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HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS?

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Lecture One

**What is historical
linguistics?**

Historical linguistics studies language change. **It involves some of the hottest topics in linguistics that have been avoided formerly and it has important contributions to by which it enriches linguistic theory and help us understand of human nature.**

There are many reasons why historical linguists believe in their linguistic research:

- ◎ - Firstly , a grasp of the ways in which languages can change provides the student with insights on understanding of language in general, of how languages work, how their pieces fit together.

- **Secondly**, historical linguistic methods have been looked to for models of rigour and excellence in other fields and historical linguistic findings have been utilised to solve historical problems of concern to society which extend far beyond linguistics.

- ◉ Those dedicated to the **humanistic study of individual languages** would find their fields much impoverished without the richness provided by historical insights into the **development of these languages** -
- ◉ **Just imagine the study of any area of non-modern literature in French, German, Italian, Spanish or other languages without insights into how these languages have changed.**

- A very important reason why historical linguists study language change and are excited about their field is because **historical linguistics contributes significantly to other sub-areas of linguistics and to linguistic theory.**

For example, human cognition and the human capacity for language learning are central research interests in linguistics, and historical linguistics contributes significantly to this goal.

- - As we determine more accurately **what can change and what cannot change in a language, and what the permitted versus impossible ways are in which languages can change, ...** we contribute significantly to the understanding of universal grammar, language typology and human cognition in general-

All these are very fundamental to understanding our very humanity.

WHAT HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IS NOT?

◉ **Let's begin by clearing away some possible misconceptions, by considering a few things that historical linguistics is *not* about, though sometimes some non-linguists think it is.**

1- Historical linguistics is not concerned with the *history of linguistics*, though historical linguistics has played an important role in the development of linguistics - being the main kind of linguistics practised in the nineteenth century - and indeed historical linguistic notions had a monumental impact in the humanities and social sciences, far beyond just linguistics .

2- Another topic not generally considered to be properly part of historical linguistics is the ultimate *origin of human language* and how it may have evolved from non-human primate call systems, gestures, or whatever, to have the properties we now associate with human languages in general.

Many hypotheses abound, but it is very difficult to gain solid footing in this area.

- Finally, historical linguistics is also not about determining or preserving pure, 'correct' forms of language or attempting to prevent change. The popular attitude towards change in language is resoundingly **negative**. The changes are often seen as **corruption, decay, degeneration, deterioration, as due to laziness, as a threat to education, morality and even to national security.**

We read laments in letters to newspapers stating that our language is being destroyed, deformed and reduced to an almost unrecognisable remnant of its former and rightful glory. These are of course not new sentiments, but laments like these that existed throughout history.

However, change in language is inevitable, and this makes complaints against language change both futile and silly.

All languages change all the time (except dead ones). Language change is just a fact of life; it cannot be prevented or avoided.

Indeed, the changes going on today which so distress some in our society are exactly the same in kind and character as many past changes about which there was much complaint and worry as they were taking place, but the results of which today are considered enriching aspects of the modern language.

Since it is always taking place, those who oppose ongoing changes would do their stress-levels well just to make peace with the inevitability of language change. Of course, society can assign negative or positive value to things in language (be the new changing ones or the old ones), and this can have an impact on how or whether these things change.

This sociolinguistic conditioning of change is an important part of historical linguistics.

A MOMENT FOR REVIEW:

- Is it possible to avoid language change? Yes/ No , try to develop a ten lines composition.
- State the position of Historical Linguistics vis-a-vis (history of language, human language origins, language preservation).
- Historical linguistics and its contributions to understanding linguistic and non-linguistic studies.