

Ferdinand von Mengden
f.vm@fu-berlin.de
@FvMengden

68. StuTS, Berlin
November 20, 2020



On How to Attain a Synchronic Stage

«Πάντα ῥεῖ»
HERAKLIT

1 TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT ROUTES

1.1 Stumbling over the factor time

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(1) Bien peu de linguistes se doutent que l'intervention du facteur temps est propre à créer à la linguistique des difficultés particulières et qu'elles place leur science devant deux routes absolument divergentes.
DE SAUSSURE 1916 [1972]: 114.</p> | <p>Few linguists will doubt that the influence of the factor time is capable of causing special difficulties for linguistics and that these difficulties compels the discipline to go two entirely different routes.</p> |
| <p>(2) il s'agit d'un système d'équivalence entre des choses d'ordres différents [...] C'est au linguiste que cette distinction s'impose le plus impérieusement; car la langue est un système de pure valeurs que rien ne détermine en dehors de l'état momentané de ses termes.
DE SAUSSURE 1916 [1972]: 115-6; italics original, underline FvM.</p> | <p>It's about a system of correspondences between objects of different orders [...]. This distinction is imposed to the linguist in the most compelling way, because language [<i>langue</i>] is a system of mere values <u>which are determined by nothing but the momentary stage of its members.</u></p> |
| <p>(3) La linguistique diachronique étudiera au contraire les rapports reliant des termes successifs non aperçus par une même conscience collective, et qui se substituent les uns aux autres sans former système entre eux.
DE SAUSSURE 1916 [1972]: 140.</p> | <p>Diachronic linguistics, by contrast, studies the relation among the successive expressions which are not perceived by the same collective consciousness and of which one replaces the other without forming a system among themselves.</p> |

1.2 Theoretical consequences

Separation of "synchronic linguistics" and "diachronic linguistics"

- rather than combining stative and dynamic aspects of language
- primacy of synchronic linguistics over diachronic linguistics
- conceptualization of language change is reduced to the formula 'A replaces B'

Distinction between 'langue' (system) and 'parole' (usage)

- 'langue' not yet defined as independent of usage
- but the mere notional distinction implies that some level of 'language' other than usage exists

1.3 Essentialism vs. emergentism

Essentialism: an entity / a phenomenon is defined by fixed and unalterable properties.

Emergentism: an approach to an entity / a phenomenon allows for fuzzy external and internal boundaries and for internal variation
Variation is inherent to a phenomenon and its units; it is *not* epiphenomenal.

2 NINETEENTH-CENTURY LINGUISTICS

2.1 Starting point

Orientation toward vernacular culture and history
→ away from classical models

Redefinition of 'a people' ('Volk') as a natural unit
→ abandoning the distinction between 'monarch' and 'people'

Culture and history as natural properties of a people
→ contrast between 'one people' and another

In want of other general (generalizable) criteria, 'language' becomes the main defining characteristic of 'a people'

Johann Gottfried Herder 1772

- Language is not created by god, but developed along with human civilization

Wilhelm von Humboldt 1810 (and later)

- The more civilized a nation, the more complex its language

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(4) So wie das ganze menschliche Geschlecht unmöglich eine Herde bleiben konnte, so konnte es auch nicht eine Sprache behalten. Es wird also eine Bildung verschiedener Nationalsprachen.
HERDER 1772 [1966]: 104.</p> | <p>Just as humankind as a whole could not remain one flock, it could also not retain one language. Therefore, different national languages emerge.</p> |
|---|--|

2.2 Discovery of language families and genetic relatedness

William Jones 1788

- Similarities between Sanskrit and European languages cannot be due to chance

- (5) The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a familiar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothick* and the *Celtick*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same idiom with the *Sanscrit*; and the old *Persian* might be added to the same family.

JONES 1788: 422-3.

Franz Bopp 1816, 1820

- All Indo-European languages go back to one common, yet unknown ancestor (proto-language)
- (6) I do not believe that the Greek, Latin, and other European languages are to be considered as derived from the Sanskrit in the state in which we find it in Indian books; I feel rather inclined to consider them altogether as subsequent variations of one original tongue, which, however, the Sanskrit has preserved more perfect than its kindred dialects.
- (7) We might farther conclude that a nation, possessing a language so polished in so early a period, where we are altogether abandoned by the light of history, must be able to boast of a very ancient literature [...].

