

Historical linguistics: levels of explanation

Linguistics began in the 19th century entirely as a historical discipline, concerned exclusively with explaining how languages got to be the way they were. Different levels of explanation were sought, some achieved spectacularly, others not at all. In an early flowering of interdisciplinarity, some of the models of explanation cut across the disciplines emerging in the late 19th century, linguistics, evolutionary biology (Darwin) and incipient political science (Marx), and linguistics was at the center of a broad enterprise to establish principles of history. I will review some successes and failures, emphasizing the cross-disciplinary features.

In the 20th century linguistics broadened greatly, embracing many new perspectives beyond the historical and generating new sub-disciplines, opening very different modes of explanation for language change and new levels of explanation. Again there were successes and failures at different levels.

A new cross-disciplinary approach to change has emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries through the family of catastrophe/chaos/complexity theories. I will identify some recurrent themes in the explanatory models and eventually focus on some approaches that have been pursued over the last 20 years within the DIGS community. In some areas we have reached the deepest level of explanation that now seems achievable but in other areas nothing comparable has emerged; we shall ask why the discrepancies and end by presuming to echo Sir Peter Medawar's *Advice to a Young Scientist* (1979) and to offer advice to a young DIGS scientist.