

History and historical linguistics: two types of cognitive reconstruction?

Patrick Honeybone (University of Edinburgh)
patrick.honeybone@ed.ac.uk

The structure of this talk:

1. What am I talking about? And why am I doing it?
 2. History and historical linguistics: two types of cognitive reconstruction? *Take 1*
 3. What do historical linguists do?
 4. What do historians do?
 5. History and historical linguistics: two types of cognitive reconstruction? *Take 2*
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1. What am I talking about? And why am I doing it?

- (1) This is a conceptual, ‘*meta-*’ talk, with little data...
 - I’m taking the opportunity to ponder the background to what I and others do

1.1 What am I talking about?

- (2) I aim to pursue the idea that:
 - the disciplines of history and historical linguistics have a fair amount in common
 - in ways which do not seem to be typically recognised
 - the commonalities are concerned with their methods of investigation and objects of study
 - I argue there is a set of intriguing similarities, differences and parallels
- (3) In order to recognise the commonalities, we need to accept a certain set of controversial, but – I think – compelling, assumptions concerning the philosophy of linguistics and of history
- (4) I aim to consider:
 - what it is that we do when we do historical linguistics (or, at least, parts of it)
 - what it is that we do when we do history (or, at least, parts of it)
 - this is a contribution to the comparative philosophy of disciplines
 - I may be talking about what linguistics can learn from history and what history can learn from linguistics, but not in terms of the disciplines’ *results* – rather, it is in terms of their *goals*
- (5) Some related relevant questions:
 - what is the object of study in history?
 - what is the object of study in historical linguistics?
- (6) Some terminological points:
 - for linguistics, there’s a handy terminological distinction between:
 - the name of the discipline: *linguistics*
 - the name of the discipline’s object of study: *language*
 - this distinction is lacking for history:
 - the name of the discipline: *history*
 - the name of the discipline’s object of study: *history*
- (7) however, there is the term *historiography*
 - = the study of the development of history as an academic discipline; the study of the academic tools, methods and approaches that have been and are being used
 - but there is no *linguisticography*
 - arguably, this talk is a contribution to comparative *historiography* and *linguisticography*...

1.2 And why am I talking about all this?

- (8) The aim is to better understand what we do
 - perhaps we can better understand who we are and what we do by understanding what we're not and what we don't do
 - this is a compare and contrast exercise for two related, similar, but different fields of study
 - (9) Will this have any practical value or effect on what we do?
 - will make us better historical linguists, or better historians?
 - I'm not sure that it will – but how can it be wrong to try to understand?
 - (10) I'm a historical phonologist.
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2. History and historical linguistics: two types of cognitive reconstruction? *Take 1*

- (11) In what way am I considering the connection between the philosophical background of historical linguistics and history?
 - see the title of the talk...
 - there are many possible connections between the two, and I'm *not* focusing on most of them

2.1 Linguistics, historical linguistics and history

- (12) Linguistics shades into several other fields: language is central to much of human experience
 - but not all of this is relevant here
 - the overlap between history and linguistics is not where (much/all of) historical linguistics lies
 - (at least it's not where *all* of it lies – perhaps much/some of historical sociolinguistics lies there?)
- (13) Some questions can be asked in both history and linguistics:
 - How does the standardisation of languages occur?
 - What role did the idea that there was a Czech language play in political developments in the Central Europe? In the Czech National Revival?
 - What impact did this have on the Slavic dialect(s) spoken there?
 - How did inhabitants of the Danelaw perceive the language contact that went on there?
 - How did this lead to fundamental changes in English – the borrowing of pronouns (*they*); the development of new phonotactics (#sk-)
 - What were the demographics of the people involved in the early colonisation of New Zealand?
 - How did this lead to the formation of the new-dialect of New Zealand English?
- (14) Perhaps *historical linguistics*, as I am using the term, is not a fully coherent discipline
 - 'not coherent' in that it is not a subfield unified by a single methodology
 - if so, it may be that I am mostly discussing only *one part of* historical linguistics here

