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## BOOK REVIEW

Willem J.M. Levelt (2013). *A history of psycholinguistics. The pre-Chomskyan era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-965366

Reviewed by Marc van Oostendorp (Meertens Instituut / Universiteit Leiden)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, linguistics to many observers seemed the one discipline among the humanities that most closely resembled a natural science. Scientists such as Charles Darwin had shown interest in the way in which languages changed over time; how such changes caused 'language families' to be organized in tree-like structures, and how in this sense the evolution of natural languages could be compared to the evolution of species in biology. Darwin explicitly mentioned the successes of linguistics as an inspiration for his own work.

The introduction of the so-called historical-comparative method was indeed most probably one of the greatest scientific discoveries of the 18th and 19th centuries. The idea that almost all European languages were the offspring of a single ancestor, Proto-Indo-European, which furthermore was also the mother of Persian, and of Indian languages such as Sanskrit, and of many more, still can be seen as a discovery of which the details have since then been refined, but which still stands.

In a separate development, psychologists and brain researchers had learned many new things about the place of language in the human brain. Very important evidence for the idea that certain areas in the brain are specialized for certain functions was discovered in work on aphasia. Scientists like Paul Pierre Broca and Carl Wernicke had shown that patients with a problem in a particular brain region systematically suffered from quite specific linguistic problems.

By 1900, virtually all currently available knowledge about language was admirably brought together by the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in his extensive, two-volume work *Die Sprache* ('Language'). For Wundt, who was a convinced methodological eclectic, both psychological experiments and historical studies were possible windows on the human language capacity and thus on the human brain. He took all the knowledge that had been collected in previous decades and placed it in a coherent framework. 'He had an admirable memory', writes Dutch psycholinguist Willem Levelt in his recent, impressive *History of psycholinguistics. The pre-Chomskyan era*, 'and treated each topic exhaustively. (...) His books have a clear structure and his writing was lucid and precise.'

Willem Levelt mirrors all of the qualities he ascribes to Wilhelm Wundt. Like his predecessor, he has published a large body of work in which he has managed

to synthesize an enormous amount of scholarly literature in an admirable way and in a writing style that is a pleasure to read. During the nineteen seventies he published a three-volume work on *Formal grammars in linguistics and psycholinguistics*, which can be seen as a summary of all the insights that the Chomskyan revolution had had on grammatical theory and on psycholinguistics. His book *Speaking. From intention to articulation* (1989) is the most comprehensive standard work on the psycholinguistics of language production of the end of the twentieth century.

Levelt has now compiled a staggering amount of literature on psycholinguistics, the psychology of language, and the role of language in psychology in his new book *A history of psycholinguistics*. Much of the work he cites belongs to literature that is very rarely cited anymore, let alone read. In his epilogue, Levelt writes that his aim was to show that

psycholinguistics is not a young, recent science. (...) Its empirical roots go back to the end of the eighteenth century; the psychology of language was an established discipline by the end of the nineteenth century; and its empirical and theoretical output during the first half of the twentieth century was substantial.

He succeeds in this goal in a truly exquisite way, in a book that one can admire for the enormous erudition with which it has been compiled as well as for its elegant style. Levelt has read everything: *Die Kindersprache* ('Child Language', 1907), the book in which Clara and William Stern turned the study of child language into a truly scientific discipline; the infamous, rigidly empiricist study *Verbal behavior* in which B.F. Skinner tried to reduce all language into a kind of Pavlovian stimulus-response pairing; the 1951 book *Language and communication*, in which George Miller seemed to announce the modern ('post-Chomskyan') era of linguistics.

Levelt thus also covers a large empirical domain: acquisition, production, perception, pathology; anything that could reasonably fall at the crossroads of linguistics and psychology. *A history of psycholinguistics* can also serve as a reference work: what were the main ideas of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, or Arthur Hocart? How did views on aphasia develop in the course of time? How did the field develop in Germany during the Third Reich? One can find the answers to all such questions in this book.

Many interesting discoveries and surprises await the reader with an interest in research, or history, or the history of research. It becomes clear that psycholinguistics as a discipline has been characterized by a constant battle of ideas — between psychologists and linguists, between people who mainly wanted to do clever experiments and people who sought their data in the systematic study of written corpora; between people who very systematically collected data in order to do careful statistical analysis and people whose main talent was in devising new grandiose theoretical vistas.

Meanwhile, people who dared to provide an overview of all that work and to make a large, coherent and synthesis, have always been relatively rare: scholars like Wilhelm Wundt a hundred years ago, or like Willem J.M. Levelt in our times. This is the main reason why I believe that any psycho-linguist, and any linguist in a broader sense, should study *A history of psycholinguistics*: to see how important it is to have large studies with great overviews, in addition to the important, but fragmented stream of top articles in top journals.