BOPP 1920: 2-3.

2.3 Focus on vernacular practices

Johann Schmidt 1872

- There are no language boundaries in pre-historic times

- (8) Sprachgrenzen innerhalb dieses gebietes [der indoeuropäischen Sprachen] gab es ursprünglich nicht, zwei voneinander beliebig weit entfernte dialekte des selben [gebietes] A und X waren durch kontinuierliche varietäten B, C, D, u. s. w. mit einander vermittelt.

SCHMIDT 1872: 27-8.

Originally there were no language boundaries within this area [i.e., within Indo-European]. Two different dialects, however far away from each other, of the same [area] A and X were connected with each other through continuous varieties B, C, D, etc.'

- (9) ich erinnere nur an die immer mer und mer wachsende macht des attischen, welche die dialekte allmählich ganz aus der schriftsprache verdrängte, an die sprache der statt Rom, welche sämtliche übrigen italischen dialekte erdrückte, an das neuhochdeutsche, welches in vielleicht nicht allzu langer zeit die gleiche vernichtung der deutschen dialekte vollzogen haben wird.

SCHMIDT 1872: 28.

I would like to refer to the growing power of Attic [Greek], which drives out [other ancient Greek] dialects from the *schriftsprache*, the language of the city of Rome, which displaces all other Italic dialects, [and] Modern High German which within short will have accomplished the same destruction of the German dialects.

Hermann Osthoff & Karl Brugmann 1878 (Neogrammarian Manifesto)

- ancient languages must follow the same principles as present-day vernaculars do
- focus on the individual speaker (rather than the language)

Hermann Paul 1886

- only a historical approach has explanatory value for the study of human language

- (10) Es ist eingewendet, dass es noch eine andere wissenschaftliche Betrachtung der Sprache gäbe, als die geschichtliche. Ich muss das in Abrede stellen. Was man für eine nichtgeschichtliche und doch wissenschaftliche Betrachtung der Sprache erklärt, ist im Grunde nichts als eine unvollkommene geschichtliche, unvollkommen teils durch Schuld des Betrachters, teils durch Schuld des Beobachtungsmaterials. Sobald man über das blosses Konstatieren von Einzelheiten hinausgeht, sobald man versucht den Zusammenhang zu erfassen, die Erscheinungen zu begreifen, so betritt man auch den geschichtlichen Boden, wenn auch vielleicht ohne sich klar darüber zu sein.

PAUL 1886: 19-20

It was remarked that there is also another approach to language than that of a historical perspective is possible. I dispute this. What is supposed to be an a-historical, and yet scientific perspective on language, is in fact nothing but an imperfect historical perspective. Imperfect partly because of the analyst, partly because of the material under observation. As soon as we will go beyond describing individual facts, as soon as we attempt to understand causalities (connections) and to understand the phenomena, we do enter the realm of history, albeit without necessarily being aware of it.

Hugo Schuchardt 1885

- Language contact takes place within the most homogenous speech community
- Language is a social phenomenon

- (11) Sprachmischung nehme ich [...] auch innerhalb der homogensten Verkehrsgenossenschaft an, Paul nur bei ethnischer Mischung, und diese sei etwas Exceptionelles. Auch gegen Letzteres lege ich Verwahrung ein.

SCHUCHARDT 1885: 16; spacing original.

I assume that language mixing can be found even in the most uniform community. [Hermann] Paul [assumes this] only in the case of ethnic mixing and [claims that] this is something exceptional. I dispute even this last point.

2.4 Summary: development of linguistics in the nineteenth century

Development away from the concept of 'a language' as an essentialistically perceived entity.

Development away from Classical (inflecting) languages as a model for linguistic analysis toward a focus on vernacular practices.

Development away from literary forms of language as a model for linguistic description toward a focus on the individual speaker.

3 LANGUAGE AND NATION BUILDING

The growing prevalence of writing plays a crucial role in the acceptance of the notion that language is a bounded, fixed system

- full literacy in Europe from early nineteenth century on
- standard orthographies are promoted by educational systems, which in turn have been organized by (nation) states
- local practices of speaking were degraded as "dialects"
- local practices of speaking were made 'invisible' in public discourse

- (12) Die Geistesigentümlichkeit und die Sprachgestaltung eines Volkes stehen in solcher Innigkeit der Verschmelzung ineinander, daß, wenn die eine gegeben wäre, die andre müßte vollständig aus ihr abgeleitet werden können. [...] Die Sprache ist gleichsam die äußerliche Erscheinung des Geistes der Völker; ihre Sprache ist ihr Geist und ihr Geist ist ihre Sprache.

