

AMERICAN LINGUISTS LOOK AT SWISS LINGUISTICS, 1925-1940*

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Swiss linguistic research did not have a major impact on American linguistics in the inter-war period. Nevertheless, there was a perhaps surprising awareness of the results of Swiss scholars among American linguists active in that period. This paper documents both recognition given to Swiss scholars by the Linguistic Society of America and the numerous references to the work of the linguists of the Geneva School.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper probes a small, but nonetheless interesting, chapter in the history of linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916) had been published in 1916 and by a decade later was being heralded as a landmark work of linguistic theory, at least in Europe. Saussure's colleagues and their students had established a major school of linguistics in Geneva and, elsewhere in Switzerland, linguistics was thriving as well. The question is to what extent Swiss linguistic research was of interest to scholars in the United States. In a major historiographical study, Falk (2004) documents the lack of impact that Saussure's book had among American researchers. While it is not my intention to dispute any of Falk's findings, one might be tempted, after reading her paper, to draw the conclusion that Swiss linguistics was either unknown or ignored by American practitioners. What follows is a corrective to that possible conclusion. Without wishing to exaggerate American interest, I show below that there was regular notice taken in the period 1925-1940 by American linguists to the work of their Swiss counterparts, as well as recognition of the achievements of the latter by the former. The dates chosen are 'partially motivated and partially arbitrary' (as linguists like to say). 1925 was the first full year of the existence of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) and, more importantly, of its organ *Language*. By 1940 the Second World War had begun. While academic research in Switzerland and the United States was interrupted less than in most countries, the movement of refugee-scholars from one country to another triggered by that war makes it rather difficult to discuss in isolation (as I attempt to do here) the impact of linguistic work in one country on that in another.

Let us begin by reviewing Falk (2004). The two most important American linguistic theorists in the inter-war period were Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield. As Falk points out, 'there is no evidence that Sapir was directly influenced by the *Cours*; he certainly never cited it in his work' (Falk 2004: 110). Nor, as far as I have been able to determine, did he cite any Geneva school linguists. Bloomfield on the other hand referred to the *Cours* on a number of occasions and even reviewed its second edition (though, again, there appears to be no citations to the work

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of other members of the Geneva School). One of Bloomfield's first references to the *Cours* was highly positive. In a review of Sapir (1921), Bloomfield (1924a: 143) remarked that the *Cours* is a book 'which gives a theoretic foundation to the newer trend of linguistic study, ... in which restriction to historical work is [considered] unreasonable and, in the long run, methodologically impossible'. However, as Falk notes, Bloomfield's review of the *Cours* was less inclined to attribute complete originality to the ideas expressed there:

Bloomfield [in *An Introduction to the Study of Language* (Bloomfield 1914)] wrote of the 'social character of language' and noted that a speech utterance 'depends for its form entirely on the habits of the speaker, which he shares with the speech community. These habits are in a sense arbitrary, differing for the different communities ... (Bloomfield 1914: 17, 81-82). It should come as no surprise, then, that when Bloomfield reviewed the second edition of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1924, he was to say: 'Most of what the author says has long been 'in the air' and has been here and there fragmentarily expressed' (Bloomfield 1924b: 318). (Falk 2004: 108).

Falk then points out that this 'seems to be the only review of the *Cours* published in any American journal until new editions were prepared in the second half of the twentieth century' (109). She goes on: 'Bloomfield admired Saussure and on several occasions referred his readers to the *Cours*, but he did not adopt Saussurean terms. He viewed most basic Saussurean concepts as ideas that had been set forth by other, earlier scholars' (111). Finally, 'as in Bloomfield's own work after 1933 [the leading American linguists of the 1930s] rarely, if ever referred to Saussure or the *Cours*' (112).

The following sections document the fact that, despite the above, some of the most prominent members of the LSA were tuned into events in the Swiss linguistics scene and were well aware of the results of Swiss linguistics.

