



On How to Attain a Synchronic Stage

Ferdinand von Mengden



Two entirely different routes

Two entirely different routes

(1)

»Only few linguists will dispute that the interference of the factor time is apt to create particular difficulties for linguistics and that it confronts their discipline with two entirely different routes.«

de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 114

Two entirely different routes

(2)

»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 [*langue*] is a system of mere values which are determined by nothing but the momentary stage of its members.«

de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 115-6; underline FvM



Two entirely different routes

(3)

«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.»

de Saussure 1916 [1972]: 140.

Two entirely different routes

Theoretical consequences

Distinction between “synchronic linguistics” and “diachronic linguistics”

Postulate of an ontological difference between system (“langue”) and usage (“parole”)

Two entirely different routes

Essentialism

An entity / a phenomenon is defined by fixed and unalterable properties.

- ▶ Change and variation is epiphenomenal.
- ▶ Categorizations are inherent to the phenomenon.

Two entirely different routes

Emergentism

An entity / a phenomenon is defined as inherently variable

- ▶ Internal and external boundaries are fluid
- ▶ Change and variation are inherent properties
- ▶ Categorizations are analytical tools, i.e. heuristic approximations, but they are not inherent properties.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Origin of language

Johann Gottfried Herder

- ▶ Language not created by god, but develops along with human civilization

Wilhelm von Humboldt

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

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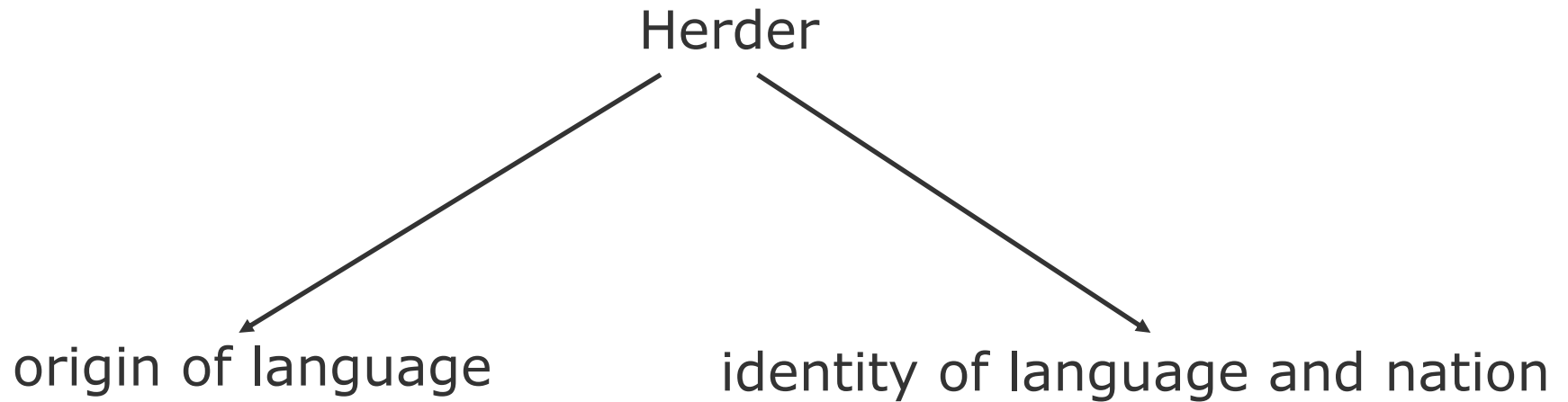
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«Just as humankind as a whole could not remain one flock, it could also not retain one language. Therefore, different national languages emerge.»

Herder 1772 [1966]: 104.

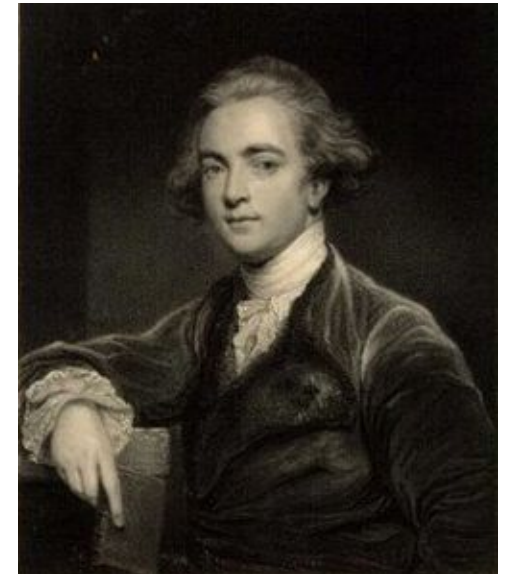


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Sir William Jones

1746 – 1794



William Jones. 1786. *The Sanscrit Language*.

