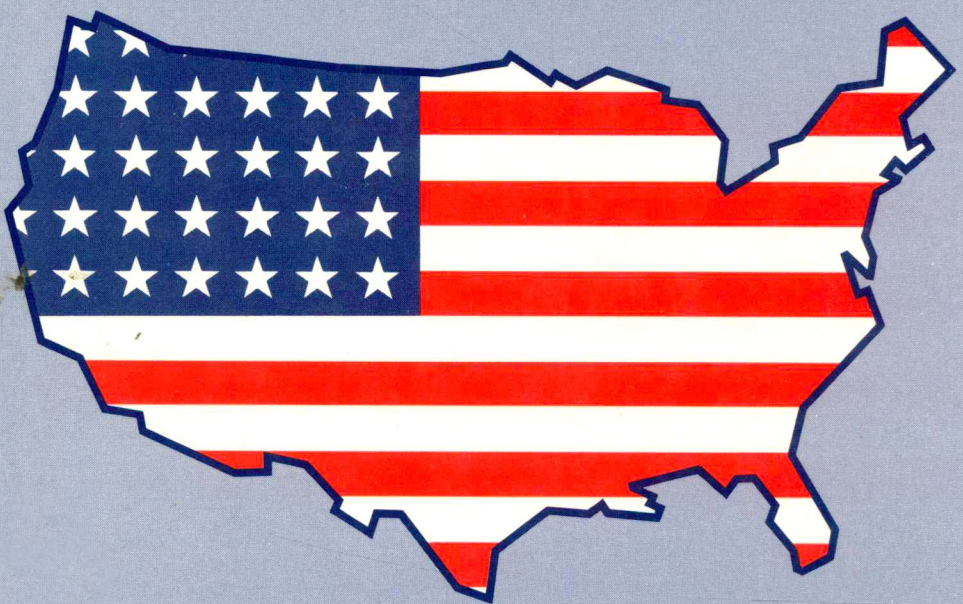
# Linguistics in America 1769~1924

## A Critical History



Julie Tetel Andresen

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## *A Critical History*

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# PREFACE: AMERICAN LINGUISTICS CIRCA 1925

It is the privilege and, in fact, business of the historian to "cheat": to peek ahead at any given moment in the historical record, to see "what happens next." Exercising this privilege to the limit, I will begin my story at the end, that is, on December 28, 1924, the date of the founding of the Linguistic Society of America. Better yet, I will begin just beyond that end and attempt to evoke "what happens next" in American linguistics in the year 1925.

Given my initial orientation to the founding of the LSA, I will begin my brief survey with the first issue of *Language*. The lead article in this issue is Edward Sapir's "Sound Patterns in Language." Here Sapir argues against the position that phonetic processes can be understood in mechanical terms, as relatively simple sensorimotor habits (i.e. the basic nineteenth-century position), and argues instead for a subtle, psychological interpretation of these processes in terms of phonemes which, according to Sapir, are located in the "inner configuration of the sound system of a language." Sapir's article is followed, in a prophetic way, by Albert P. Weiss's article "Linguistics and Psychology," an essay where the terms "behavior," "stimulus," and "response" figure prominently. Thus, the stage is set for "what happens next" in a significant portion of American linguistics, namely, a theoretical schism between Sapir's mentalism and Leonard Bloomfield's Weissian behaviorism.[1]

Leonard Bloomfield, for his part, in 1925 was engaged in professionalizing the discipline of linguistics from his academic base of operation at Ohio State. Bloomfield was, of course, the major driving force behind the creation of the Linguistic Society of America. His prefatory "Why a Linguistic Society?" to the first

issue of *Language* pointedly addresses the need for a "professional consciousness" among American linguists. In addition, Bloomfield had already written "A Set of Postulates for the Science of Language" which he based on Weiss's set of postulates for psychology and which he was to publish in the second issue of *Language* (1926). In "Postulates" Bloomfield cites with approval both Sapir's 1921 *Language* and Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1922) as helpful steps toward the "delimitation of linguistics" and presages the behaviorist scenario to come.[2]