2. LSA RECOGNITION OF SWISS LINGUISTICS

The highest recognition that the Linguistic Society of America can give to a foreign scholar is that of 'Honorary Member'. As stated in the first constitution of the LSA:

Any foreign scholar of distinction in linguistic studies, not resident in North America, may be elected an Honorary Member, by a five-sixths vote of the Society in its annual business session, provided such scholar has received the recommendation of the Executive Committee. Not more than six honorary members shall be elected at the first election, and thereafter not more than three in any one year. The total number of honorary members shall not exceed twenty-five. (*Language*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1927, p. 65)

Of the six chosen at the first election, two were Swiss. One was the Indo-Europeanist Jakob Wackernagel, who was born, died, and spent most of his career in Basel. The other, Albert Debrunner, was also an Indo-Europeanist. He too was born in Basel and at the time of his election was a professor at Jena in Germany. However, he returned to his native country in 1935, teaching in Bern until his 1954 retirement. Both linguists were effusive in their gratitude for the honor (*Language*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1927, pp. 154-155):

In Ihrem Schreiben vom 20. Januar teilen Sie mir mit, dass die Linguistic Society of America mich zu einem Honorary Member ernannt hat. Wollen Sie der Gesellschaft meinen ergebenen Dank für diese Ehrung übermitteln. Ich schätze es sehr von einem Kreise trefflicher Gelehrten einer solchen Anerkennung gewürdigt zu werden, und werde fortfahren die lehrreichen Publikationen der Gesellschaft als ein dankbarer Leser zu studieren. Ihnen, sehr geehrter Herr Kollege, danke ich noch besonders für die freundliche Mitteilung über die Umstände meiner Ernennung ... (J. Wackernagel)

Zu meinem grossen Erstaunen erhielt ich von Ihnen die freundliche Mitteilung, dass ich von der Linguistic Society of America zum Ehrenmitglied ernannt worden bin, und ich gestehe Ihnen offen, dass mich dabei die Gleichstellung mit Leuten wie ... etwas bedrückt. Umsomehr fühle ich mich durch diese Ernennung hochgeehrt und umso lebhafter ist mein Dank dafür. Ich bitte Sie, diese meine Gefühle Ihrer Gesellschaft zu übermitteln zugleich mit dem Versprechen, dass ich diese Verbindung mit der Linguistic Society allzeit hochhalten und mich in den gemeinsamen wissenschaftlichen Zielen mit ihr eins fühlen werde ... (A. Debrunner)

In 1936, the Indogermanische Gesellschaft, headed by Debrunner, was named an 'Associated Society' of the LSA. The only other society at the time to have received such recognition was the Société Linguistique de Paris.

The Second International Congress of Linguists (ICL) was held in Geneva from August 25th to August 29th, 1931. For the LSA and its members it was an important event. The Society was represented by three delegates: George M. Bolling (LSA President in 1932), Carl D. Buck (LSA President in 1927 and 1937), and Franklin Edgerton (LSA President in 1934). Seven other members made the time-consuming trans-Atlantic journey: Kemp Malone (LSA President in 1944), Earle B. Babcock, D. S. Blondheim, William Edward Collinson, Sanki Ichikawa, Ephraim Cross, and August Gunther. As reported in *Language*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1931, p. 289:

No attempt to appraise the achievements of the Congress can be made before the publication of its Acts; but it may be said in general that the program was most attractive. Its richness, indeed, was its only drawback; for it was of course physically impossible to hear all the papers, and it was only with regret that one missed those which it was necessary to forego. But what was one to do when, for instance, the following papers were being read at the same hour: Mlle. E. Richter: Die Einheitlichkeit der Hervorhebungsabsicht und die Mannigfaltigkeit ihrer Auswirkungen; E. Hermann: Die Lautgesetze; A. Nehring: Sprachwissenschaftliche Palaeontologie; Z. Blesse: Zum sprachlichen Ausdruck der abstrakten Begriffe im Lettischen; G. Piccoli: Metodo etimologico-combinatorio per l'interpretazione dei testi etruschi.

The review in *Language* concludes (p. 290):

There must be added an expression of admiration for the work of the Organizing Committee [headed by Bally and Secheyay — FJN], thanks to which a large and complicated meeting was handled most smoothly and efficiently. One wishes also to speak with gratitude of the warm welcome and lavish hospitality that made one's sojourn in Geneva a thing of joy. Most especially to be recalled in this connection is the reception

tendered to Members of the Congress by Madame Ferdinand de Saussure in her castle of Vufflens-sur-Morges.

