

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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## Book Review

**Historical Linguistics.**

**Herbert Schendl. Oxford Introductions to Language Study.**

**Ed. by H. G. Widdowson.**

**Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. 2001**

**Reviewed by Summaira Sarfraz**

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**A Note by the Review Editor:** Reviews of leading books and articles are most welcome. We'll review your reports and decide on the publication of your reviews. Please choose most appropriate and relevant books and articles for review. Ensure that all sources you've used are cited in the text and the citations and references are presented following either MLA or APA style sheet.

**G. Baskaran, Ph.D.**

**Review Editor**

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Historical Linguistics is written by Herbert Schendl in the series of Oxford Introduction to Language study. The book is based on comprehensive survey of the crucial issues of historical linguistics. Schendl in this survey has very successfully served the purpose of making people understand the complex ideas related to historical linguistics in the most simplistic way so to make linguistics relevant to people in the wider world.

While reading this book, one realizes that it does not require a particular expertise in the area of linguistics to understand and explore ideas. The survey provides the preliminary

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information for readers and encourages more critical and detailed study. The survey is not only useful for those who want to use the information for academic purposes but also for those people who want to study language “for their own lines of enquiry, or for their own practical purposes, or quite simply for making them aware of something which figures so centrally in their everyday lives.”

Schendl in his **first chapter**, (Language change as a matter of fact) explains attitude to language, language state process and aims and scope of Historical Linguistics as introduction to key issues. He has given deep insight into how Linguistic change “is not restricted to particular languages or generations, but a universal fact.” (p.5)

Schendl contrasted the conservative linguists of past who regarded language “as growing organism with a stage of growth, brief moment of evolutionary perfection, and subsequent decay,” with those of contemporary linguist who have a “neutral or even positive attitude towards change.”(p.8)The aims and scope cover the major questions that the historical linguists seek to explain: “*why* languages change, and *how* these changes spread in space and time.”(p.9) what makes the survey most interesting is the discussion of social, political and, historical inter-relationships.

The **second chapter** (Reconstructing the past: data and evidence) is quite rich in information. It explains the data of historical linguistics, written evidence, sources of evidence, comparing and reconstructing languages, correspondence between languages, laws of change, and internal reconstruction. Schendl has tried to best explain the evolution process of language with the help of family tree. Any lay man can follow the genetic relationship between languages easily with the help of family tree of Germanic languages (p.17) given in this chapter.

In the following **three chapters (Vocabulary Change; Grammatical Change; Sound Change)** Schendl shifts the focus of discussion to the occurrences of Linguistic changes at all level: phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, and that “changes on one level may influence another level and trigger off changes there as well.”(p.25). There are a lot of linguistic terms used in these chapters and their meanings are explained with examples to make the reading accessible to all. These terms appear in bold, e.g. “**The palatalization** of vowels, i.e. the ‘fronting’ of the raised part of the tongue towards the palate as in the change from [u]>[y] (the sound in French *une*, or German *Gluck*,) or of [o] >[e], was frequent in the development of pre-Old English.”(p.47)

**Chapters six and seven** (Language Contact; How and why do language changes?) are the most thought provoking chapters of the survey. Schendl in chapter six (Language contact) makes his reader ponders over the phenomena of language contact which according to him is “neither good nor bad” and that, it is speakers attitude towards phenomena which is “frequently not as neutral (ef. Chapter 1).” The chapter addresses the main issues related to language contact which lead to borrowing from other languages, linguistic convergence, language birth and language death. Since there is hardly any nation in the world whose speakers are not bilingual, the topic of ‘Language

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death' in this chapter makes a reader question the status of his own mother tongue in the presence of other languages in his speech community, "Since language and speakers in contact are rarely of equal political, economic or social status and power, the less powerful or prestigious group is frequently disadvantaged. This often leads to language conflict between the speech communities." (p.55)

In **chapter seven** (How and why do languages change?) Schendl explains three general types of explanation offered by historical linguists: functional explanation, psycholinguistic explanation and sociolinguistic explanation to how and why do languages change. After a thorough discussion on these explanations, Schendl maintains that the issue still remains inconclusive "in spite of the long tradition of historical linguistics and recent research, there is still no generally accepted answer to the question of how and why languages change." (p.80) this, according to Schendl is due to lack of consensus among schools of linguistics over explanations, "Much of controversy is linked to what we understand by explanation, and how we view language- as an autonomous system, as a psychological or biological fact or as a vehicle of communication which speakers use."(p.80)

The **last chapter** of the book (Postscript: further developments) sheds light on the three prominent developments over the recent years in the area of historical linguistics namely: Socio-historical linguistics and historical pragmatics, Evolutionary linguistics and standardization and language planning. These developments lend further to widen the scope in the study of language.

In conclusion, Schendl emphasizes the study of the history of language as it helps us to "understand better some of the fundamental issues of humanity." (p.85).

Readings at the end of each chapter provides thought provoking questions that a reader can take up for further research. "The book concludes with a graded bibliography for readers who wish to deepen their knowledge and gain an appreciation for current research on the issues discussed by Schendl, and a glossary which, however, fails to include several linguistic terms not commonly familiar to the casual reader (constructional iconicity, memes, majority principle, polysemy, topicalization, etc.)." ( K.Albert)

Albert K. Wimmer, in his review of Historical Linguistics very rightly sums up the book by saying " Schendl's volume goes beyond a general survey of historical linguistics. Indeed, it provides readers ranging from advanced undergraduates to graduate students of linguistics with a permanent set of tools and reference with which to approach language change. Especially, students interested in second language acquisition will appreciate the circumsinct way in which Schendl places the study of linguistics within historical contexts."

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### Reference

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