Whatever divisions were to come later in American linguistics, I consistently detect in 1925 a sense of group effort in progress which was focused toward the twin and intertwined goals of 1) carving out a theoretical space in language that was the particular province of the linguist (e.g. Sapir's "inner configuration of the sound system"); and 2) making linguistics a professionally autonomous academic discipline. Another group effort along this line was the provision made by the Linguistic Society of America soon after its founding for summer linguistic institutes. On the individual level, Sapir left his position as the Chief of the Anthropological Section, Geological Survey of Canada, in 1925 to accept his first academic post (University of Chicago).

Philology was in full swing in America in 1925. The journals *Modern Philology, American Journal of Philology, Journal of the American Oriental Society, Journal of English and Germanic Philology* and the *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* all produced healthy volumes for the year in the well-plowed fields of the Classics, be it Horace or Homer, and of Sanskrit and the *Vedas*, and of the language and literature of Old, Middle, and Early Modern English. In 1925, Maurice Bloomfield, a student of William Dwight Whitney and Leonard's uncle, drew the following distinction between history and philology: "History . . . may be compared to a pen and ink drawing, philology lays on the colors. History is engaged with what may be called the more external, pragmatic, secular aspects of the human past; philology deals more with its inner, spiritual aspects" (1925: 5). The sense of "inner feeling"/"outer form" is here refinforced

It is worth speculating why no existing journal and why no existing American society devoted to language studies (e.g. The Modern Language Association, The American Philological Society, the American Oriental Society) could have been reformed

from within to meet the new needs that led to the creation of the Linguistic Society of America. Despite the recognition by the founders of the Society that linguistics was an international discipline, there seems to have been a nascent feeling around 1925 for *American* linguistics.[3] A glance at all the above-mentioned journals and societies of the period confirms that they were devoted to traditional European-style topics and methodologies. I suggest that none of them would have been "home-grown" enough for the founders of the LSA.

On the other hand, a publication such as *Dialect Notes* devoted specifically to the American language would not have been "linguistic" enough for Bloomfield's purposes. Incidentally, volume V, part VIII of *Dialect Notes* for 1925 issued a call for "The Need for an American Dialect Dictionary," thereby indicating fairly accurately "what happens next" in American dialect studies.

A journal already existed in 1925 which was both suitably "linguistic" and devoted to uniquely American language concerns, although it was, perhaps, too specialized to serve exclusively as the official journal of the Linguistic Society of America: *The International Journal of American Linguistics*. In 1925, those linguists who were most active in establishing the Linguistic Society of America were also continuing their work on American Indian languages. The third volume of the journal, which Franz Boas had begun in 1917, appeared in 1924–5, and included articles by Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield, John Swanton, and Truman Michelson. The letters from Bloomfield to Michelson and Sapir have recently been published (Hockett 1987). The Bloomfield–Sapir correspondence clusters particularly between January 1924 and June 1925 and fully confirms Bloomfield's enthusiasm both for the Linguistic Society of America and for American Indian languages. In addition to the exchanges of information on various Algonquin languages (mostly phonemic matters), the letters reveal such disparate information as Bloomfield's painfully inflamed feet and how much to pay an informant (Sapir judged $5 a day to be high).

In October of 1925, another new journal was launched which was devoted to language in a specifically American key. This was *American Speech*. The first issue opens without editorial comment on a worthy, but not ground-breaking, discussion of "Conservatism in American Speech." The most interesting article in the issue, from my point of view, is one by Kemp Malone entitled "A

Linguistic Patriot." It is devoted to the writings of Noah Webster. When I first came across that article, I was gratified to find that a part (however small) of "what happens next" in American language studies after 1924 is a return to "what came before," in this case, to Webster's writings from the 1780s onwards. My historiographic sensibility – or whatever aesthetic sense it is that seeks closure – was initially satisfied that my end (1924) could point, even partially, to my beginning (1769).