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Discovery of language families

William Jones

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

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(5)

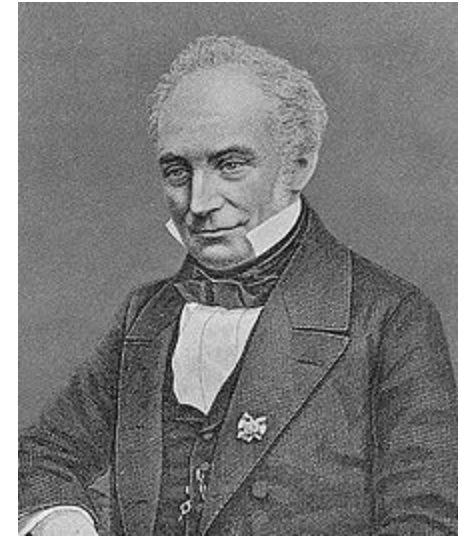
«The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could 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.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Franz Bopp

1791 – 1867



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: Andrä.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Discovery of language families

Franz Bopp

- ▶ All Indo-European languages go back to one common, yet unknown ancestor (proto-language)
- ▶ Revised concept of 'original language' ('Ursprache'; proto-language)

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(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.»

Bopp 1820: 2.



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Regular correspondences

Skrt. <i>devah</i>	– Lat. <i>deus</i>	– Gr. <i>théos</i>	– Engl. <i>Tues(-day)</i>
Skrt. <i>pāda</i>	– Lat. <i>pes, ped-</i>	– Gr. <i>poús, pod-</i>	– Engl. <i>foot</i>
Skrt. <i>maha</i>	– Lat. <i>maximus</i>	– Gr. <i>mégas</i>	– Engl. <i>more</i>
Skrt. <i>viduvah</i>	– Lat. <i>vidua</i>		– Engl. <i>widow</i>
Skrt. <i>pitár</i>	– Lat. <i>pater</i>	– Gr. <i>patér</i>	– Engl. <i>father</i>
Skrt. <i>asti</i>	– Lat. <i>est</i>	– Gr. <i>estí</i>	– Engl. <i>is; Hd. ist</i>

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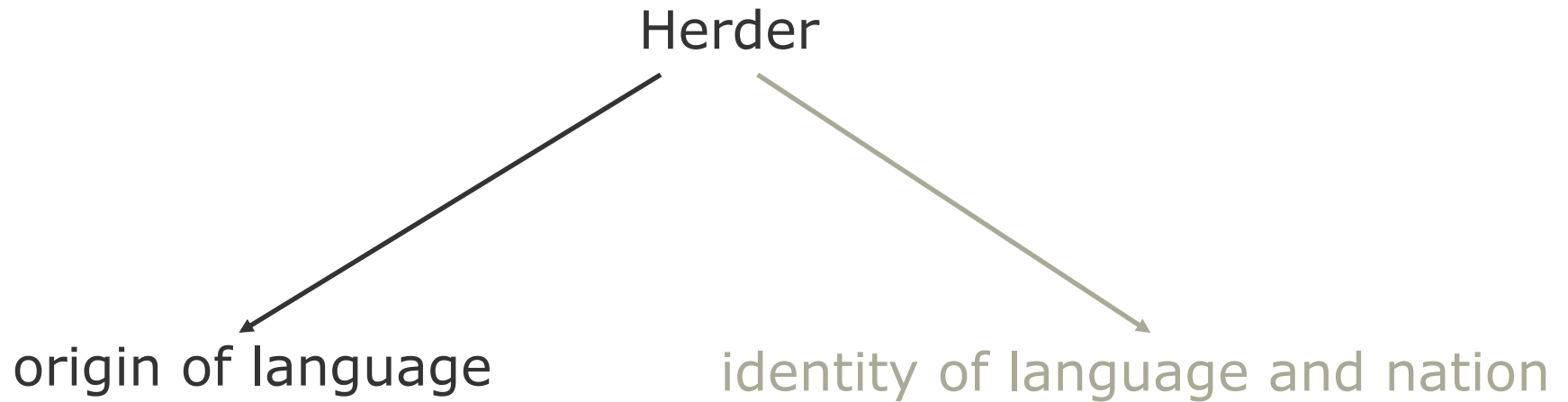
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«We might farther conclude that a nation, possessing a language so polished in so early a period, where we are altogether abandoned by the light of history, must be able to boast of a very ancient literature [...].»

Bopp 1820: 3.

