

## *Conference Report*

Annual Colloquium of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas  
Jesus College, Oxford; 14–17 September 2009

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The latest meeting of the Henry Sweet Society, which took place in the elegant surroundings of Jesus College, Oxford, was a cause for celebration on more than one account. In addition to a multitude of stimulating papers and much congenial company, it was the occasion of the Society's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as well as the launch of its new journal, *Language and History* (through Maney Publishing), a continuation of what was previously the Henry Sweet Society Bulletin. The conference itself was very efficiently organised by David Cram, who deserves much praise for his admirable and worthwhile efforts.

Although I was unfortunately unable to attend the opening of the conference on Monday evening, I nonetheless received positive reports of the first two papers, one by Paula Hellal and Marjorie Lorch on Darwin and the birth of child language acquisition research in Britain, and one by William McGregor on 'Native vocabularies' of Kimberley languages. This was followed by a reception sponsored by Oxford's Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics. The Tuesday morning sessions began bright and early at 9 a.m. with Mark Atherton's discussion of Henry Sweet's views on language and their debt to his academic exchanges with the anthropologist E.B. Tylor, followed by John Coleman's account of intellectual exchanges between J.R. Firth and N.S. Trubetzkoy in the 1930s. In the next group of papers, Toon Van Hal analysed Johannes Elichmann's influence on the development of the so-called 'Scythian hypothesis' of the Leiden professors Claude de Saumaise (1588-1653) and Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn (1612-1653), while Alessandra Mosca discussed determiners in Italian grammar (or the lack thereof), and Viviane Point explored the related question of determiners in nineteenth-century French grammar.

After lunch, Claudia Stancati considered the theoretical and epistemological implications of placing linguistics among the great scientific classifications between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, while Serhii Vakulenko gave an interesting talk on the semiotics of language in the Latin course of logic written by Iosyf Kononovych-Horbatsky. Following the tea break, we were then treated to two papers which inspired lively discussion. First was Ute Tintemann's well-delivered presentation on Wilhelm von Humboldt's corpus of grammatical and lexical studies of American languages, which are soon to be published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. Her paper explored Humboldt's view of these languages as non-flectional and representative of an earlier state in language development, as well as the notion of inflected languages as 'ideal' systems for resolving universal categories of the human mind and Humboldt's thoughts on the difficulties involved in discovering the real structures of languages. The session was then brought to a close with Bart Karstens' examination of the emergence of historical and comparative linguistics as an academic discipline in nineteenth-century Germany, focusing on the role of Franz Bopp.

Following a very pleasant dinner in the Hall of Jesus College on Tuesday night was the annual Leslie Seiffert Memorial Lecture. This was very engagingly delivered

by Anne McDermott, who took time away from a parallel conference across town celebrating the tercentenary of Samuel Johnson's birth in order to share her expertise on Johnson's work as a lexicographer. McDermott discussed a number of the myths surrounding Johnson's famous dictionary, including the notions that his definitions were heavily prescriptive, prejudiced or incomprehensive, and the evidence that we have to contradict many of these assumptions. In particular, the speaker argued that Johnson only took three years to complete the dictionary after he signed a contract for it in 1746, and considered the possible events which may have delayed its publication until 1755.

Wednesday morning welcomed another day of thought-provoking discussions. Anneli Luhtala ensured that the Classical world was not neglected in her study of the complex concept of 'nature' and the ways in which it was applied to linguistic analysis during this period. Her paper focused specifically on the idea of 'natural word order' in the works of Apollonius Dyscolus and Priscian, and considered the philosophical background to the relationship between the natural world, rationality and logic, and 'art' as a criterion for Latin usage in Late Antiquity. Craig Brandist then delivered an interesting talk on the ideology and legacy of N. Ia. Marr, looking at his ideology critique of Western linguistics in its historical context and the influence it had on later influential thinkers. The post-tea session included three very different papers. The first was given by Gisela Bruche-Schulz on historical approaches to linguistics which might contribute to methodologies for current experimental work on cognitive processes. Following this was an excellent presentation by Paula Hellal and Marjorie Lorch on the history of child language impairment and the idioglossia debate of the 1890s, which examined the influence of Walter Hadden's 1891 paper on defects of articulation in children and its effect on subsequent approaches to prognosis and treatment, as well as on the later linking of idioglossia with word deafness and verbal aphasia. We then rounded off the morning with Kenichi Kadooka's fascinating account of the history of Chinese dictionaries, which emphasised the significance of the scholar Xu Shen and his creation of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, a categorisation of Chinese characters into six types classified by radicals.

A particularly useful contribution to this conference was the workshop on electronic sources for the history of linguistic ideas, which was led by Johanneke Sytsema, the Subject Consultant for Linguistics in the Oxford Library. Johanneke gave a very informative overview of many of the electronic sources currently available, and a roundtable discussion of participants' experiences in this area unearthed several other tools of both general and more specific interest; Johanneke has expressed a willingness to compile a list of these and any others that scholars may find helpful.

This workshop was followed by a bilingual session of papers, beginning with Béatrice Godart-Wendling's presentation on the changing conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics in the early 1980s, and Anne-Gaëlle Toutain's analysis of Structuralist approaches to the Saussurian distinction between synchrony and diachrony. Marlene Loureiro then brought Wednesday's proceedings to an end with more discussion of Saussure, focussing on a detailed comparison of the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) with the later *Écrits de linguistique générale*, a work based on more recently discovered manuscripts handwritten by the author. After members had attended to official business at the Society's Annual General Meeting, the evening dinner which concluded this day of diverse and interesting papers proved to be a particular highlight of the conference, as we were all regaled with wine and cheese generously sponsored by John Benjamins Publishing Company.

On Thursday morning we were treated to two final sessions of papers. The first began with Hedwig Gwosdek's well-researched presentation on the adverb in late medieval and early modern Latin grammars written in England. A strong showing from Portugal then offered Gonçalo Fernandes' talk on the *Reglas para enformarmos os menynos en Latin*, an anonymous fourteenth-century text in Portuguese on the teaching of Latin found in the Bodleian Library, which can be classified as a didactic 'manual' or 'compendium' with a primarily morphological focus; this was followed by Maria Helena Santos' paper on the nineteenth-century scholar Francisco Adolpho Coelho's contribution to the field of Portuguese linguistic analysis. Tinatin Bolkvadze then turned our attention to studies of the Kartvelian languages in nineteenth-century Europe and Russia, with a focus on their reception in Georgian printed media of the period. Last but certainly not least, the conference proceedings were brought to a close with two interesting discussions of music and grammar: the first of these was Jonathan Stock's analysis of Alexander Ellis' role as a pioneer in music research, and the second Nadia Kerecuk's examination of the use of grammar as a conceptual construct metaphorically applied to music theory.

Such a pleasant combination of well-prepared and thought-provoking research, a lovely setting, good food, excellent organisation and plenty of opportunity to socialise with many interesting scholars made attendance at this conference a worthwhile and rewarding experience. Members should look forward to the appearance of the first issues of *Language and History* in their post-boxes over the coming months.

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