Personal and aesthetic gratification aside, however, the more I came to think about Kemp Malone's article, the more I began to realize its anecdotal significance to my entire project. It is this: American linguists of today do not think of Noah Webster as having anything to do with the American linguistic past, and even less with the present. Neither, apparently, did American linguists of 1925. After all, Kemp Malone was a foundation member of the Linguistic Society of America, and he published his article on Webster in *American Speech*, and not in, say, *Language*. Now, any number of reasons come to mind why Malone's article on Webster should appropriately appear in *American Speech*, not the least of those being that Malone was one of the original editors of the journal, along with Louise Pound and Arthur Kennedy. More to the point, however, is the implicit separation made in 1925 between those language concerns and interests of a Webster who viewed language, let us say, *in a radically non-autonomous way* and those of a Bloomfield who was heavily invested in autonomizing both the discipline and the profession of "the science of language." It was tacitly decided, in effect, in 1925 that Webster's and Bloomfield's approaches to language belonged in two different places and to two different traditions: Webster's to some narrowly nationalist (read: non-linguistic, non-scientific) tradition (interpret: of no interest to "real" linguists); Bloomfield's to the loftier realms of general (read: enjoying all the rigors of German science) linguistics (interpret: though all the while striving for a "made in America" touch). Significantly, however, Bloomfield identified the highest unity of "that noblest of sciences, philology" to be "the study of *national* culture," as opposed to, say, *human* culture (L. Bloomfield 1925a: 4, note 1).

Whatever benefits this separation of approaches may have brought to the future growth of linguistics in America after 1925, I maintain that, today, it has outlived its usefulness. Furthermore,

if there is among American linguists today a continuing perception of separation between those interests (and perhaps it is an unconscious perception, for I have just said that American linguists do not usually think of Webster at all), this perception is the historically contingent product of the *de facto* separation that occurred in 1925. Over the past sixty years and more, this implicit separation has become part of a received history of what it is to do linguistics in this country, and that history necessarily informs current theories and practices.

This received history – how we view "what came before" – is not cast in stone; and although history is not infinitely plastic, I find a lot of "give" in the possibilities of history-writing and think that history-writing's first purpose is to serve the needs of today. It is now time to rewrite – or, more accurately, to write in the first place – a history of linguistics in America, one that incorporates the interests and concerns of a Noah Webster (to name but one) and that acknowledges them as valid, even central, to what American linguistic theory and practice has always been and continues to be.

What do we gain when we do this? First, I have long noticed a tendency for histories of linguistics to isolate the nineteenth-century American linguist William Dwight Whitney, to make of him a solitary mesa rising out from around a very barren surrounding landscape of nineteenth-century American linguistic activity (L. Bloomfield 1933: 16; Labov 1972: 266–70; Anderson 1985: 194–6; Koerner 1986a). However, a rereading and recontextualization of the impetus and import of Webster's views on the American language and its political consequences in the wake of the American Revolution help to anchor and explain the tradition to which Whitney's sociopolitical linguistic thought belongs. When we put Whitney in line with Webster, we gain a very new history of (non-autonomous, sociopolitico-)linguistics.

Second (and in this context of the traditional academic northeast), the name of a third New England linguist who has also written widely on politics may be invoked. Although a comparison of Chomsky's politics and linguistics to Webster's goes well beyond the bounds of this book, the simple juxtaposition of names (Chomsky–Webster) strikes a new image of linguistic thought and suggests new possibilities in linguistic history; and instead of seeing Chomsky's political writings as something separate from his

linguistic writings, one might turn the problem around and ask what the two activities have in common, or even ask how they have come to be separated.[4]

For my part, I will be using the term "political" in this book in a conceptual framework that includes "historical" and "contextual." I maintain, at the outset, that all linguistic theories are political, in that they are elaborated in a specific historical context. When speaking of a particular conception of language, say the "political conception" of language, the term "political" will belong in a conceptual framework that includes "non-autonomous," as well. An examination of the shaping and reshaping of the boundary lines between so-called "autonomous" and "non-autonomous" (i.e. political) linguistics is a central task of *Linguistics in America 1769–1924: A Critical History*.