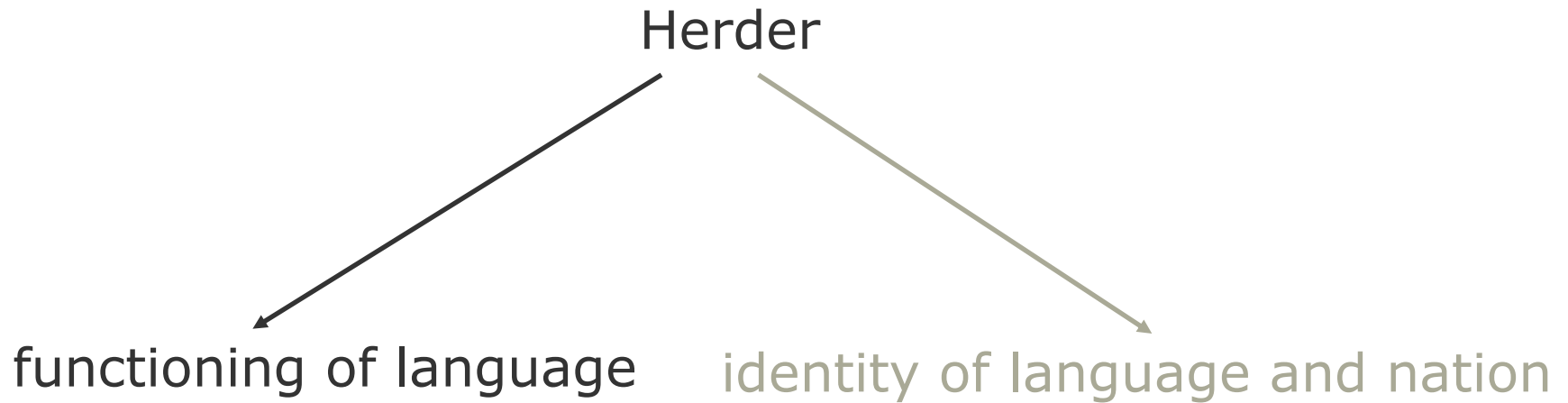


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Nineteenth-century linguistics



Nineteenth-century linguistics

Johannes Schmidt

- ▶ no language boundaries in pre-historic times



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(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.»

Schmidt 1872: 27-8.

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(9)

«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.»

Schmidt 1872: 28.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Orientation towards vernacular practices

Neogrammarian manifesto (Osthoff & Brugmann)

- ▶ ancient languages must follow the same principles as present-day vernaculars do
- ▶ dialectics of sound change and analogy (physiological and psychological activities)
- ▶ focus on the individual speaker (rather than on the language)



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Hermann Paul

- ▶ only a historical approach has explanatory value

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(10)

«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.»

Paul 1886: 19-20.

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Orientation towards vernacular practices

Hugo Schuchardt

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

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(11)

«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.»

Schuchardt 1885: 16.

Nineteenth-century linguistics

Development of nineteenth-century linguistics

away from 'language' as an essentialistically perceived property of a nation

away from Classical languages as a model for linguistic analysis

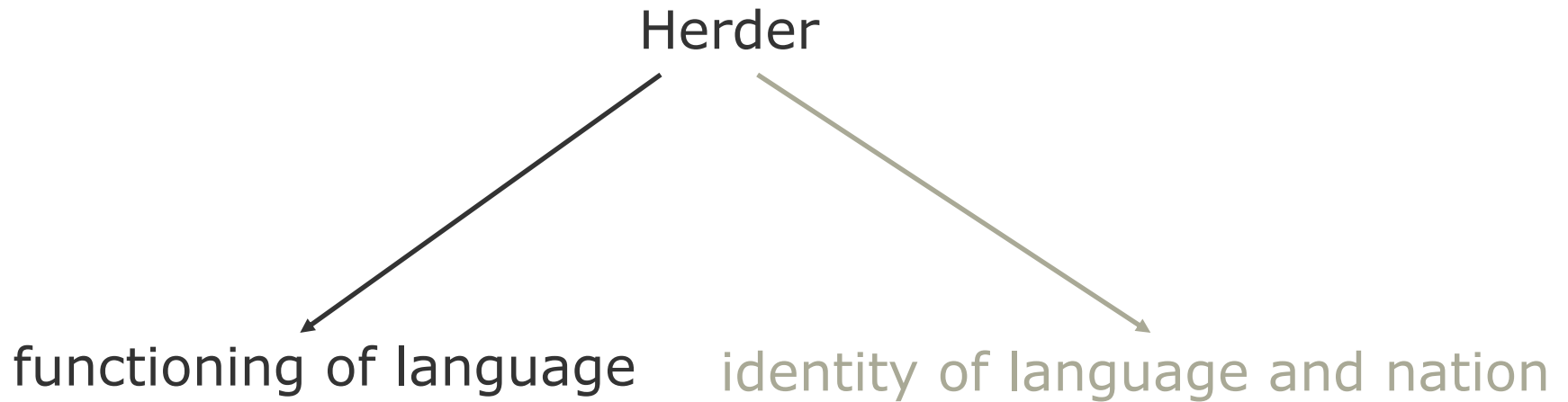
→ toward a focus on vernacular practices