2.2 History and historical linguistics: similarities and differences

- (15) I'm arguing here that, once all my caveats are made, we can recognise that history and historical linguistics are closely linked in terms of what historians and historical linguistics *do*
 - and in terms of the nature of their *objects of study*
 - there are, however, also crucial differences between these things
- (16) This all relies on an attempt to take seriously two controversial, but – I think – appealing assumptions in the philosophy of the disciplines:
 - linguistics: the mentalist orientation (eg, Chomsky, 1965, but not only found in Generativism)
 - language exists in the minds of speakers
 - history: the semi-idealist position (eg, Collingwood, 1946)
 - the aim of history is to rethink the thoughts of people from the past

2.3 Some clear (?) parallels between history and historical linguistics

- (17) Some parallels between history and historical linguistics *seem* quite clear
- the historian is interested in understanding past actions
 - the historical linguist is interested in understanding past linguistic states
- (18) Although, in fact, even this may not be clear...
- it all relies on rejecting the post-modernist approach to the study of the past (eg, Jenkins, 1991), which argues that we cannot rediscover or truly understand the past, because we are too tied to our own linguistically-determined world-view (“My history is just another cultural practice that studies cultural practice.” Munslow, 2001)
 - rather, it requires us to assume that we are able to understand the past in terms of how it actually *was* (Evans, 1998, O'Brien, 2001)
 - [it is perhaps noteworthy that postmodernism has not been influential in linguistics as the discipline is generally conceived – perhaps the very existence of historical semantics contradicts or conflicts with its tenets?]
- (19) Another parallel between history and historical linguistics:
- the historical linguist uses both *direct* and *indirect evidence*
 - the historian uses both *witting* and *unwitting testimony*
 - Marwick (2001a, b) “ ‘Witting’ means ‘deliberate’ or ‘intentional’; ‘unwitting’ means ‘unaware’ or ‘unintentional’. ‘Testimony’ means ‘evidence’. Thus, ‘witting testimony’ is the deliberate or intentional message of a document or other source; the ‘unwitting testimony’ is the unintentional evidence (about, for example, the attitudes and values of the author, or about the ‘culture’ to which he/she belongs) that it also contains.” (2001a)
 - Direct evidence for historical phonology = overt comment on pronunciation from orthoepists, such as Lily (1540), who wanted to instruct English people on “the way of speaking purely and rightly” and spelling reformers such as Hart (1569) who devised his own phonetic alphabets to better represent English phonology
 - Indirect evidence for historical phonology = the comparative method, early spellings, early rhymes (see, eg, Dobson, 1968, Jones, 1989, Lass, 1997)
- (20) Another parallel between history and historical linguistics:
- both rely on *uniformitarianism*
 - humans and the human mind have been qualitatively the same throughout history, so the nature of language and the nature of thought have always been the same
 - where... “In ordinary usage *history* tends to be identified not with natural history but with the history of human affairs.” (D’Oro, 2006)
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3. What do historical linguists do?

- (21) To make my case, I need to show that
- (at least part of) historical linguistics aims to do cognitive reconstruction

3.1 Does historical linguistics involve cognitive reconstruction?

- (22) In some aspects of historical linguistics, this is not difficult to argue
- a realist interpretation of comparative reconstruction assumes that the historical linguist is engaged in cognitive reconstruction
 - the comparative method compares what is found in attested languages to reconstruct early ancestor languages, based on the principles of (i) ‘majority normally wins’, but (ii) changes must be natural, and (iii) the proto-form need not be attested in any language

(23) The reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European consonant system is a parade example:

Skt	Av	OCS	Lith	Arm	Toch	Hitt	Gk	Lat	OIr	Goth	PIE
p	p	p	p	h/w	p	p	p	p	∅	f/b	*p
t	t	t	t	t'	t/c	t	t	t	t	þ/d	*t
k/c	k/c	k	k	k'	k/š	k	k	c	c	h/g	*k
b	b	b	b	p	p	p	b	b	b	p	*b ^h
d	d	d	d	t	ts/ś	t	d	d	d	t	*d ^h
g/j	g/j	g/ž	g	k	k/š	k	g	g	g	k	*g ^h
bh	b	b	b	b/w	p	p	ph	f/b	b	b	*b ^h
dh	d	d	d	d	t/c	t	th	f/d	d	d	*d ^h
gh/h	g/j	g/ž	g	g/j	k/š	k	kh	h/g	g	g	*g ^h

