

Portland State University

PDXScholar

World Languages and Literatures Faculty
Publications and Presentations

World Languages and Literatures

2007

Review of Dieter Wanner's The Power of Analogy: An Essay on Historical Linguistics

Eva Núñez-Méndez

Portland State University, enunez@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/wll_fac



Part of the [Comparative and Historical Linguistics Commons](#), and the [First and Second Language Acquisition Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Núñez-Méndez, Eva. "Review of Dieter Wanner's The Power of Analogy: An Essay on Historical Linguistics," *Linguistica e Filologia*, 25 (2007), p. 266-267.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Literatures Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

WANNER, Dieter, *The Power of Analogy: An Essay on Historical Linguistics*, Mouton de Gruyter, New York 2006, pp. xiv + 330, ISBN 978-3-11-018873-8.

Following the division predicated in the Saussurean dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony, this book starts by arguing that this antinomy between the formal and the historical should be relegated to the periphery. Combining diachronic with synchronic linguistic thought, Wanner proposes two adoptions: first, a restricted theoretical base in the form of Concrete Minimalism, and second analogical assimilations as formulated in Analogical Modeling. These two perspectives provide the basis for redirecting the theory in a cognitive direction and focus on the shape of linguistics material and the impact of the historical components of language. Wanner's reorientation in studying historical linguistics offers an innovative framework to explain those linguistic phenomena that escape standard regularity and conventional formal determination.

Going back to language specific foundations and cognitive forces, the author addresses two questions: one is that formal generalizations do not show up in correspondingly streamlined linguistic output. The other is that the complexity of language acquisition is troubling if compared with its apparent ease and rate of effective success. A unique focus on formal linguistic properties cannot explain language as a plane of universal, hard-wired invariability. According to Wanner, the cognitive puzzle of language is based on two constitutive contingencies: the continual historical development of languages from one fluctuating state to another; and the open-ended linguistic interaction between individuals having acquired their cognitive and linguistic expertise from their socio-historical environment. The author suggests a way of conceiving language as a cognitive faculty practiced in individual and collective time and with varying form, yet communicational functionality.

Far from both European philological traditions on diachronic aspects of languages, and distinctions such as Saussurean poles of *langue* versus *parole* or as Chomsky's reinterpretations of competence versus performance, Wanner considers language faculty as integrated into a broader cognitive context to provide a reconstruction of the diachronic contributions to the acquisition, cognitive integration, and social practice of human language. The author criticizes the historical approach of linguistics based on the predominance of diachrony from the nineteenth century. Instead, he advocates for diachrony as a co-determining dimension, altogether with reliance on cognitive and social conditions.

Divided in seven chapters, the volume focuses on the difficulties confronting historical linguistics. Chapter one and two shape challenges in the field and review past achievements, current trends and contemporary philology. Chapter three provides a critique, based on parameter setting and the relevance of frequency information. Grammaticality judgments, redundancy, and regularity regarding

linguistic materials are assessed in chapter four. Some constructive proposals on syntax are also offered. In chapter five, Wanner presents analogy as the force driving language acquisition, practice and change if combined with social embedding. On this foundation, he elaborates a framework for syntax, Soft Syntax, applying to synchrony as well as diachrony in chapter six. Syntax and its six dimensions: precedence, cohesion, dependence, agreement, constructional identity, and concatenation, receive a detailed relevance of their purpose and operation in a broader cognitive context. Chapter seven brings together Wanner's investigation by implementing Soft Syntax for diachrony, locating crucial points for syntactic change.

Among all the sections of this volume, chapter five maintains a more meaningful outlook on language and its properties for a well-read audience in the discipline. The concept of analogy is described as a judgment of similarity as well as a process of assimilation; therefore, it depends on the simple comparison of similarity. Analogy is crucial for first language learning, formal constitution of language, and social dispersion of linguistic features. At the same time, it produces linguistic classifications, form classes, constituents, and constructions. It effects change through innovative associations, and eventually assimilation. Wanner strongly recognizes that linguistic change is mediated by analogical assimilation across individual speakers participating in a given group practice. Analogy keeps language evolving naturally while also determining its functional conservatism. One of the strengths of this volume is precisely this unprecedented recognition of analogy in linguistic practices.

In brief, Wanner offers some themes of relevance for a reformulated practice of historical linguistics. In my opinion, he brings some fresh air in this field. He innovatively puts together external factors and the complementation of cognitive and social disciplines with the theoretical framework of historical linguistics. However, his critique to philological traditional diachronic studies goes too far. After all, what is historical linguistics without the relevance of descriptive diachrony? *The Power of Analogy* offers a rich, convincing theory, and although well illustrated and coherent, it cannot be considered a very realistic framework for studying historical language development. It also becomes sometimes un-engaging and difficult to read. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Wanner's reflection on social contact and cognitive practices regarding linguistic behavior and boundaries open up new discussions for experts in the matter. His multifaceted view of diachronic change contributes positively to a deeper understanding of language.

[Eva Núñez Méndez]