

Brugmann, Karl (Friedrich Christian); (b. 1849, d. 1919; German), lecturer at Leipzig University (1877-1884), professor at Freiburg (1884-1887), then professor of Indo-European linguistics at Leipzig (1887-1919). A vastly influential historical linguist, both in his youth as a leading member of the ‘neogrammarians’, who revolutionised the study of diachrony, and later as the author of the key compendium for Indo-European historical and comparative linguistics. (See Also: *Bopp, Franz; *Grimm, Jacob; *Rask, Rasmus; *Saussure, Ferdinand de).

Brugmann was born ‘Brugman’, in Wiesbaden, into a well-to-do family. His family changed the spelling to ‘Brugmann’ when he was 33. In 1867, he left to study linguistics, already well established at German universities, first for one year at Halle, and then at Leipzig, where he was to spend almost all the rest of his life. One interruption came directly after he submitted his doctoral thesis (1871), when he took a teacher training qualification in Bonn. After a year’s teaching in Wiesbaden, he moved back to Leipzig, first to teach in a school, and after four years, returning to the university.

His university teaching career was all spent at Leipzig, apart from an early move to Freiburg when he was 35. He began publication of some of his key works there, but stayed for only three years, until his *alma mater* offered him a chair. Returning to Leipzig, he helped build the university into the then world-centre of linguistics, with Brugmann himself its leading light. Germany was then the capital of linguistics, and the discipline essentially a historical and comparative one (although other trends were also pursued, for example by *Humboldt). Brugmann belonged to the third generation of serious nineteenth-century linguists. The first comprised pioneers such as *Rask, *Bopp and *Grimm. The second, including such figures as August Schleicher, established linguistics as an academic discipline, both in universities and as a developing paradigm of knowledge, with scholars aware of and consciously building on colleagues’ work.

Brugmann thus found linguistics a relatively mature discipline (he reckoned it 60 years old in 1878). Its primary goal was the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European, and Brugmann’s first influential articles were both contributions to this goal. Published in 1876, while still a school teacher, they were distinctly controversial, also a defining characteristic of some of Brugmann’s later writings. These first major contributions substantially but simply reshaped Indo-European phonology by reinterpreting its inventory of vowels and recognising that it had underlying syllabic nasals. The latter illustrates his openness to developments in general phonetics and phonology, unlike many historical linguists who had gone before.

Brugmann is best known as a leader among the ‘neogrammarians’. This handful of scholars and their contemporary co-thinkers were academically young, and set out to revitalise linguistics and save it from what they saw as non-scientific, romantic faults. The translation ‘neogrammarian’ does not well convey the humorously-meant ‘young upstart’ flavour of the original *Junggrammatiker*, and the confidence with which they set about revising old results was as infuriating for some contemporaries as it was inspiring for others.

Brugmann co-founded the quasi-journal *Morphologische Untersuchungen*, to publicise neogrammarian ideas, and its first volume’s preface (1878) is now known as the ‘neogrammarian manifesto’. Written by Brugmann (also signed by Hermann Osthoff), this sets out the theoretical assumptions of the neogrammarian movement. These were not stunningly new in 1878 – as the ‘manifesto’ explains, they had been

assumed in some previous work – but their formulation by Brugmann in a concise and coherent manner had a considerable impact due to their explicitness and clear contradiction of the assumptions of predecessors and contemporaries.

Using modern terminology, these principles can be summed up thus: (i) phonological change proceeds through the innovation of regular, subconscious ‘sound laws’ which do not allow exceptions – for any change, all occurrences of a segment in the environment concerned will be changed (this is referred to as the ‘regularity’ or ‘exceptionlessness’ hypothesis; it aided the shift in linguistics from plain comparative reconstruction to attempts to link reconstructed to attested forms through the formulation of historical phonological processes), (ii) the other key mechanism which can lead to changes in a morpheme’s form is an analogy with a member of parallel morphological paradigm (sometimes referred to as ‘form association’), (iii) the languages which linguists reconstruct had exactly the same kind of linguistic properties as languages have today (often referred to as ‘uniformitarianism’), (iv) language exists in the human mind and is not an autonomous organism which might ‘be young’, ‘grow old’, ‘improve’ or ‘decay’.

