

## The Koernerian revolution

*In memoriam* E. F. K. Koerner (1939–2022)

John E. Joseph

University of Edinburgh

Ernst Frideryk Konrad Koerner was born on 5 February 1939 in Hofleben (Polish: Mlewiec), some twelve miles from Thorn, West Prussia (now Toruń, Poland). His childhood was of course shaped by the war, which dramatically changed his family's circumstances, including the identity of their country. Following studies at the Universities of Göttingen and Berlin, as well as two terms at the University of Edinburgh, he received his *Magister* degree from the University of Gießen in 1968, with a thesis on the development and use of the subjunctive in German. In 1971 he completed his PhD dissertation at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, on the background and evolution of Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857–1913) *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), supervised by Geoffrey L. Bursill-Hall (1920–1998), and with Dell H. Hymes (1927–2009) as external examiner. A revised version was published in Germany (Koerner 1973) and has since been translated into Hungarian, Japanese and Spanish.

The thesis posed a number of audacious challenges to the received history of modern linguistics. The 1960s had seen prominent scholars postulate a series of Saussurean 'precursors', including the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893), a linguist whose work lay outside the Neogrammarian mainstream in which Saussure was trained. Koerner argued that more convincing sources can be found within that mainstream itself: rather than Gabelentz, he pointed to Hermann Paul (1846–1921), whose 1880 *Principien der Sprachgeschichte* was regarded by the Neogrammarians as their 'bible', and William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), the American linguist whom they respected and Saussure revered.

In the case of Durkheim, Koerner raised strong objections to the fact that his name is never cited anywhere by Saussure, insisting that a methodology which ignores the documentary record can produce 'influences' without any limit or firm basis. In a scientific approach to the history of linguistics, assertions must, following Karl Popper (1902–1994), be falsifiable, and if the purported influence of X on Y is based on shared terminology or overlapping ideas but without attribution to

X, it may turn out that both X and Y were separately influenced by Z, drinking from the same trough, as it were; or that the terms and ideas were ‘in the air’, the product of what would now be called distributed cognition, and not really any single scholar’s property.

Saussure and his background would persist as a theme of Koerner’s work in the decades ahead, along with other recurring themes, including

- the impact on 19th-century linguistics of the natural sciences,
- the failure to appreciate the role played by certain relatively minor figures in the field: Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), August Friedrich Pott (1802–1887), Antoni Dufriche-Desgenettes (1804–1878), Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and numerous others,
- the parallels among various ‘revolutions’ proclaimed in modern linguistics, e.g.
- Sir William Jones’s (1746–1794) ‘discovery’ of Indo-European linguistic affinities in 1786,
- Franz Bopp’s (1791–1867) methodological refinements of 1816,
- the Neogrammarian ‘revolution’ of 1876,
- structuralism, starting in the late 1920s,
- the Chomskyan ‘revolution’ of the 1960s.

Koerner considered the last of these particularly dubious, in view of the demonstrable continuity between Noam Chomsky’s early methodology and that of his predecessors Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), Charles Hockett (1916–2000) and especially Zellig Harris (1909–1992). As for the failure to appreciate the role of certain figures, Koerner sought to rectify it not just through his research, but, for the past, by starting the reprint series *Amsterdam Classics in Linguistics*, 1800–1925, and for the future, by publishing three volumes of *First Person Singular*, for which living scholars wrote autobiographical sketches.

After completing his doctorate Koerner occupied posts as research associate at the Universities of Texas and Indiana, then in 1973 returned to Germany to do research and teaching at the University of Regensburg. In 1976 he took up the professorship of linguistics at the University of Ottawa which he held until his retirement in 2001. He then relocated to Berlin, where he held an honorary position with the Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft. He continued to carry out his very active programme of editorial activities and research, until his health suffered a sudden decline in 2017. After that his scholarly work necessarily slowed, and his awareness of the change is reflected in the prescient, if somewhat morbid, title of his final book, *Last Papers in Linguistic Historiography* (Koerner 2020). He

was hospitalised in Berlin in December 2021 after suffering several falls, and died of pneumonia on 6 January 2022, at the age of 82.