HUMBOLDT 1836 [1907]: 42.

The mental characteristics and the formation of the language of a people are so intimately fused into each other, that, if one were given, the other could be completely derived out of it. [...] The language is the outer appearance of the minds of the peoples; their language is their mind and their mind is their language.

- (13) Einige Nationen begnügen sich gleichsam mehr an dem Gemälde, das ihre Sprache ihnen von der Welt entwirft, und suchen nur in sie mehr Licht, Zusammenhang und Ebenmaß zu bringen. Andre graben sich gleichsam mühseliger in den Gedanken ein, glauben nie genug in den Ausdruck legen zu können, ihn anpassend zu machen [...].

HUMBOLDT 1968, GS 4: 432f.

Some nations are satisfied with the painting which their language draws of the world and they only strive to bring more light, more cohesion and more harmony into it [the world]. Others take more effort to intrude into the thought and they think they cannot put enough effort into the expression in order to make it fit [...].

- (14) L'Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani.

Massimo D'Azeglio c. 1867; cf. BILLIG 1995: 25.

We now have created Italy. It still remains to create the Italians.

- (15) [t]o make 'Italians' it was necessary to present the creation as a revival, as if something ancient were being continued. During the heyday of nation-making in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many seemingly ancient traditions were invented.

BILLIG 1995: 25.

- (16) keine unter allen neueren sprachen hat gerade durch das aufgeben und zerrütten alter lautgesetze, durch den wegfall beinahe sämtlicher flexionen eine grössere kraft und stärke empfangen als die englische [...]. Ja die englische sprache, von der nicht umsonst auch der grösste und überlegenste dichter der neuen zeit [...Shakespeare...] gezeugt und getragen worden ist, sie darf mit vollem recht eine weltsprache heissen und scheint gleich dem englischen volk ausersehn künftigt noch in höherem masse an allen enden der erde zu walten. Denn [...] keine aller noch lebenden sprachen [lässt sich] ihr an die seite setzen, auch unsere deutsche nicht, die zerrissen ist wie wir selbst zerissen sind und erst manche gebrechen von sich abschütteln müste [sic] ehe sie kühn mit in die laubahn träte [...].

GRIMM 1852: 50.

Among all modern languages, none but the English language has, through abandoning and destroying all sound laws and through the loss of almost all inflections, has acquired more strength. [...] Its spiritual and wonderfully fortunate array and structure emerged from a surprising marriage of the two most noble languages of later Europe, Germanic and Romance [...]. Lo, the English language, which brought forth the greatest and most superior poet of modern times [...Shakespeare...], may rightfully be called a world language. It seems to be, just like the English people, chosen to rule to a yet greater extent in all corners of the world. For none of the living languages can be considered equal, not even our German language, which is torn as we are torn ourselves and which would first have to rid itself of deficiencies, before it could boldly march on the same path.

4 THE SITUATION AROUND 1916

4.1 Once again the Cours

Continuation of the Neogrammarian / late eighteenth-century approach to language:

- 'langue' defined as a social product (de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 30)
- language is independent of writing (de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 45 & 193-4)
- impossibility to define boundaries between languages and between language and dialect (de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 275-80)
- language cannot mirror the mentality or the intellect of a people (de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 310-2)
- language is shaped by its history (de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 128 & 246-50)
- no absolute relation between 'a language' and 'a nation'
- internal variation within one language
- nations can be multilingual (last three items: de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 265-9)

But:

- (17) Les faits dont il a été question dans ce chapitre sont si fréquents qu'ils pourraient passer pour un facteur normal dans l'histoire de langues. Cependant nous ferons ici abstraction de tout ce qui trouble la vue de la diversité géographique naturelle, pour considérer le phénomène primordial, en dehors de toute importation de langue étrangère et de toute formation d'une langue littéraire. Cette simplification schématique semble faire tort à la réalité ; mais le fait naturel doit être d'abord étudié en lui-même.
- The facts that we looked at in this chapter [the variability and heterogeneity of language] are so frequent that they can be taken as a normal characteristic of the history of languages. Yet, we will abstract away from all the natural geographic diversity which troubles the view, in order to look at the essential phenomenon, ignoring language contact and the formation of a written language. This schematic simplification doesn't seem to do justice to the reality, but the natural matter-of-fact must be viewed in its own right.