(24) This works beyond phonology, of course, as in this example of the reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European case system:

Singular	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Gothic	OCS	Lith	PIE
Nom	vrkas	lukos	lupus	wulfs	vliku	vilkas	*-os
Acc	vrkam	lykon	lupum	wulf	vliku	vilka	*-om
Gen	vrkasja	lykojo	lupi	wulfis			*-osjo
Abl	vrkād		lupō		vlika	vilko	*-ōd
Dat	vrkāja	lykōi	lupō		vliku	vilkui	*-ōjo
Loc	vrkē	(oikoi)	(domī)	wulfa	vliSe	vilke	*-ei
Instr	vrkēna			wulfa	vliKōmi	vilku	*-mi??

(25) What is being reconstructed here?

- Proto-Indo-European was a *language*, with real speakers; so... what is a language?
- languages live in people
- 'language' = linguistic knowledge in a native speaker's mind = I-language, competence ('*langue*')

(26) The idea that language is a mental ('cognitive') entity is often associated with the 'idealised speaker-hearer' approach of Generativism (Chomsky, 1965, 1986)

- but the basic idea need not be stripped of all aspects of linguistic variation: we have knowledge of the kinds of linguistic variation that surrounds us
- for example: in Liverpool English lenition, there is clear sociolinguistic patterning in the realisation of the process: p, t, k, b, d, g → Φ , Θ , x, β , $\underline{\delta}$, γ / (with complex environmental patterning)
- Watson (2007) shows that stops lenite to different degrees:

Figure 4.29 Lenited vs. non-lenited variants for female speakers

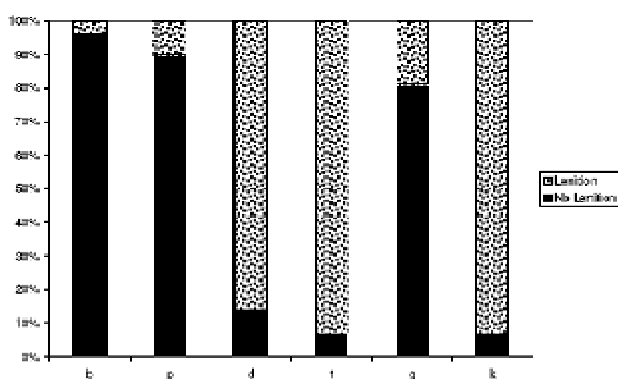
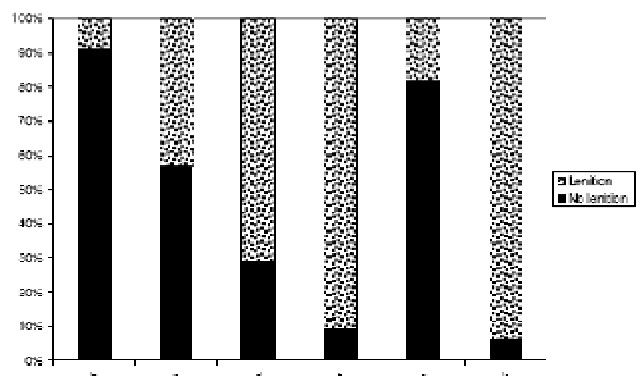


Figure 4.30 Lenited vs. non-lenited variants for male speakers



(27) part of Liverpool English speakers knowledge about this process is that, for /b/, there is a sex-related difference:

- lenition is common (although not overwhelmingly so) for males, but rare for female speakers

(28) Beyond comparative reconstruction, historical linguists aim to reconstruct past syntactic and semantic states, using both indirect and direct evidence.