Two of the American LSA-member attendees at the second ICL, Babcock and Collinson, were active members of the International Auxiliary Language Association, Inc. (IALA). And herein lies another American-Swiss linguistic connection (see Falk 1995 for discussion). The LSA and the IALA were founded the same year (1924) and had overlapping memberships. At the time it was considered quite a respectable occupation for professional linguists to propose and refine artificially constructed languages designed for universal use. The IALA was founded by the wealthy Americans Alice Vanderbilt Morris and her husband Dave Hennen Morris; its first president was Babcock (for a portrait of A. V. Morris, see Falk 1999). Mrs. Morris the previous year had organized and funded the Meeting of Linguistic Research in Geneva held from March 20th to April 2nd, 1930, at which both Babcock and Collinson were present. Also at that IALA meeting were the Swiss Charles Bally, Albert Debrunner, Albert Sechehaye, and Otto Funke, along with other European linguistics, including Otto Jespersen, who served as chair. While none of the latter ever joined the international auxiliary language movement, one assumes that at both Geneva meetings, there was ample opportunity for productive intellectual exchange among the linguists from the two countries.

Swiss linguists also played an important role in the 1931 LSA-sponsored Linguistic Institute. In December 1930 the Director of the 1931 Institute, E. H. Sturtevant, received \$2,000 from the American Council of Learned Societies to provide for the traveling expenses and an honorarium for the Swiss dialectologists Jakob Jud and Paul Scheuermeier to support their teaching at that Institute. The idea was they would share their experience of preparing linguistic atlases with American linguists working on the newly launched Project for a Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada (*Language*, vol. 7, no. 1 = *Bulletin* 7, 1931, pp. 3-5, 8; *Language*, vol. 7, no. 3 = *Bulletin* 8, 1931, pp. 4-5). The following is their course description:

Les Problèmes de la Préparation d'un Atlas Linguistique. M. Jud et M. Scheuermeier. — Exposé critique des méthodes et du but des atlas publiés ou en publication. Différences entre l'atlas et les dictionnaires. Les préparatifs d'un atlas. L'enquête sur les lieux. Classification et coördination des matériaux recueillis. Résultats linguistiques. Conférences par M. Jud et exercices pratiques donnés par M. Scheuermeier sur la base du questionnaire du *Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz*, dont une copie sera remise aux participants. (p. 8)

Among the 15 registrants for the course were Hans Kurath (LSA President in 1942), Bernard Bloch (LSA President in 1953), Martin Joos (LSA Vice President in 1952), H. B. Richardson (LSA Executive Committee member in 1934), and Miles Hanley (LSA Executive Committee member in 1936) (*Bulletin* 8, p. 12).

Another Swiss linguist on the faculty at that Institute was Alfred Senn, who gave courses entitled 'Church Slavonic' and 'Comparative Grammar of the Baltic Languages'. Senn, who served on the LSA Executive Committee in 1939, was born in Switzerland and early in his career taught at the University of Lithuania, where he built a reputation as the world's leading Lithuanian dialectologist. Senn moved to the United States in 1930. At the 1930 Institute he had been 'Docent in Indo-European Linguistics' (*Bulletin* 6, 1930, p. 9) and at the 1931 Institute both he and Jud gave evening public lectures (*Bulletin* 8, p. 15).

3. AMERICAN REFERENCES TO THE GENEVA SCHOOL

The most important American-written introduction to general linguistics in our time period, after Bloomfield's *Language* (Bloomfield 1933), was Louis H. Grey's *Foundations of Language* (Gray 1939). Gray, one of the preeminent Indo-Europeanists of the period, served as LSA President in 1938. In their lengthy review of this book, Harris and Swanson (1940) noted that 'Gray speaks of three aspects of language (15-18), basing himself on the langue-parole dichotomy of de Saussure and many Continental linguists' (p. 228). Some years earlier, in the *American Journal of Philology*, Gray had written in a review of Hjelmslev (1928) that 'Adhering in general to the principles so brilliantly enunciated by the Franco-Swiss school of de Saussure and his followers, M. Hjelmslev has not only summarised everything of importance that had previously appeared upon his theme, but has made a very appreciable advance' (Gray 1931: 77).

