

THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

Thoughts on transitions: From diachrony to dicladia

Readers familiar with my Editor's Department from a year ago ('With all due respect. . .', *Language* 80.1.4–6, 2004) may think, by the time they get to the end of this piece, that I have a morbid streak, and this feeling perhaps is only compounded by the fact that I have indeed had obituaries on my mind in recent months.¹ I mention this as, to some extent, my musings in this space here have been prompted by my reaction to reading Braj Kachru's moving obituary tribute to Henry Kahane in this issue.²

Perhaps it is simply a function of getting older, or, as I would prefer to think, of working so much these days in the *Language* office with history all around me, so to speak—William Dwight Whitney's desk (rescued from Whitney's old farm by George Lane in 1962 and donated eventually to the LSA, moving from *Language* editor to *Language* editor ever since) is here,³ as, of course, are all the back issues of *Language* and related works, including *Special publications*, *Language monographs*, the *William Dwight Whitney linguistic series*, and the *LSA Bulletin*—or perhaps it is just an extension of my interest in language history, but for whatever reason I find myself increasingly drawn to the history of our field. And maybe as the inevitable result of reading 100-plus quite diverse and interesting papers a year that are submitted to the journal, I find myself increasingly drawn as well to thoughts about our field in general.

My interest in diachronic linguistics provides a natural bridge to an interest in obituaries and what they tell us about the way our field developed, since obituaries are personal diachronies, accounts of various figures' individual passages through time. And these passages are essentially transitions from one phase of their life to another phase and another one and so on. In these personal histories, therefore, we see exactly what diachrony means, namely nothing more than the transitions and passages through successive synchronic states—they tell us that in life, in language, and in human institutions in general, there really is no independent diachrony, rather only synchronic states and time.⁴ Since time, figuratively speaking, 'goes by' or 'passes' by its very nature—or by our interpretation of our experience with it—'diachrony' is a necessary by-product of the intersection of time with whatever synchronic states we identify.

¹ Obituaries in *Language* were the subject, for instance, of a paper that Hope C. Dawson and I read at the Annual Meeting of the North American Association for the History of the Language Sciences (January 7, 2005), entitled 'A forgotten genre, the academic obituary, and the *Language* obituary project', in which we announced a project (suggested to me once by Stephen Anderson and apparently thought of by others, we discovered) involving collecting all of the obituaries published in *Language* into one volume, as a contribution to the history of our field. We welcome any thoughts readers may have on such a project.

² Readers may wonder whether an obituary twelve years after an individual's death is warranted. My answer is yes. While the writing and publication of this piece was delayed for various reasons, good history should always be welcome, so it seemed appropriate to me to run it. I confess that my admiration for Henry Kahane as a scholar played a role in my decision to memorialize him, inasmuch as he did seminal work on Greek, a language that is especially close to my scholarly heart.

³ A photograph of the desk can be seen on the *Language* website, www.lsadc.org/language/pics/pics.html.

⁴ This is what Richard Janda and I meant when we said, in our 1988 article ('The how and why of diachronic morphologization and demorphologization', *Theoretical morphology: Approaches in modern linguistics*, ed. by Michael Hammond and Michael Noonan, 193–213, San Diego: Academic Press, p. 194), that 'language change takes place in the present', a statement that some linguists, in reacting to it, thought to be either trivially and uninterestingly true or just plain wrong (seeing language change rather as something that is over and done with in the past). Naturally, we disagree with them.

Life, and language, therefore, are filled with transitions, and in Henry Kahane's life, we see numerous transitions, inasmuch as he was a scholar who bridged several eras in linguistics, several cultures, and several periods in the history of the world. Working on this piece at a point when one year bridges over into the next, I am naturally led to think about how one handles transitions and ultimately fits temporally, culturally, and professionally into a world and a field so much in change.

Not only is his personal diachrony at issue, but we see as well in Henry Kahane and in his work the blending of old approaches and new approaches, and therefore a transition of methods and prevailing doctrine and frameworks. His work serves as a reminder to me of the relevance of the old even in the midst of the new, thus suggesting the utility of gradual rather than abrupt transitions, of the blending of methods and approaches.