In addition to his studies in Edinburgh in 1964–65, Koerner was a Visiting Scholar at the University's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in 1977, and presented papers to its Linguistic Circle in November 1999, and at the annual meeting of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas which Edinburgh hosted in September 2000. He was with us as a British Academy Visiting Professor in May 2005. In 2018 an honorary doctorate was conferred upon him by the University of Edinburgh, following those he had previously received from the Universities of Sofia, St Petersburg and Toruń. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and of the Royal Society of Arts in the UK. In 2001–2002 he was Fellow-in-Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and in 2002–2003 he was awarded the Konrad Adenauer Research Prize by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Koerner's importance within modern linguistics owes as much to his organisational energies and editorial skills as to his own scholarship. In 1972 he had his first meeting with John L. Benjamins, at the time exclusively an antiquarian book dealer, and in subsequent exchanges they agreed to launch *Historiographia Linguistica*, the first journal devoted to the history of linguistics, and an associated book series, *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences* (SiHoLS). The first volume of *HL* appeared in 1973. In 1978, he organised the first International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (ICHoLS) at the University of Ottawa; this has subsequently become a triennial event, most recently hosted online by the Catholic University of Milan in 2021 (delayed by a year because of the Covid pandemic), with the next meeting to be held in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2024. Koerner also helped to establish a number of national societies in the field, including the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas in the UK, and the North American Association for the History of the Language Sciences.

Other editorial enterprises would have wide-ranging positive repercussions for the development of linguistics in the last decades of the 20th century. His founding in 1984 of the journal *Diachronica* would help to revitalise historical linguistics at a time when it appeared to be in terminal decline. The series *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (CILT) which he founded offered a stable, high-quality publication outlet for non-mainstream approaches to the study of language, at a point when English-language academic presses had begun focussing narrowly on Chomskyan generativism. Without this series, many young linguists developing innovative work outside the mainstream would not have been able to have a career. Linguistics would be much less diverse a field today had it not been for Koerner's editorial undertakings, which occupied most of his time, although

he never ceased his active programme of research, including travel to conferences across the globe, until his poor health made it impossible.

As the author of two volumes in series he founded, co-editor of two others and contributor to many more, I can back up with personal testimony what I have written above about his contribution to diversifying linguistics – and in doing so I know that I speak for dozens, maybe hundreds, of other scholars. In the late 1980s, a few years on from my PhD, I was becoming frustrated with how posts in top North American universities were nearly all going to candidates who toed the Chomskyan line, even including sociolinguists. Many scholars I knew who considered the postulates of generative linguistics deeply flawed (as in fact Chomsky himself would conclude within a few more years) nevertheless preached them for purely pragmatic reasons. Publishing too was a breeze if you were proposing some minuscule variation on the generative model based on minuscule data from one or two languages; but if your work was more intellectually or empirically ambitious, you might be better off reorienting your career toward anthropology, which however might require doing a second PhD.

I had always had an interest in the history of linguistics, but it would have been a straight path to career death at that time were it not for the existence of *HL* and *SiHoLS* and their indefatigable Editor-in-Chief. It was his encouragement that led me largely to re-orient my work, not just in a historical direction but also in terms of the theoretical enquiries I was pursuing, to which *CILT* would be open. In the end I never published a monograph in *CILT*, but other publishers were by now opening up new opportunities, having seen the success that Koerner's journals and series were having for Benjamins, and sensing the energy that was pulsing around the organisations Koerner had kick-started. By 1990, the tide had turned. Chomsky retreated into 'minimalism', leaving his acolytes disoriented and floundering, and linguistics was opening up to several novel streams of enquiry, none of which was the exclusive mainstream.

He was no less troubled by the trend whereby English was becoming the dominant language of international scholarship. His journals and book series were open to a range of languages, and articles had to include résumés in English, French and German. His instinctive resistance to domination manifested itself too in his strongly held view that *ICHoLS* should not be anything other than an international meeting. He was always prepared to argue passionately against proposals which arose periodically for the creation of an international society for the history of linguistics – despite his having been the driving force behind so many of the national societies. He worried that an international society might be dominated by whichever national group was most vibrant at a given time, or most ambitious.

The dozens or hundreds of people who have done significant work in linguistics over the last thirty years, and who recognise my story as their own, have

students who are probably unaware of how fortunate they are to be received into a diverse, open-minded, exciting field – exciting in the way the Renaissance must have felt to those who had come up under mediaeval scholasticism. That is the heritage of the Koernerian Revolution: freedom to do research that need not follow a party line enforced by those whom Koerner would privately refer to as little Napoleons.

Konrad Koerner the man was intense, and that inevitably endeared him deeply to some, whilst having the opposite effect on others. He was extremely generous to anyone he perceived as having scholarly talent, with no consideration whatsoever as to their gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation or age. This was not the norm in the 1970s, and whenever the great Vivian Salmon (1921–2010) spoke of Konrad, it was of the man who released her from the sexism and condescending attitudes that had stalled her career, including during the many years when her husband Paul Salmon (1921–1997) was Professor of German in the University of Edinburgh and she was given the sort of minor teaching roles that went to faculty wives. She did not hesitate to credit Konrad Koerner with assembling the books which she published in his series, using papers of hers which, though unquestionably magisterial, had not received the attention they deserved.

