

“The New Look” in the History of Linguistics (1965)

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What follows here is a summary of a paper presented at the 128th Meeting of the Linguistic Circle of Madison on December 9, 1965. A complete typescript or manuscript has not survived. Fortunately, Jon Erickson, the recorder of the Linguistic Circle of Madison, entered this detailed digest of the paper into the Linguistic Circle’s minutes. At the request of Charles T. Scott, the secretary of the Madison Linguistics department graciously provided me with copies of the minutes referring to all the papers that I presented to the Linguistic Circle in the years 1965-69 while I was teaching linguistics at the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin. Needless to say, I feel much indebted to Professors Scott and Erickson, and to the departmental secretary.

The purpose of “‘The New Look’ in the History of Linguistics” was to review two standard treatises on the history of linguistics, namely *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft in Deutschland* by Theodor Benfey (1869), and *Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century* by Holger Pedersen (1931).

In spite of the way Theodor Benfey (1809–1881) implicitly outlined the subject matter of his book in the title [“History of Linguistics and Oriental Philology since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, with a Retrospective Glance at Earlier Periods”], he in fact devoted much attention to linguistic studies spanning the entire period from the end of the medieval period to the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his so-called retrospective survey [*Rückblick auf die früheren Zeiten*], he dealt with the Renaissance and the eighteenth century in remarkable detail. He then proceeded to devote one chapter to each of the major figures in the linguistics of the first half of the nineteenth century. He also attempted to delineate the intellectual climate underlying the rise of linguistics in the early nineteenth century and presented a survey and evaluation of scholarly work in Indo-European and oriental philology and in other branches of linguistics.

In his book *Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Holger Pedersen (1867–1953) presented a survey of language groups and discusses decipherment and the development of linguistic methodology. Only in passing, however, did he mention such important topics as phonetics and dialect geography. Similarly, his book included no account of general linguistics, e.g., such important topics as grammatical theory, phonetic theory, the activities of Russian or Eastern European scholars, or the roots of nineteenth-century linguistics in Romanticism. There were even gaps in areas in which Pedersen himself specialized, viz. in Sanskrit and classical philology.

In general, Pedersen adopted a condescending attitude to pre-Neogrammarian linguistics, accepting throughout the Neogrammarian position as truth. He viewed the development of linguistics as a harmonic progression towards Neogrammarianism. As a result, he felt it necessary to attack all those who violated this harmony. It is as if he regarded the Neogrammarian theory

of regular sound change as a moral law which all of the history of previous linguistics had been working towards.

In my paper, I then examined the work of certain linguists of the early nineteenth century, finding more value in their work than Holger Pedersen had assigned to it. I went on to slay a pair of dragons, namely (1) the idea that Franz Bopp, Rasmus Rask, et al. were single-handedly responsible for the “genetic hypothesis,” and (2) the notion that nineteenth-century linguistics developed a new “methodology.”

The paper concluded with a detailed discussion of the ideas and contribution of one early nineteenth-century linguist, namely Rasmus Rask (1787–1832).

In the minutes of the meeting, the recorder ends on this pleasing note: “There followed a lively debate on aspects of the history of linguistics, including much conjecture on who should be assigned the dubious distinction of having first used the term ‘family’ with respect to linguistic classification.”

A Note on my Sources

While I was writing this paper in 1965, my inspiration came from writings by the Danish philologist and linguist Paul Diderichsen (1905–1964), whose book *Rasmus Rask og den grammatiske tradition: Studier over vendepunktet i sprogvidenskabens historie* [‘Rasmus Rask and the Grammatical Tradition: Studies on the Turning Point in the History of Linguistics’] I was studying with great interest. Most probably, I had also read a later paper of Diderichsen’s entitled “The Foundation of Comparative Linguistics: Revolution or Continuation?” copies of which were distributed in advance to the participants of the second symposium on the history of linguistics organized by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research at the Newberry Library, Chicago in April 1968. Diderichsen had presented this paper four years earlier in Burg Wartenstein, Austria at the first Wenner-Gren symposium on the history of linguistics, which I did not attend. Substantially the same paper appeared in a collection of Diderichsen’s articles entitled *Helhed og struktur* [Totality and Structure] (Copenhagen, 1966), of which I was not aware at the time. Diderichsen’s Burg Wartenstein paper was, however, re-published verbatim in 1974 in the proceedings of the Newberry Library meeting in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, edited by Dell Hymes.

Diderichsen’s main contention, and a revolutionary one at that time, was that all of Rask’s main ideas had resulted from his early acquaintance with a number of eighteenth-century Danish and German writers on both Scandinavian linguistics and comparative linguistics in general. This notion was topical at that time, in that scholars were digesting Thomas Kuhn’s theory according to which science advanced not continuously but in spurts, which he dubbed “scientific revolutions.” Many linguists were led (or misled!) into imagining that various early-nineteenth century writers on linguistics were examples of Thomas Kuhn’s “paradigm blazers,” and among them Rasmus Rask was obviously a prime candidate for that (relatively) rare distinction!

I might point out that I discussed Rasmus Rask’s linguistic theories in my article “Rask’s View of Linguistic Development and Phonetic Correspondences,” *Studies in the History of Lin-*

guistics: Traditions and Paradigms, edited by Dell Hymes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 307–314. This had also been presented at the same meeting in the Newberry Library, Chicago in April 1968.

Whether I was in any way influenced in this paper by having heard Noam Chomsky expound his novel ideas about Descartes' philosophy of language and the Port-Royal *Grammar* at MIT in 1964 I cannot remember. (On Chomsky's ideas, see his subsequent 1966 monograph *Cartesian Linguistics*, of which I was of course still unaware in December 1965.) I do not know whether Chomsky knew of Diderichsen's work, but I can report that as far as I recall he never mentioned his name in class.

While both Diderichsen and Chomsky may be viewed as joining forces in dethroning the generation of Bopp and Rask and discarding the traditional periodization of the history of linguistics tacitly assumed by Benfey, Pedersen and many other linguists, on a deeper level there is little affinity between their respective ideas. Diderichsen questioned the entire notion of conceptual revolutions, while Chomsky believed that linguistics had undergone such a revolution but located it in the seventeenth century rather than on the threshold between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This early paper of mine was an attempt to follow in Diderichsen's footsteps. What exactly I understood in positive terms by my expression "new look in the history of linguistics" is not entirely clear from this précis, but I understood the "old look" to comprise (1) the presumption that linguistics was created by Franz Bopp and the other early nineteenth-century German comparative philologists, and (2) the implication that a truly "scientific" linguistics is defined by the theory espoused by the Neogrammarians of the late nineteenth century. On re-reading this digest I am surprised at my positive attitude to Theodor Benfey's 1869 history. I now view my critique of Holger Pedersen's *Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century* as overdrawn. Subsequently, of course, the entire focus of my interest in the history of linguistics shifted away from the early nineteenth century to the Renaissance.

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