Points (i) and (ii) are the key methodological principles, and all four are now fundamental assumptions in much linguistics, apart perhaps from (i), which may have been complicated by the recognition of ‘lexically diffusing’ changes, which seem to spread gradually through the lexicon, so that not all words are affected at the same time, even though they feature the same phonological environment; nonetheless, many linguists in 2003 still claim some version of the regularity hypothesis as a crucial guiding methodological assumption. The principles fitted well with the general assumption of universal laws and uniformity in nature in nineteenth-century science.

Brugmann applied these principles in many contributions to the history of Indo-European languages, especially Latin and Greek. For the latter, he produced a detailed grammar (1885), recognised as one of the clearest and most comprehensive for any individual language. Although historically focussed, it also described the synchronic phonology, morphology and syntax of Ancient Greek (indeed, synchronic description was taken for granted by the neogrammarians, although not seen as a goal in its own right).

His greatest work was his vast compendium of knowledge about Indo-European and the Indo-European languages, the *Grundriß*. This was published in several parts (some written by Berthold Delbrück), beginning in 1886, with a second edition following soon after. A mammoth undertaking, the *Grundriß* summed up the state of the art in comparative and historical Indo-European studies, the linguistic pilot science. It contained the results of many scholars’ work, including Brugmann’s own, and encouragement for subsequent researchers to address unexplained problems. Naturally, subsequent scholarship has revised the results that Brugmann records (thus his four series of Indo-European obstruents are now normally reduced to three, and the discovery of Tocharian and Hittite have widened the Indo-European data set) but Brugmann’s *Grundriß* has stood the test of time as a remarkable source of data and hypotheses concerning older Indo-European languages.

The second edition of the *Grundriß* was nearing completion when Brugmann died. In the meantime, he had published a shortened, still-read, one-volume version, co-founded the journal *Indogermanische Forschungen*, and published a remarkable number of other pieces, mostly on phonology and morphology, but also on syntax and meaning.

While the controversy regarding some of his opinions and analyses did not and still will not die down, Brugmann achieved immense respect during his lifetime,

undiminished among those who read his work today. He was an absolute master of the live topics in linguistics, and also a great teacher, organiser and networker. Many students and colleagues came to Leipzig, including *Saussure, *Bloomfield and *Trubetzkoy, who all played major roles later in the development of 'modern' synchronic linguistics, and Brugmann's influence is by no means limited to those who work on historical problems. The neogrammarian systematic, scientific approach has been passed on to contemporary formal linguistics. The 'regularity' hypothesis was the first explanatory principle in linguistics: sound laws could be shown to be right or wrong because they made predictions about which segments in which environments would change. If a word could be found where a segment targeted by a law had not changed, either a principled (phonological, dialectological or analogical) explanation had to be found, or the sound law had to be reformulated or rejected. This type of argumentation has been passed on to feature crucially in generative linguistics. A further neogrammarian contribution was in fully legitimising the investigation of speaker-internal, endogenously-changing language in its own right, that is, as an autonomous system which can undergo changes caused and constrained by purely linguistic (e.g. phonological, morphological) factors. Brugmann never shied from academic debate where he felt his science demanded it, but most of his work was painstaking and creative explanation of data. He had a happy family life, was well-liked by his colleagues, and died in post at Leipzig in 1919.