Over the years, I found that I could tell a good deal about a person based on their feelings about Konrad – people in linguistics, that is. Non-linguists were, without exception in my experience, bowled over by his charm, his aristocratic grace and appearance and his deep, rather melodious voice. As for linguists, I have heard the full gamut of opinions about him, from admiration and affection to ridicule to outright loathing, though personal criticism never bothered him, and negative assessments of his work simply spurred him to take those assessments apart. For many years this was done at his typewriter, with several carbon copies which he posted to his confidants. When he acquired his beloved Macintosh computer – he couldn't bear anything Microsoft, because of the company's perceived dominance – the carbon copies became multiple printings, and then, with the internet, blind cc's to an ever growing list of people. My attempts to persuade him not to forward emails of a confidential nature to every continent never succeeded; but it was clear that by doing this he had created an international family for himself. Never having married, despite a few close calls, his life was the history of linguistics and the community of scholars engaged in it. He fortunately was close to his niece, and had friends who treated him like a member of their families, so his human contact was not entirely via his Mac.

Most scholars working in the history of linguistics admired him greatly, and had a wealth of anecdotes about him that we would share with laughter, even when the anecdote was about some occasion when we had been on the sharp

end of his criticism. In pre-internet times it was a common occurrence for someone who submitted a manuscript to *HL* or *Diachronica* to have it returned covered in red ink, with what he disarmingly called his *Verschlimmbesserungen*. Also tucked into the envelope would be the latest complete list of books in the CILT and SiHoLS series, and often a bibliography of the works of E.F.K. Koerner – interpretable as a subtle hint that including a few of those in the references would not go amiss, though he never required anyone to do so.

He knew how to get an audience's attention with a provocative comment, for instance by predicting, during the height of the generativist ascent, that in a hundred years' time people will still be reading Saussure, but Chomsky will be forgotten. His oral presentations were surprisingly disorganised, given the rigorous organisation of his published work and of his editorial undertakings – no author for one of his journals or series could get away with not giving the full name and life-dates of anyone they referred to – and he never supervised a PhD student, again surprisingly given the energies he devoted to nurturing the careers of young scholars post-PhD. The obvious weakness of the series of books which he authored from 1978 to 2020 was that he would return repeatedly to the topics which most occupied his thinking. He would not do so without adding some new information or analysis, and no two of the books had the same selection from amongst his pet topics, so they were technically new books, and each had to be consulted for the latest version of his research. Six of the eight books appeared in his own series with John Benjamins, with no editorial vetting apart from those chapters which had first come out as articles in refereed journals. It did not look like good practice, and his friends told him so. But, as always, he followed his own instincts.

Stephen O. Murray (1950–2019), one of the scholars whose career Koerner nurtured, analysed the development of American linguistics in the twentieth century in terms of who, for a given subarea, was the intellectual leader, and who was the organisational leader. For generative linguistics, Chomsky was the former, and Morris Halle (1923–2018) the latter. Applying this perspective to the history of linguistics, Koerner was the organisational leader, and for certain areas, also the intellectual leader, although he claimed no expertise prior to the end of the 18th century. His organisational endeavours were not just momentarily successful, but were undertaken with an eye to how they would be kept going in the long term. So far, so good. It will be up to those of us who read and contribute to *HL* to follow his example and nurture young scholars in our field. Konrad often said that, in his travels around the world, he never spoke with a linguist who did not express some interest in the history of linguistics – which makes it odd that so few universities have courses in it, and fewer still employ a specialist in the area, as opposed to a scholar who does research and teaching in the subject but whose main responsi-

bilities lie in some other area. Whatever we can do to improve the situation will form a tribute to Konrad Koerner's legacy, and a continuation of his revolution.

## REFERENCES

- Koerner, E.F.K. 1973. *Ferdinand de Saussure: Origin and development of his linguistic thought in Western studies of language. A contribution to the history and theory of linguistics*. Braunschweig: Vieweg. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-85606-7>
- Koerner, E.F.K. 2020. *Last Papers in Linguistic Historiography*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sihols.128>

### *Address for correspondence*

John E. Joseph  
 School of Philosophy, Psychology & Language Sciences  
 University of Edinburgh  
 Dugald Stewart Building  
 EDINBURGH, EH8 9AD  
 United Kingdom  
[john.joseph@ed.ac.uk](mailto:john.joseph@ed.ac.uk)