(29) For example, Old English is typically claimed to be a V2 language

- In V2, the finite verb is expected to be the second constituent in main clauses
- many different kinds of constituents can precede the verb: subjects, objects, adverbials
- some syntactic processes can ‘hide’ this order, but it is assumed to be fundamental

þæt hus hæfdon Romana to ðæm anum tacna geworht
that building had Romans with the one feature constructed
O V2 S etc.

þær werþ se cyning Bagsecg ofslægen
there was the king Bagsecg slain
A V2 S etc.

(30) As is well known, the meaning of words in the past needs subtle reconstruction

- From Honeybone, D. & Honeybone, M. (to appear) *The Correspondence of the Spalding Gentlemen’s Society 1710-1761*.
- Dr Th. Rutherford of Cambridge c. 1740 “... I suppose that *natural philosophy* and polite literature are the branches of **science** that you chiefly improve...”
- PDE = “I assume that the fields of **knowledge** that you work in are chiefly *science* and philology”

(31) In working to understand all of the above, historical linguists are (whether they know it or not...), aiming to reconstruct past (linguistic) cognitive states

- this is the *synchronic* aspect of historical linguistics
- it has led to the writing of historical grammars, such as...
 - Campbell, A. (1959) *Old English Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
 - Hogg, R. (1992) *A Grammar of Old English. Volume 1: Phonology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
 - Braune, W., Ebbinghaus, E. & Heidermanns, F. (2004) *Gotische Grammatik*, 20th edition. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- It also expands the database of synchronic linguists (of both theoretical and sociolinguistic varieties), in the quest to understand what is *possible* in language, what is *common* in language
- eg: what was the structure of the foot in Germanic? And so... what’s possible in foot-structure in language? (see, eg, Dresher & Lahiri, 1991)

3.2 Does historical linguistics *only* involve cognitive reconstruction?

(32) Historical linguistics does not only take a synchronic approach, *of course*...

- it is often seen (wrongly) as a discipline which only focuses on diachrony
- but much work in historical linguistics *is* diachronic:

The High German Consonant Shift

p ^h > pf > f(f)	p	Old English	pund	OHG	pfund	‘pound’	
t ^h > t̥ > θ(θ)		Old Saxon	opan	OHG	offan	‘open’	
k ^h > kx > x(x)	t	Old Saxon	settian	OHG	setzan	‘sit’	
NB:		Old English	etan	OHG	e33an	‘eat’	
German	English						
<i>pfund</i>	<i>pound</i>	k	Old Saxon	werk	OHG	uuercch	‘work’
<i>zeit</i>	<i>tide</i>		Gothic	wakan	OHG	uuahhen	‘wake’
<i>kann</i>	<i>can</i>						

- another phonological example:

Early Modern English monophthongisation

ai > ε: *bait, vain, day, way*

au > ɔ: *taut, claw, caught, daughter*

- a syntactic example:

English has lost the V2 constraint and has developed into an SVO language.

(i) **V2 OE**

þæt hus hæfdon Romana to ðæm anum tacna geworht
that building had Romans with the one feature constructed
O V2 S *etc.*

þær werþ se cyning Bagsecg ofslægen
there was the king Bagsecg slain
A V2 S *etc.*



(ii) **SVO PDE**

The Romans had constructed that building with one feature
S V O *etc.*

King Bagsecg was slain there
S V A

On this hill, king Bagsecg was slain
A S V

- (33) How does this fit with the contention that historical linguistics aims at cognitive reconstruction?
- in part, it *doesn't*: if the focus is on explaining change between successive (linguistic) states of knowledge, non-cognitive factors can intervene
 - population movements, acoustic confusability, syntactic ambiguity
- (34) One focus of historical linguistics has become: the study of the types of 'possible change'
- these are, of course changes from one linguistic (cognitive) state to another...
 - but to the extent that the *focus* is on change, this aspect of historical linguistics is only partly engaged in cognitive reconstruction

4. What do historians do?

- (35) To make my case, I need to show that
- (at least part of) history aims to do cognitive reconstruction