Thus far, I have insisted that developments post-1924 fall beyond my purview. This periodization is somewhat arbitrary, and in any case, the history of language study in America is too complex to start and top cleanly at either of the edges I have chosen. However, the major periodization of the book is not completely without foundation. Similarly, the periodizations of the five chapters are equally motivated but still problematic. They exist, to a certain extent, for organizational convenience. All of my dates may be thought of as bull's-eyes, that is, centers of large, overlapping, and non-discrete targets.

The rationale behind the various periodizations will be discussed in the Introduction, which is also intended to orient the reader to the goals of linguistic historiography and to expose the challenges, assertions, and thematic boundaries of my study. I have permitted myself an Introduction, in addition to this Preface, because I have repeatedly confronted a number of pre- and misconceptions surrounding my material, like so many prophylactics wrapped around the texts; and it has been borne in on me that it is the very historical understanding of these texts that is the disease (thinking here etymologically of "prophylactic") which these preconceptions are supposed to guard against. That is, I am aware, before even beginning my project, that there exists a strong resistance against interpreting American linguistics in a historical and political context.

From the Introduction, I will focus in Chapter 1, "In the Beginning: The Political Conception of Language," on the years 1769

through 1815. During this period, a distinctly political conception of language prevailed in Colonial and post-Colonial America which shared much in common with the anglo-french tradition of eighteenth-century language studies. The principal figure involved in elaborating this conception is Noah Webster, whose general conception of language is supported by the writings of both Benjamin Franklin, who founded the American Philosophical Society in 1769, and Thomas Jefferson, whose vision of language study included an interest in dialect variation, the recording of American Indian languages, and the institutionalization of Anglo-Saxon.

Chapter 2, "From Philadelphia to the Field," concentrates on the years 1815–42. It is closely intertwined with the first chapter to make one extended movement. Since there is the most groundwork to lay in the period 1769–1842, the first two chapters make up half the book. After describing the various expansions that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, the chapter returns to an examination of the complex ideological relationship that existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century between the status of American English and of the American Indian languages. Next is reviewed the image of the American Indian languages that the (Euro-)Americans inherited from the eighteenth century. To the negative European perspective on the American Indian languages, the American response is most articulately outlined by John Heckewelder, Peter Duponceau, and John Pickering, the work of the last two men representing essentially "armchair studies." The move to the field is best exemplified by the work of Henry Schoolcraft and Albert Gallatin, which last founded the American Ethnological Society in 1842, the date marking the end of the second chapter. A first codification of American scholarship is represented by Francis Lieber's *Encyclopedia Americana*, first edition 1830, and his general writings on language represent a high degree of linguistic relativism. However, the general spirit of liberalism and expansion would not last forever, and the study of language in America had to contend with the diffusion of German scholarship "back east," resulting in a return to conservatism.

The formal institutionalization of American linguistics occupies the whole of Chapter 3, spanning the years 1842–94, beginning with the founding of the American Oriental Society (the same year

at Gallatin's American Ethnological Society) and ending with William Dwight Whitney's death. In this, the central chapter, Whitney's writings and career are of pivotal importance, along with the practical tensions engendered by the transplanting of German scholarship on American soil. I will argue here that, despite Whitney's sophistication in German erudition, his thought belongs to the distinctly franco-anglophone, non-autonomous, i.e. "political," conception of language, which was incompatible with German approaches. It is the particular interest of this chapter, then, to show how Whitney, the most important American academic of the second half of the nineteenth century, conceived of the "science of language" and what he did to promote its development in the United States. Whitney fundamentally shaped the course of American linguistics for several generations by being actively involved in the organization of the American Philological Association (1869), Spelling Reform Association (1876), Modern Language Association (1883), and the American Dialect Society (1889).