I like to tell my historical linguistics classes about the ways in which the field of linguistics has changed but to emphasize as well how there is still room for insights from days gone by. In particular, it is clear that there have been dramatic changes in the field in the past century, indeed in the past quarter century, that can serve the study of language change. I have in mind here new methodologies, such as those of quantitative sociolinguistics, and technological advances, such as the capability to create and search huge corpora. Moreover, work in the second half of the twentieth century, especially by William Labov and others following his lead, has enriched and altered the way we view how languages change. Still, I tell my students that for all the fact that such significant shifts have occurred in recent years, some of the greatest insights into language change came in the mid-nineteenth century with the recognition by the Neogrammarians of the regularity of sound change; that insight alone has provided a foundational bedrock on which much of historical linguistics has developed, thus showing a remarkable durability in our array of tools for approaching the challenges posed by changes in languages.

Such a blend of methods and approaches is not unlike the blend of language registers one sees in diglossic situations, as described by Charles Ferguson ('Diglossia', *Word* 15.325–40, 1959) and as studied by Kahane for Greek, in that there is often the archaic alongside the innovative. Interestingly, Kahane himself experienced a diglossia of a different sort, beyond what he encountered through his work on Greek and in Greece, through his personal multilingualism and choices he had to make regarding language use in different settings. Moreover, somewhat akin as well to the extended sense of diglossia that Michael Herzfeld has drawn attention to, namely 'disemia'⁵—the coexistence of and competition between varying semiotic-cultural systems in a given society, of which diglossia in language is but one aspect—it seems clear that Henry Kahane lived with a disemia as well through his bicultural encounters, confronting life in America from the perspective of his continental education and his persona developed over so many years in Europe.

Let me take this one step further—these are musings after all—especially since Henry Kahane looked to develop a late twentieth-century 'humanistic linguistics', as a counterweight to what he saw as an emerging social-science orientation to the field, particularly in America. We can recognize, as far as our discipline is concerned in general, a disemia of sorts, what can perhaps better be termed 'di-cladia' (based on the Greek κλάδος 'branch', understood literally, as with branches of a tree, but also figuratively, as with branches of a university), that is, a coexistence of different compet-

⁵ See, for instance, 'Disemia', *Semiotics 1980*, ed. by Michael Herzfeld and Margot Lenhart, 205–15, New York: Plenum Press, 1982.

ing visions for an institutional home for a field.⁶ I am referring here to the common observation that linguistics as a field straddles the social sciences and the humanities,⁷ as reflected in the differing practices of various universities in the United States as to the placement of linguistics administratively.⁸

To bring these ramblings back to the concrete here-and-now of *Language*, we can perhaps see a reflection of this dicladia played out in an interesting way in the pages of this very issue: the Discussion Notes section, with its three reactions to Frederick Newmeyer's 'Grammar is grammar and usage is usage' (*Language* 79.4.682–707, 2003) and Newmeyer's response to them, presents clear contrasts between and among different approaches and methodologies (stochastic vs. nonstochastic, formal vs. functional, corpus-based vs. introspective vs. usage-based) that to some extent correlate with approaches associated with different sectors of the academy. Whether representative of dicladia, whether simply the statement of opinions, whether the antithesis to a thesis in the transition to a synthesis, to me the expression of such differing viewpoints on a subject is a healthy sign for any field, and I am pleased that *Language* is able to offer a forum for such discussion. I invite and welcome such commentary by readers and hope for more in future issues.

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⁶ This word exists as a technical term for a genus of moth; I leave it to lexicographers and morphologists to decide if my usage here constitutes a coinage or an extension or some other type of neologicistic usage.

⁷ Not to mention other branches as well, such as the physical sciences, through, for example, the intersection of acoustics with phonetic research, and even engineering, through the relevance of methods and principles of computer science in computational linguistics.

⁸ These practices are discussed in a characteristically engaging way by Geoffrey Pullum in 'Memo from AVC re divisional placement of linguistics department' (*Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 3.1.107–12, 1985), a piece reprinted with some introductory annotations under the title 'A memo from the vice chancellor' in *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax and other irreverent essays on the study of language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 182–89).