4.1 Does history involve cognitive reconstruction?

- (36) The argument from the discipline of history is (even) more controversial
- an (at least partly) idealist approach, which argues that the nature of reality is based on the mind or on ideas enables this type of argument, however
 - history aims to understand past actions
 - these are actions that are due to human causality
 - human causality is due to the thoughts that the actors have
 - thoughts exist in the cognitive realm

- (37) R.G. Collingwood wrote in some detail on the philosophy of history
- Collini & Williams (2004): “*The Idea of History* [(1946)] has become something of a classic in a field not over-supplied with classics written in English...”
 - it is through his approach, and that of those who follow and share the ideas that he discussed that history can be seen as a type of cognitive reconstruction
- (38) Collingwood (1946, 10-11) includes a famous definition of the idea of history
- “history should be (a) a science, or an answering of questions; (b) concerned with human actions in the past; (c) pursued by interpretation of evidence; and (d) for the sake of human self-knowledge”
 - (b) is a point mentioned above; (d) is the perspective which leads to the ideas in focus here
 - we can understand ourselves through history; we can develop an understanding of psychology through history – because history *is*, practically, psychology
 - Collingwood wrote about a conception of psychology as a type of historical study, whose aim “would be to detect types or patterns of activity, repeated over and over again in history itself” (1946, 224, see Connelly, 2000)
- (39) Collingwood’s emphasis was “upon history as the interpretation of purposive action and hence upon the primacy of the need to recover historical agents’ own understanding of their situation” Collini & Williams (2004)
- “His most famous dictum ... was the claim that ‘all history is the history of thought ... and therefore all history is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind” (Collini & Williams, 2004, citing Collingwood, 1946, 215)
 - “this was intended not as a prescription of the method of historical enquiry, but a description of its success: only insofar as historians can ‘re-enact’ in their own thought what an act meant to its agent can they explain that act”
- (40) This leads to an understanding of the definition of the object of study in history as *actions*:
- “the subject matter of history, understood as a science of the mind, is actions--actions understood not simply as the doings of human beings but of human beings in so far as they are rational. Actions, in the sense in which they constitute the subject matter of historical investigation have an ‘inside’ that events lack. To explain an event all we need to do is to subsume it under a general law that is obtained by inductive generalisation, through the observation of repeated events of type B following events of type A. In order to understand an action, by contrast, we need to render it intelligible by reconstructing the thought processes that inform it.” (D’Oro, 2006)
- (41) On this approach, the key goal of history is cognitive *re-enactment*
- When taken at Collingwood’s word, this should be absolutely literal cognitive reconstruction:
 - The claim is that that “when historians re-enact the thought of an historical agent, they do not re-enact a thought of a similar kind but the very same thought of the agent. This claim has often been regarded as counterintuitive since to say that the thought of the agent and that of the historian are the same appears to presuppose that there is only one rather than two numerically distinct acts of thought, that of the historian and that of the agent. Collingwood’s point, however, is that, since thought proper is conceptually distinct from the physiological process in which it is instantiated, the criterion of numerical identity that is usually applied to physiological processes is not applicable to thought. Thoughts, in other words, are to be distinguished on the basis of purely qualitative criteria, and if there are two people entertaining the (qualitatively) same thought, there is (numerically) only one thought since there is only one propositional content. Collingwood makes this point by saying that ‘... in its immediacy, as an actual experience of his own, Plato’s argument must undoubtedly have grown up out of a discussion of some sort, though I do not know what it was, and been closely

connected to such a discussion. Yet if I not only read his argument but understand it, follow it in my own mind re-enacting it with and for myself, the process of argument which I go through is not a process resembling Plato's, it is actually Plato's so far as I understand him correctly.' ” (Collingwood, 1946, 301; from D'Oro, 2006)