away from literary forms of language as model

→ focus on individual speaker

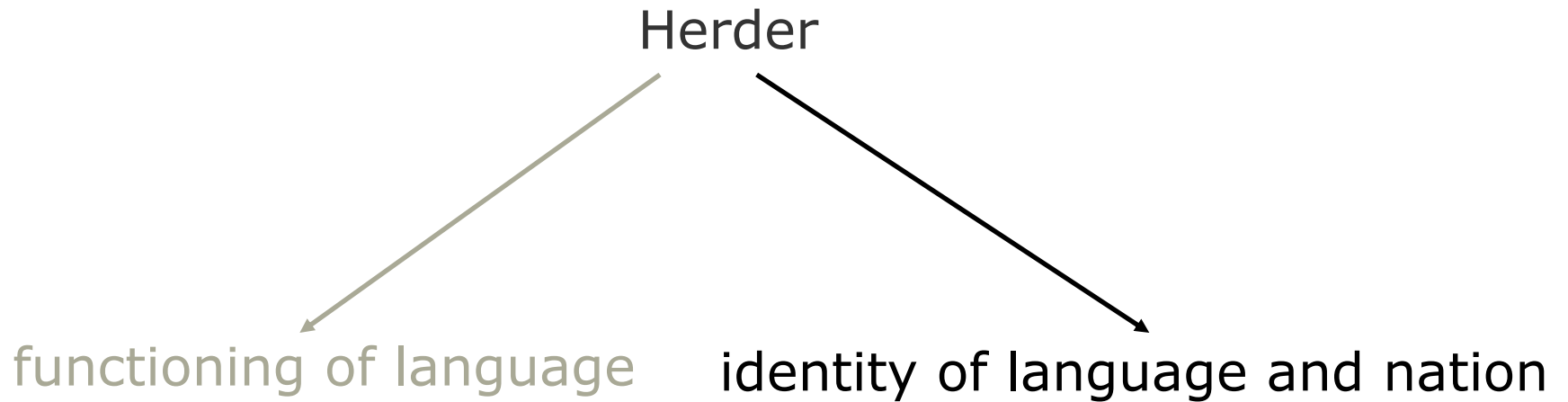


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Nineteenth-century linguistics





Language and the formation of European nations

Language and nation

(5)

«Just as humankind as a whole could not remain one flock, it could also not retain one language. Therefore, different national languages emerge.»

Herder 1772 [1966]: 104.

Wilhelm von Humboldt

1767 – 1735



Language and nation

(12)

«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.»

Humboldt 1836 [1907]: 42.

Language and nation

(13)

«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 [...].»

Humboldt 1968, GS 4: 432f .

Language and nation

Language is the mirror of a nation's mentality

Wilhelm von Humboldt

- ▶ Differences in the degree of civilisation across the nations.
- ▶ The mentality of a nation corresponds with the complexity of its language.
- ▶ Synthetic languages are the most developed.

Language and nation

(14)

«We have created Italy. It still remains to create Italians.»

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

Language and nation

(15)

However, «[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.

19. Jahrhundert

Jakob Grimm

1785 – 1863



Grimm, Jacob. 1819. *Deutsche Grammatik*. Erster Teil. Göttingen: Dieterich.

Language and nation

(16)

«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.»

Grimm 1851: 50.



Language and nation

Jacob Grimm

- ▶ Loss of inflection means increase in vigour and strength
- ▶ The English language rules the world just as the English nation does.
- ▶ A torn nation speaks a torn language (German).



The situation around 1916

1916

Historical context

World War I

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

1916

Once again the *Cours*

- ▶ 'langue' defined as a social product
- ▶ language is independent of writing
- ▶ no boundaries between languages or between language and dialect
- ▶ language cannot mirror the mentality of a people
- ▶ language is shaped by its history
- ▶ no absolute relation between 'a language' and 'a nation'
- ▶ internal variation within one language
- ▶ nations can be multilingual

but...

Once again the *Cours*

(18)

«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: 114



The twentieth century: and back to essentialism

Back to essentialism

How to attain a synchronic stage?

Back to essentialism

(18)

«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.

Back to essentialism

(19)

«A single unified speech community for Proto-Germanic is relatively certain because of the single phonological system underlying the attested Germanic dialects.»

Lehmann 1968: 4.



Concluding questions

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*?



Thank you very much

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