DE SAUSSURE 1916 [1972]: 269.

4.2 Political context

World War I

- nationalist movements had turned into hostile antagonisms
- breakdown of Germany-based scholarly traditions

5 THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: ...AND BACK TO ESSENTIALISM

All post-Saussurean theories about language have been designed to describe, model and "explain" language(s) as conceived of as essentialist entities. Change and variation have always been added to an existing framework *after* the framework as such has been established.

- (19) ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatical irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.
- CHOMSKY 1965: 3.
- (20) A single unified speech community for Proto-Germanic is relatively certain because of the single phonological system underlying the attested Germanic dialects.
- LEHMANN 1968: 3.

6 CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

What is the heuristic value of separating a so-called "diachronic" from a so-called "synchronic" perspective?

Is 'language' anything else beside speaking?

→ If yes, how would we have to define it?

Is there 'a system' that is separate from usage / speaking?

→ If yes, how did it come about?

What is 'a language'?

→ How do we distinguish one language from another *on linguistic grounds*?

REFERENCES

- Benedict Anderson. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Michael Billig. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE.
- Franz Bopp. 1816. *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache: Nebst Episoden des Ramajan und Mahabharat in genauen metrischen Uebersetzungen aus dem Originaltexte und einigen Abschnitten aus den Veda's*. Herausgegeben und mit Vorerinnerungen begleitet von K. J. Windischmann. Frankfurt/M: Andräi.
- Franz Bopp. 1820. Analytical Comparison of the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Teutonic Languages, shewing the original identity of their grammatical structure. *Annals of Oriental Literature* 1: 1-65.
- Noam Chomsky. 1965. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press.
- Jacob Grimm. 1851 [1858]. *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*. Vierte und unveränderte Auflage. Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin: Philologische und historische Abhandlungen
- Johann Gottfried Herder. 1772 [1966]. *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. Herausgegeben von Hans Dietrich Irmischer. Reclam Universalbibliothek 8729. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Wilhelm von Humboldt. 1810/11. Einleitung in das gesamte Sprachstudium. In: *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke*. Herausgegeben von Albert Leitzmann. Wilhelm von Humboldts gesammelte Schriften 7. 2. Berlin: Behr. 619-28.
- Wilhelm von Humboldt. 1836 [1907]. Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts. In: Albert Leitzmann ed. *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke*. Wilhelm von Humboldts gesammelte Schriften 7,1. 1. Berlin: Behr. 1-344.
- William Jones. 1788. The Third Anniversary Discourse Delivered 2d February, 1786. *Asiatick Researches: or Transactions of the Society, instituted in Bengal, for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature, of Asia* 1: 415-31.
- Winfred P. Lehmann. 1968. The Proto-Germanic words inherited from Proto-Indo-European which reflect the social and economic status of the speakers. *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung* 35: 1-25.
- Hermann Osthoff & Karl Brugmann. 1878. Vorwort. In: *Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen*. Von Hermann Osthoff und Karl Brugmann. Erster Theil. Leipzig: Hirzel. iii - xx.
- Hermann Paul. 1898. *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*. Dritte Auflage. Halle/S.: Niemeyer.
- Ferdinand de Saussure. 1916 [1972]. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Publié par Charles Bally et Albert Sechehaye. Avec la collaboration de Albert Riedlinger. Édition critique préparée par Tullio de Mauro. Payothèque. Paris: Payot.
- Friedrich Schlegel. 1808. *Ueber die Weisheit der Indier: Ein Beitrag zur Begründung der Alterthumskunde nebst metrischen Uebersetzungen indischer Gedichte*. Heidelberg: Mohr & Zimmer.
- Johannes Schmidt. 1872. *Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse der indogermanischen Sprachen*. [reprinted in Cambridge Library Collection]. Weimar: Böhlau.
- Hugo Schuchardt. 1885. *Ueber die Lautgesetze: Gegen die Junggrammatiker*. [reprinted in Cambridge Library Collection]. Berlin: Oppenheim.