On the trail of the tiger

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I was going through U.S. customs en route to a conference. What kind of conference? the agent asked. A linguistics conference, I said. Linguistics, he said, stamping my card with the code that means ‘harmless idiot’. So what languages do you work on? No languages in particular, I explained, we study the principles that govern all languages. The principles that govern all languages, he repeated thoughtfully. Well, that’s a good racket. Have a nice trip.

Linguistics is a hidden science, largely unknown to the public at large, even to the educated and well-informed public. Most fields have popularizers, writers who convey something of the excitement of advanced research in the area. In the case of language, however, the people who write for the nonacademic public do not typically have any connection with modern linguistics, and rarely discuss issues that are relevant to linguistics as we know it. This is just as well, since these writers are almost invariably as hostile to scientific linguistics as they are ignorant of it. Linguistics has more anti-popularizers than popularizers.

One might think that linguistics is just unlucky to be in this position, but I think there is more to it, something to do with what is called ‘human interest’ and its relation to scientific interest. The two do not necessarily go in the same direction, especially in the case of language.

Consider how popular and scientific linguistics deal with the subject of language change. Much writing in popular linguistics is concerned with the history of particular words. Why, for example, does the English language have curious expressions like Dutch treat or in Dutch? A Dutch treat is a treat for which the recipient pays, hence no treat at all. To be in Dutch is to be in trouble. These expressions, and others like them, date from the seventeenth century rivalry between the English and the Dutch.

Behind each word or idiom, then, there is a unique story which tells us something about political or cultural history. The subject has human interest, and it is this human interest that appeals to people, and is the basis of popular linguistics.

Entertaining as it is, however, the study of the history of word meanings plays at best a marginal role in scientific linguistics. Of the 744 example-packed pages of Hans Henrich Hock’s *Principles of Historical Linguistics*, for example, not more than 50 deal with word meanings in any way, and very few of the examples discussed would be deemed interesting enough to make the local newspaper’s column on language.

Why do linguists so perversely avoid studying what everyone else finds so interesting? The reason is simple. The history of a word has human interest to the extent that it is idiosyncratic, bound up with specific historical or cultural events. This very characteristic, however, is unfavourable for purposes of scientific inquiry, which requires instead systematic and recurring patterns. So a person who signs up for a historical linguistics course hoping to investigate the history of word meanings is more likely to spend much of the course (around 500 pages worth of Hock) contemplating sound changes. I have never yet read a newspaper column on language devoted to a discussion of the fact that pre-Attic-Ionic u changed to Early Attic-Ionic ü (it did—Hock, p. 155).
Admittedly, sound changes have a lot less intrinsic human interest than meaning changes, in the sense that there is not much human drama conveyed by the change of \( u \) to \( ü \). Rather, the interest comes from the attempt to develop theories which can account for the patterns we find.

A similar situation obtains in other fields. Geologists do not study only impressive formations which are the biggest tourist attractions; sometimes a very inconspicuous and unimpressive feature—a patch of dirt, perhaps—may turn out to have greater scientific interest.

Returning home from the annual meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, I met my neighbour on the stairs. What do you think of the Nostratic hypothesis? he asked, showing me an article on it that had been circulating among his friends, who all work for the city sanitation department. In three days in Chicago—a storm centre of the Nostratic theory, as I learned from the article I borrowed from him—I never heard a word about it.

The gap between human interest and scientific interest is unusually large in linguistics. Few subjects have more inherent human interest than language. We live in a world of language. The mechanics of language must be relegated to the background when we are actually using language, which is most of the time. We are interested in the messages conveyed by language, what they tell us about the speaker and the world. When we say we are interested in language because it is a window on the mind, most people assume we mean the content of language. Our everyday experience of language is so dazzlingly bright that it takes a special effort to focus on its form.

So you are in linguistics, my dentist exclaimed, handing me a cup of fluoride to swish around in my mouth for 45 seconds. How fascinating! I’ve been reading a lot about Neurolinguistic Programming—have you been to their seminars?

I did my thesis on the Old English Vespasian Psalter. According to the jacket of the excellent edition by Sherman Kuhn, this manuscript ‘is a major landmark in the development of the English language as well as in the history of the Psalms in English and Latin.’ Kuhn writes that the Latin text of the manuscript is one of the earliest surviving copies of St. Jerome’s first version of the Psalter; its illuminations are famous as works of art. When I saw it in the British Museum, it was item #1 in the special exhibit of important manuscript holdings of the museum. A part of the world heritage of humanity, then, of great human interest. My research, though, was not concerned with the illuminations, illustrations, or Latin psalm text, but rather with the spelling of the vowels of the Old English gloss. For all I cared about the meaning and significance of the text, it could have been the Lichfield phone book of 925.

With respect to the human interest of the subject matter, my project would appear to be a curious choice. But from my perspective, I was investigating a fascinating issue – the nature of the mental representation of sounds. In particular, are sounds represented in the mind more or less in their manifest phonetic form, or are more abstract representations ever motivated? This issue was much debated as the ‘abstractness controversy’. Studying the language of the Vespasian Psalter in conjunction with that of earlier and later texts adds a diachronic dimension to synchronic study. As Kiparsky (1968) has memorably put it, ‘Changes in phonological systems may reveal ordinarily hidden structure, as a tiger lurking on the edge of a jungle, his stripes blending in with the background, becomes visible the moment he begins to move.’ I saw the tiger move in the Vespasian Psalter, revealing the otherwise hidden abstract underlying representations.

The accountant who prepares my tax return sat back in his chair. It just occurred to me, he said, that you would be an excellent person to give a talk on linguistics to a discussion group I’m part of. Do you think you could talk to us about the work of Deborah Tannen?
Does science not have human interest? Of course it does. The human interest of science is very high, but at the level of the theories, not at the level of the raw data they are built on. Most people enjoy puzzles and intellectual challenges, and the problems posed by the human language faculty are among the most challenging there are. It is up to us, however, to reveal the human interest inherent in the research enterprise of linguistics.

To the other denizens of the jungle, our interests may appear peculiar—we follow obscure trails, we pore over broken twigs. Our methods are hard to explain, but our goal is simply stated: we are on the trail of the tiger, and when we catch a glimpse of him—now, that’s interesting!

I was taking an early morning taxi to the airport. Going on vacation? the driver asked. No, a conference—a linguistics conference. Yeah? How many languages do you speak? Two or three, I said, too tired to go into my usual explanation. We drove for a while in silence. So, the driver said after a while, easing onto the highway, what do you think of Optimality Theory?

References