Chapter 4, "The Arcs of Development Separate: 1875–1900," details the separation of the concerns of English studies from those of "the science of language" as well as from those of Powell's and Brinton's approaches to the American Indian languages. Chapters 4 and 5 also make a single, extended movement. Since the topics covered in these chapters have received proportionally more attention from recent historians, I will spend proportionately less space on them in this book. I will focus only on tying these chapters into those themes I have already set out in the first three chapters, with the aim of refreshed readings of such familiar texts as Boas's 1911 "Introduction" to the *Handbook of American Indian languages*.

Chapter 5, then, "The Search for Autonomy: 1900–24," details Bloomfield's early career in the context of existing ways in America for practicing linguistics with the overlay of Germanic scholarship that was to hit high tide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bloomfield's work both links with Whitney's work and breaks with it in ways that have shaped the study of language in America for the whole of the twentieth century. The importance of academic institutions such as Johns Hopkins, whose early development is discussed in Chapter 4, continued on into the early decades of the twentieth century and contrasts with non-institutionalized professional activity, such as

Mencken's and even Sapir's work. Both Boas's and Sapir's life and career are of prime importance here. The chapter will end with a description of the establishment of the LSA in the closing days of 1924.

Thus, we have arrived back at 1925. To complete my little survey of the contemporaneous American linguistic scene circa 1925, I note the inauguration of yet another journal, this one in January of 1924. It is *American Mercury*, and it is bound to the history of American language studies in a variety of ways, beginning with its editor, Henry L. Mencken, who had already published, by this time, the first three editions of his monumental *The American Language* (1919, 1921, 1923). In the first volume of *American Mercury*, those articles pertaining to language reconfirm my sense that a general movement was afoot both to establish some special space inside of language that would be the linguist's privileged territory and to foster a pride in American approaches to scholarship. For instance, under the rubric "Philology," the article by George Krapp on "The Test of English" examines the question of "what sanction must English speech receive before it can be included sympathetically with the circle of the English idiom" (1924: 95). Krapp dispenses with all external factors – etymology, grammar, usage – and argues that the "idiomatic life of the language is not something external . . . but lies within us, a part of every person's living experience" (1924: 97). There is, under the rubric "Anthropology," a contribution by Robert Lowie who balances current American ethnology against the British historical school and the German–Austrian *kulturhistorische* school. Lowie values the American school for its display of "calm commonsense."

Finally, in this first volume of *American Mercury* appears an elegant piece by Sapir entitled "The Grammarian and His Language." Sapir is concerned with the issue of "the very pallid status of linguistics in America" which he attributes to the Americans' general preference for function and their corresponding lack of appreciation for the "inner structure of language," "unconscious psychic processes," and the "world of linguistic forms, held within the framework of a given language." Sapir clinches his arguments with a discussion of *the stone falls*, a particular phrase which echoes with the resonance of Indian glosses involving stones to be found in the literature going all the way back to

Father Le Jeune's *Relations of New France* (1636), at least. I was gratified, once again, that my end could, even so obliquely, evoke my beginnings.

In this same article, Sapir also mentions the then recently published work *The Meaning of Meaning* by the English scholars C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards. Innocently, I must suppose, Sapir points with this reference to a particular aspect of "what does *not* happen next" in American language studies, namely the notorious (and often notoriously misunderstood) elimination of the study of meaning from the "science of language" (see Bloomfield 1927a, Part II, "The Problem of Meaning"). Nonetheless, by 1925, Sapir had read Ogden and Richards and found it useful.[5] Now, Ogden and Richards orient themselves in a rich tradition of semantics ("the science of symbolism") that includes, among others, the American Charles S. Peirce, a tradition which I do not intend to cover in this study. My symmetry is perfect: I have identified the study of meaning – "what does not happen next" – as part of "what did not come before." However, I am not striving for perfect symmetry. I am rather reminded, in this context, that the identification of "what happens next" and "what came before" (along with their negative counterparts) are mutually determining – and always incomplete.