- This does not necessarily involve telepathy...
 - “On the conceptual reading the re-enactment doctrine establishes merely that it is possible in principle to re-enact the thoughts of others because thoughts, unlike physiological processes, are not private items unique to the person who has them, but publicly rethinkable propositional contents.” (D'Oro, 2006)
- (42) An example of the impact of this approach is considered in Honeybone, M. (2008), who is discussing the writing of the history of a well-known witchcraft trial from the 17th Century in the Vale of Belvoir
- “European scholars have appreciated that the concept of early-modern witchcraft arose as an imaginative response to the widespread myth of the witches' sabbath, defined as ‘A midnight meeting of demons, sorcerers and witches, presided over by the Devil, supposed in mediæval times to have been held annually as an orgy or festival.’ [SOED] After extensive historical investigation it is now accepted that no actual ‘sabbath’ ever took place. Equally, however, the notion of the sabbath existed absolutely in the minds of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men and women. This is a perfect justification for Collingwood's concept of history as the process of rethinking the thoughts of past people: ‘wrong ways of thinking are just as much historical facts as right ones, and, no less than they, determine the situation (always a thought situation) in which the man who shares them is placed’. [Collingwood, 1946, 317]”
- (43) This body of ideas on the philosophy of history is controversial
- a considerable body of work has rejected it as too optimistic concerning what we can do:
 - Evans (1997, 92) “We bring our own thoughts to bear on documents, and these can have a material effect on how the document is read. Many sources are not written at all. Getting inside the head of someone who buried treasure in a grave in the fourth century, or made a newsreel in the twentieth, is far from easy”
 - other historians have overtly adopted Collingwood's position, however
 - “the argument, originally put forward by R.G. Collingwood [was] subsequently elaborated by E.H. Carr ... because ultimately, as Carr put it, ‘no document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought.’ [(Carr, 1987, 16)]”

- (44) In working to understand all of the above, historians are (whether they know it or not...), aiming to reconstruct past cognitive states and actions
- the thoughts that provided the context for the actions that we know of need to be reconstructed
 - they are rethought in the mind of the historian, and the historian aims to invoke them in the mind of the reader of his or her work
 - [do we *need* to assume that the very same thought exists in the minds of the original actor and the historian (and the historian's audience)? it could still count as cognitive reconstruction even if we don't adopt Collingwood's absolute mind-body distinction]

4.2 Does history *only* involve cognitive reconstruction?

- (45) On Collingwood's approach, perhaps so
- much of the work done by the historian in order to get to the position to do this is not actual cognitive reconstruction in its own right, however
 - for example: work with documents and artefacts; conducting the background work necessary to ‘do the history’
 - [is history essentially a synchronic discipline? so that it doesn't deal with change in the same way as historical linguistics?]

6. History and historical linguistics: two types of cognitive reconstruction? Take 2

- (46) If both history and historical linguistics can both be seen as engaging in cognitive reconstruction, are they essentially the same discipline?
- Are they doing exactly the same kind of thing?
 - While there is a conceptual similarity, there are also fundamental differences
- (47) There are clear connections:
- both rely on uniformitarianism – that the human mind has been the same throughout history, so the nature of language and the nature of thought have always been the same
 - therefore, as historical linguists or historians, we stand a chance of being able to engage in cognitive reconstruction as part of our disciplines
 - both history and historical linguistics have to work with sources which are imperfect reflections of their true object of study
 - indirect evidence for language (past states of knowledge)
 - unwitting testimony for history (past thoughts)
- (48) There are substantial differences, too, however:
- ‘language’ is part of the subconscious mind
 - ‘thoughts’ are part of the conscious mind
 - this distinction is an important one, and it explains many of the differences between the approaches discussed above
- (49) Historical linguists do not try to recreate the past linguistic state in their own minds
- historical linguistics is reconstructed ‘outwith’ the researcher
 - it involves attempts to reconstruct aspects of past speakers subconscious knowledge of language: which segments existed, what the syntactic patterns were, what network of meanings existed, what knowledge of variation these speakers had
- (50) Historians, if we follow Collingwood, try to recreate past thoughts in their own minds
- history is reconstructed ‘within’ the researcher
- (51) In the interpretations discussed here, both types of cognitive reconstruction aim to truly reconstruct / reconstitute the past
- this doesn’t mean that they necessarily *succeed* on each occasion
 - but it may be that we can better understand both disciplines if we understand these similarities, and, importantly too, these differences

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