Primary works

- (1876). 'Nasalis sonans in der indogermanischen Grundsprache'. *Sudien zur griechischen und lateinischen Grammatik (Curtis' Studien)*, Vol. 9.
- (1876). 'Zur Geschichte der stammabstufenden Declinationen. Erste Abhandlung: Die Nomina auf -ar- und -tar-'. *Sudien zur griechischen und lateinischen Grammatik (Curtis' Studien)*, Vol. 9.
- (1878). Preface to *Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet der indogermanischen Sprachen*. Vol. 1. Winfred Lehmann, trans. In Winfred Lehmann (ed). *A Reader in Nineteenth-Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1963.
- (1885) 'Griechische Grammatik' In Iwan Müller (ed.). *Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Vol. 2. Munich: Beck, 1-126. Later published, in a much expanded form as a separate volume (e.g. the third edition, 1900, with 632 pages).
- (1886-1893). *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*. First two volumes, on phonology and morphology (volumes 3-5, on syntax, were written by Berthold Delbrück). Strasburg: Trübner. Joseph Wright, R. Seymour Conway and W.H.D. Rouse, trans. *Elements of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-Germanic languages*. London: David Nutt, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner. 1888-1895. Second edition 1897-1916.

Further reading

- Collinge, N.E. (1995) 'History of historical linguistics'. In E.F.K. Koerner and R.E. Asher (eds.) *Concise History of the Language Sciences*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Lehmann, Winfred (1993). *Theoretical Bases of Indo-European Linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Morpurgo Davies, Anna (1997). *History of Linguistics*. Vol. 4: *Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*. London: Longman.

Chapman, S. & Routledge, P. (eds) (2005) *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Pp 45-48.

Streitberg, Wilhelm (1919). 'Karl Brugmann'. *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch*, Vol. 7.
Robins, R.H. (1997). *A Short History of Linguistics*. Fourth edition. London:
Longman.

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NB: The (*See Also*'s) at the start, and asterisked names in the text refer only to other linguists who feature in *Key Thinkers in Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language*. It's a good book – buy it!

Further further reading and notes

(Titles and things which I could not include in the published version due to constraints on space: 1500 words in total...)

- There are several other pieces on Brugmann, such as Anna Morpurgo Davies' (1986) 'Karl Brugmann and late nineteenth-century linguistics', in Theodora Bynon & F.R. Palmer (eds.) *Studies in the History of Western Linguistics: in Honour of R.H. Robins*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 150-171. And it is worth reading Max Förster's (1918) 'Worte der Erinnerung an Karl Brugmann' *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch*, Vol. 6, vii-x, for another piece about him, which expresses the great sense of loss that those working in the field felt when he died.
- The importance of Brugmann and the other neogrammarians for the general development of linguistics has been discussed in many places. One of these is the 1978 volume of the *Transactions of the Philological Society* which celebrates the 100 year anniversary of the 'annus mirabilis' 1876, when neogrammarian ideas began to be properly promulgated. Another is Winfred Lehmann's (1993) *Theoretical bases of Indo-European Linguistics*, London: Routledge – an excellent book, which discusses much of the history of our understanding of *Indo-European*, including Brugmann's contributions, and is well worth reading.
- You can get a free copy of an English translation of the (1878) preface to *Morphologische Untersuchungen* (and of much of the (1876) 'Nasalis sonans' paper) here: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/books/readT.html>. This is a freely available electronic version of Winfred Lehmann's (1967) *A Reader in Nineteenth Century Historical Indo-European Linguistics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. It's a wonderful resource, including William Jones' famous (1786) *Discourse*, and articles by Rask, Bopp, Grimm, Verner and others, as well as those by Brugmann. The (1878) preface to *Morphologische Untersuchungen* is truly extraordinary and comes across still now as remarkably modern and relevant.
- Brugmann was so well respected in his lifetime that he was made the first president of the Society for Indo-European Studies when it was founded in 1912; this society still exists, if in reconstituted form (see: http://www.indogerm.uni-halle.de/1146_130432/).
- I think a direct line can be drawn from the kind of work that Brugmann and the Neogrammarians did through Structuralist synchronic work to early Generative linguistics, and hence to the basic foundation of much of how linguistics is conceived of, and done, today. Phonology, long the pilot science of linguistics, was the crucial theoretical field in which many of these basic principles were worked out, establishing the assumptions that language can be investigated as an autonomous entity, and that linguistics should be rigorous and explicit and should look for 'law-like' linguistic generalisations (rules, constraints, principles etc...). As Robins (1967) says, "we are all neogrammarians now".