
On borders in historical linguistics

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Historical linguistics is to a large extent the art of drawing borders and digging trenches. When in his Presidential Address delivered at an anniversary meeting of the Philological Society James Murray summarised the philosophy behind the *Oxford English Dictionary* with, "At which Englishman's speech does English terminate?" (1880: 132), he questioned the existence of a *limes* separating the English language from the globality of linguistic structure. In doing so, to paraphrase Linda Dowling (1982: 172), he provided a metaphor for a fundamental opposition of "a center with vanishing borders" and a city within defensible walls.

These days few linguists would lend a hand to building a Victorian wall separating one language from another. However, the legacy of the world with clean borders drawn to the rule is still visible in how students of dead languages approach their subject. With incompleteness as an inseparable aspect of the data, this unexposed relationship between framework and focus needs to be revisited, as separating parts of a simplified picture is always a tempting proposition.

A case in point is the issue of periodisation, shared with historians of human civilisation and historians of literature. Jacques le Goff's programmatic question, *Must we divide history into periods?* (2014; English edition 2015), remains unanswered, but its value lies in its very asking. The problem is time and its inherently fluid nature, clashing with equally inherent human need for categorisation and compartmentalisation. Within English historical linguistics various criteria and solutions have been proposed, intralinguistic, extralinguistic, focusing on subsystems or on standards. Yet all these attempts at periodisation are manifestations of the linguist's attitudes to linguistic history as a narrative, while the question that should be asked is whether linguistic history as flow of language in time needs internal borders at all (thus going well beyond a long tradition of questioning a particular location of a particular border, most recently expounded by Curzan (2012)).

Another example of terminology of identity getting the better of reality is the conceptualisation of foreign lexical elements in the target language. The issue of what conditions have to be met for a word to qualify as a borrowing is fraught with pitfalls. The least of these is the impossibility of specifying the source of borrowings in cases of functional multilingualism like the one which characterised Mediæval England, with Norman French, Middle French, Anglo-Norman, and Latin all involved in a complicated etymological interplay. A more pertinent question is that of nativisation of borrowings — within the classical Haugenian framework the moment a foreignism is uttered by a native speaker to be imitated by others, formally it ceases to be a borrowing.

Realising a need for redefinition of liminal conditions delineating the history of language as an object of study, the question that this presentation intends to pose is whether a zero framework in the vein of Murray's city without walls is possible for historical linguistics, and if so, what kind of conceptual redefinition would be needed in order to achieve it.

References

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