In fact, there were no fewer than 25 articles and reviews in *Language* between 1925 and 1940 that referred to Saussure. The majority concerned his contributions to historical linguistics, but more than a few noted the *langue-parole* distinction and other dichotomies found in his *Cours*. Saussure's synchronic work was cited in other American journals of language-related study from the period, including, as noted above, *American Journal of Philology*, and also *International Journal of American Linguistics* (Uhlenbeck 1927), *Modern Language Journal* (Bloomfield 1924, Zipf 1938), and *Modern Philology* (Field 1927).

Other members of the Geneva School were not ignored in *Language*. For example, Henri Frei's *La grammaire des fautes* (Frei 1929) was given a highly positive review by R. E. Saleski (Saleski 1930). Saleski was an important early member of the LSA, serving as Assistant Director of the first LSA-sponsored Linguistic Institute in 1928 (for a fascinating account of Saleski's role in the institutes, see Falk and Joseph 1994). Saleski, an early sociolinguist (though the term had not been coined yet), informed readers that 'the Geneva School (de Saussure, Brunot, Bally, Secheyaye) is interested not in the history of language as such but in the value of language to the individual speaker and hearer and no doubt to the society concerned' (p. 91).

Bally also received a mention in an article by Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 1931). Holmes was Kenan Professor of Romance Philology at the University of North Carolina and was later to become a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. He wrote that 'Charles Bally is not concerned with historical, only with psychological syntax, but he calls attention to a 'mentalité européenne' which would account for many resemblances [between Old French and Germanic]' (p. 195).

The same issue of *Language* in which the review of Gray appeared saw a review by Holmes (Holmes 1940) of *Mélanges de linguistique offerts à Charles Bally* (Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Genève 1939). His wording suggests that the readers of *Language* had at least basic familiarity with Geneva School contributions:

When G. Gougenheim wrote his survey of current tendencies in the field of French syntax he did not attach much importance to the Genevan school of Saussure and Bally; he emphasized rather the disciples of Tobler and Karl Vossler in Germany, and the work of Brunot and Lucien Foulet in France ... The methodology of the Genevan school was made generally accessible in 1916 when Bally, Albert Secheyaye, and Riedlinger issued Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. Since then, Bally's publications, including his numerous articles, and H. Frei's *Grammaire des fautes* (1929) have elaborated and crystallized the concepts and the terminology. ... Saussure emphasizes the law of opposition: such a word as *paperasse* retains additional meanings because *papier* exists beside it ... In opposition to von Wartburg, A. Secheyaye (19-29) states that synchronic

study is more basic than diachronic, though he admits that Saussure was overemphatic in insisting on the absolute separation of the two. (Holmes 1940: 237-240)

Finally, it is worth pointing out that many American linguists, even before the Second World War, had European backgrounds. Of the first ten LSA presidents, five were born in either Germany or Austria-Hungary. This fact facilitated the transmission of ideas developed by European linguists to their New World counterparts. As noted above, Alfred Senn was a European-born linguist based in the United States. Given his Swiss roots it is not surprising to find an article written by him in a major American journal that begins with a reference to a member of the Geneva School:

The Swiss scholar, Charles Bally, in his book *Le langage et la vie (Language and Life)*, second edition (Zurich: Max Niehans, 1935), makes the statement: ‘La linguistique a été un art avant d’être une science’ (before becoming a science, linguistics was an art). It was a branch of practical learning studied for the purpose of acquiring efficiency in speech and writing. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the turn toward a new attitude in regard to language took place, language had never been the object of research interested only in language as such. Bally does not condemn the work of the earlier philologists, although he is outspoken in his opinion that the modern method of linguistic study constitutes a decided advance over the methods previously employed. (Senn 1937: 501)

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, as has been noted by earlier historiographers, Swiss linguistics did not have a major impact on American linguistics in the inter-war period. Nevertheless, there was a perhaps surprising awareness of the results of Swiss scholars among American linguists active in that period.

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