Happily, the editors of *American Mercury* anticipated my difficulty and wrote for me when they admitted in their first editorial that: "the Editors are not fond enough to believe in their own varieties of truth too violently, or to assume that the truth is ascertainable in all cases, or even in most cases" (Mencken 1924: 27).

# INTRODUCTORY ESSAY: THE GOALS OF LINGUISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

## CHALLENGES

Linguistic historiography is a discipline that has come into its own during the past several decades. It is now possible to cite a large body of literature devoted to linguistic historiography and to identify an international community of scholars dedicated to historiographic research. Although historiography is not yet a standardized part of the linguistic student's training in the United States, historiographic perspectives are appearing more and more in the work of American linguists (see Preface, note 1). The increasing appearance of these perspectives suggests that American linguists perceive an increasing need for the theoretical depth and dimension that historiography provides. However, when it comes to historiographic perspectives on linguistics in the United States, few exist, and almost none at all for the period before the twentieth century. In fact, up to now, the tradition of American linguistics announced in my title has been assumed *not* to exist. This book challenges that negative assumption by providing a history of American linguistics from the founding of the American Philosophical Society in 1769 to the founding of the Linguistic Society of America in 1924.

As a consequence, this book also challenges the assumption that the true study of language in the nineteenth century was Indo-European philology. This book then also necessarily challenges the assumption that the center of linguistic activity in the nineteenth century was Germany. Traditional histories of linguistics – those written by Rudolf von Raumer (1815–76), Theodor Benfey 1809–81), Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), and Holger Pedersen (1867–1953) – established the equation for the nineteenth century whereby *Indo-European studies* plus *Germany* equalled, if not the sum

total, at least the *core* or *true center* of language study. This equation of *Indo-European studies* plus *Germany* equals *linguistic center* has proven to be strong and enduring. Many linguists today automatically associate the nineteenth century with historical–comparative Indo-European studies and readily identify their alpha and omega as Franz Bopp (1791–1867) and Karl Brugmann (1849–1919). The absence of any other immediate association reinforces the assumption that Indo-European studies in Germany indeed represent the essence of nineteenth-century linguistics.

Traditional histories of the nineteenth century did sometimes acknowledge other types of linguistic activity. In the United States, Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), in his brief history of linguistics in the first chapter of *Language* (1933), identified two types of activities for the nineteenth century: those in the "main stream" and those "not in the main stream." For Bloomfield, who inherited his view of linguistic history primarily from Pedersen (see 1931), the "great stream" of linguistic research was historical, alongside of which ran "a small but accelerating current of general linguistic study" represented by the tradition of Humboldt–Steinthal–Wundt (1933: 17–18). Descriptive studies were also not in "the main stream of historical work" and could be represented by the study of any non-Indo-European language family, e.g. Finno-Ugric or Amerind. Although Bloomfield intends for his history to valorize general linguistics and descriptive studies in the twentieth century, the phrase "main stream" when applied to the nineteenth century is not neutral. In organizing the vision of what it was to do "mainstream" linguistics in the nineteenth century, Bloomfield, at the same time, identifies the "core". The implication results that the research programs and the findings of those researchers "not in the main stream" were not only merely peripheral but also somehow "less": perhaps less numerous, less productive, certainly less central, and then by extension, less scientific, less theoretically important. In other words, those studies "not in the main stream" were, in a word, marginal, and they have been accordingly adjourned to the margins of our received history.

The present study challenges the assumption that the practice of linguistics, and thus its history, falls into the *a priori* divisions of "main" and "not mainstream." It takes issue with the assumption that a predetermined center exists against which other types of study may be measured as marginal.