'When we describe a language, we may ignore the lack of uniformity by confining ourselves to some arbitrarily chosen type of speech and leaving the other varieties for later discussion, but in studying linguistic change we cannot do this, because all changes are sure to appear at first in the shape of variant features.'
(Bloomfield 1933:311-312)
By 1924, Bloomfield and other historical linguists—many or most of them trained, like Bloomfield, in Indo-European linguistics—had demonstrated that the Comparative Method and other methodologies developed for studying language history could be applied equally well to unwritten languages.
For instance, two major classifications of indigenous languages of the Americas appeared before 1924.
In 1924 and for quite some time afterward, these historical methods were being applied especially to Native American languages, and the long-lasting close connection between field-workers and historical linguists was firmly established. The best-known early scholars who did both primary documentation and historical linguistics are Bloomfield and Edward Sapir; maybe Franz Boas too, but his contributions to historical linguistics are less robust.
Fast-forward to today:

Among the most prominent modern scholars who have been major contributors both to primary documentation and to historical linguistics are Terrence Kaufman, Ives Goddard, Andrew Garrett, Dale Kinkade, Lyle Campbell, Marianne Mithun, Jeffrey Heath, Martha Ratliff, Robert Rankin, William Jacobsen, Alice Harris, Alan Dench, and Claire Bowern.
But the number of fieldworkers who also do historical linguistics has shrunk dramatically in the last several decades, partly because so few linguists now have the requisite training in historical linguistics and partly because anthropology departments have replaced retiring anthropological linguists with linguistic anthropologists, who are rarely trained in historical linguistics and sometimes not in linguistic analysis.
Some major developments post-1924

Advances in the breadth and depth of historical linguistic research have led to exciting new theoretical proposals and a greatly increased database on which theories can be tested.
Great expansion in scope, as historical studies of language families have been carried out on every continent except Antarctica.

Genetic classifications now exist for most of the world’s languages, though some proposed classifications are more firmly established than others....

...and many question marks remain in New Guinea and South America.
Major post-1924 developments, cont.

- Expansion also in the scope of historical investigations, beyond the traditional areas (lexicon, phonology, morphology)
  ◇ Sophisticated research on phonetic bases of sound change
  ◇ Increasing emphasis on syntactic change and the prospects for syntactic reconstruction
  ◇ Exploration of semantic change
Major post-1924 developments, cont.

- A second trend has been a recurring series of disputes between “lumpers” and “splitters”—those who aim to shrink the number of the world’s language families by grouping more and more languages together into super-families vs. those who do not believe that solid evidence has been, or can be, marshalled to support proposals of very distant genetic relationships. For instance:
• Nostratic vs. skeptics
• Altaic vs. skeptics
• Greenberg’s African classification vs. skeptics
• Greenberg’s American classification vs. skeptics
• Greenberg’s other classifications vs. skeptics
• Dene-Yeniseian vs. skeptics
Some of these debates have generated more heat than light.

But one good result of the debates has been an increase in historical linguists’ understanding of the criteria that one must satisfy in order to support a claim of genetic relatedness.
Major post-1924 developments, cont.

- The boom in the study of contact-induced change
  - Weinreich 1953
  - The study of pidgins & creoles (e.g. Robert A. Hall, Jr., 1966; Dell Hymes, ed., 1971)
For example:

♦ The study of contact-induced change has led to major advances in distinguishing between internally-motivated and contact-induced changes.

♦ Historical linguists now admit that mixed languages exist, and progress is being made in understanding the restricted social environments in which they can arise.
Major post-1924 developments, cont.

- Sociolinguistic studies of ongoing change, especially sound change (especially William Labov and his students)
  - Variationist approaches to investigating ongoing change over apparent and real time
  - The role of code-switching and other mechanisms through which features travel from one language to another.
But sociolinguists and historical linguists still need to find a way to make their separate results fit together.
Major post-1924 developments, cont.

- Recently, inspired by phylogenetic methods in genetics, biologists, linguists, computer scientists, and others have applied quantitative models of the nature and timing of biological species’ diversification to linguistic data. The results have been greeted by reactions from historical linguists that range from skeptical to enthusiastic, depending on the nature of the input data and the particular methods adopted in particular studies.
These methods have been used in efforts to establish genetic relationships (especially distant ones) among languages, to date language splits within established language families, and to provide subgrouping models for various language families.
Two developments that don’t (for me) qualify as major developments

- **Grammaticalization theory.** Like a sizable number of other historical linguists, I am not convinced that this is a major theoretical development. True, we now have many more examples of grammaticalization than we used to have; but historical linguists knew about the common process of change from lexical item to grammatical morpheme long before anyone called it grammaticalization theory.
Syntactic parameters as evidence of genetic relationship. This approach (introduced by Giuseppe Longobardi & colleagues) is essentially typological, and historical linguists have had good evidence for over a century that typological similarities do not provide reliable evidence for genetic relationship.
Historical linguistics in 2014 & beyond

I predict

- More historical studies of more languages, more results on the phonetics of sound change, more on syntactic change (and maybe also on syntactic reconstruction), more on contact-induced change, more sociolinguistic studies of ongoing change, and many, many more quantitative studies of language change and linguistic diversification.
• And that the accessibility of much more material on the internet will facilitate new discoveries, e.g.

◊ through large-scale investigation of areal similarities among languages
through better understanding of how structural diffusion can affect quantitative efforts to classify languages, so that...

There will be successful new genetic classifications, especially in New Guinea and South America.
• But also, I predict a continuing dearth of job opportunities for historical linguists, which will mean that fewer and fewer linguists can get the training necessary to conduct historical linguistic research successfully.

(...which might be O.K. if linguists didn’t want to talk about language change, but many of them do—phoneticians, phonologists, syntacticians, sociolinguists, typologists, etc.—and it’s hard for them to do so usefully if they don’t know the basics about historical linguistics.)
Thanks!

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