
[36] *Projections. On projecting the present into the past*

Frans Gregersen (LANCHART, University of Copenhagen).

Projections. On projecting the present into the past

It is a well-known fact that in carving a niche for itself, a new generation of researchers discover alleged forerunners or position some older generation as such. Two particularly striking examples are * the nomination by Uriel Weinreich and his pupil William Labov of Hermann Paul, Winteler and Gauchat as their forerunners in historical variationist sociolinguistics (Weinreich et al. 1968, Labov 1994) and * the reevaluation of the Danish linguist Rasmus Rask as a theoretical and empirical (grand)father of structural linguistics.

Uriel Weinreich in his section of the 1968 collective paper searches for a pedigree of a historical linguistics based on empirical evidence and focusses squarely on Hermann Paul. Labov follows suit in his discussion of Winteler and Gauchat as the first researchers to study language change in apparent and real time (Labov 1994, cf. Chambers 2008). The bias in the Weinreich-Labov interpretation of the Neogrammarians does not lie in the examples adduced and analyzed but rather in their centrality for the Neogrammarian main effort: That of studying the history of the Indo-European languages.

Holger Pedersen in his 1918 history of the results of 19th century linguistics, placed Rasmus Rask as one of three founding fathers of Indo-European comparative linguistics: Rask, Bopp and Grimm were to be seen as a triad complementing each other. Louis Hjelmslev, who was a pupil of Holger Pedersen's, was from 1928 and onwards charged with the centenary edition of Rasmus Rask's oeuvre (Rask 1932 ff) and he had a distinctly different view. He saw Rask primarily as a student of the general structure of language. Hjelmslev in numerous lectures in- and outside Denmark (and finally also in a published lecture from Paris (Hjelmslev 1951)) placed Rask as a forerunner for structuralism, even in a lecture in the USA in 1952 labeling him a 'pioneer of structural linguistics'. The Hjelmslev stance sparked controversy, however, and in a book from 1960, Hjelmslev's friend and colleague as a structural linguist Paul Diderichsen, attempted to set the record straight placing Rask as an curious halfway house between rationalist and romanticist thought. I will study these two examples and show how in particular the second one has proved useful in generating research into the history of the discipline attempting to 'correct' the 'biased' projection of the present into the past.