

# Franz Bopp and Wilhelm von Humboldt

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# A breakpoint in the history of linguistics

- The arrival of Franz Bopp on the linguistic scene is often seen as an important breakpoint in the history of linguistics
- There are roughly two parties, still more or less visible in the Leiden context:
  - Comparative (historical) linguists, who tend to see Bopp as one of the most important founders of linguistics as a serious discipline
  - General linguists, who tend to see Bopp as somebody who led away linguistics from its Cartesian path
- However, many historians nowadays point out that also Bopp was inspired by Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers

# Franz Bopp (1791-1867)

- Born in Mainz, 1791, from parents who were born
- He became interested in Indian culture and Sanskrit at an early age, through his teacher(s)
- Studied Arabic and Persian in Paris (Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache, 1816)
- Moved to Berlin in 1821, invited by Humboldt
- Main work: *Vergleichende Grammatik* (Comparative grammar)

# Franz Bopp (1791-1867)

- Bopp was a professor of 'general linguistics' and of 'Asian culture'
- He wrote a grammar and a textbook of Sanskrit, and translated many texts
- He knew Pāṇini and other classical Indian grammarians, although he may not have appreciated them fully

## The birth of Indo-European: Jones

*The Sanskrit 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 similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia.*

(William Jones (1746-1794), 'On the Hindus', 1786)

# The Oriental Renaissance

- Europe (in particular Germany) rediscovered 'the East' in the 19th Century
- People were fascinated by an image of the east that was mystical, irrational, etc. (All of this is no longer believed, although it has played a role in Western culture for a long time.)
- Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, Avesta, and Shakuntala were all translated into German
- India was seen as "the cradle of all culture"

# Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829)

- According to Schlegel, Indian culture was superior to Western culture, and its language was older
- We should study language comparison not just by looking at individual words, but by studying ‘the inner structure of the grammar or comparative grammar’
- “the regular simplicity of the Indian language in this structure is an very clear sign of its old age” (so grammars become more complex over time)
- Two types of languages:
  - ‘organic’ languages with flexion (Celtic, Indian)
  - ‘mechanical’ languages with particles (Chinese, ‘American’)
- The fact that Sanskrit was so old, meant that the origin of the Indo-Europeans could have been in India
- Schlegel called these people *aryan*.

# Language as an organism

- Schlegel saw 'organic' things as superior to 'mechanical' things
- Language was seen in the romantic age by some as an organism (Sanskrit was full of Blumenschmuck und Bilderfülle), by others (Humboldt) as an organ
- Much more than Schlegel, Bopp wanted to study Sanskrit *for its own sake*, separate from the Indian culture (he also was the first professor of 'general linguistics' ever)
- For him the metaphor of the organism was central, mostly in the sense of a developing organism
- Linguistics was a type of natural science, comparable to biology (also because there were no laws without exceptions)



# An organism is a unit and it has parts

- “Its parts[i.e. of language] are the members of an organism. To recognize its functions means to recognize their original significance.” (Comparative Grammar)
- “inner nature”: an organism has something which binds it together, as a unit
- For Bopp, Sanskrit was not the original Indo-European language, but it was the language that came closest to it
- The original Indo-European language was ‘perfect’, other languages were deteriorations of it
- Notice that once more we find the Platonic idea that behind imperfect variety we find universal beauty
- We find this reconstruction by comparing languages according to natural laws applying to their grammatical structure

# A more scientific approach

- An important difference between Bopp and Schlegel is that the former is much more clearly a *scientist*.
- For instance, he finds no evidence for the existence of ‘organic’ languages: flecion is always the result of agglutination
- “I am totally of the opinion, Dear Sir, that all languages have only little real flecion. At the moment, I only recognize two flecions in Sanskrit, viz. the root vowel and reduplication; everything else I take as compounding... F. Schlegel’s division of languages into organic and mechanic therefore has no ground, and I will try very hard to prove the opposite.” (Bopp to Humboldt)
- “You have proven completely that [the division between organic and mechanical languages] is a mistake which stems from incomplete language knowledge, as I have always believed.”

# Form - meaning relationships

- Most roots in 'older' Indo-European languages are monosyllabic
- Bopp believed that this is an indication that in the original language there was a 1:1 relationship between form (syllable) and meaning
- Three tasks: “alles verwandte zusammenfassende Beschreibung des Organismus der auf dem Titel genannten Sprachen, eine Erforschung ihrer physischen und mechanischen Gesetze, und des Ursprungs der die grammatischen Verhältnisse bezeichnenden Formen.” (i.e. (i) a description of all the individual languages and the picture of the language organism that emerges, (ii) research into the physical and mechanical laws that explain language change and (iii) a reconstruction of the original state of the language)

# A mechanical law influenced by natural science

- Gewichtsmechanismus der Personalendungen: longer vowels in the verbal root attract the ending more and therefore cause a shorter ending; lighter vowels admit for a longer ending.
- This explains how languages move away from the ideal 1:1 relationship
- (This is nowadays usually ascribed to stress.)

# Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)

- A member of the Prussian aristocracy, diplomat, official, etc. until his retirement in 1819. (He was also the architect of the modern university - the 'Humboldt model': research and teaching should go hand in hand)
- Brother of the explorer Alexander von Humboldt
- He wrote a study on the Kawi language on the island of Java, which was interesting because of its Sanskrit vocabulary mixed with Malayan grammar, and a book 'On the diversity of human language-structure and its influence on the mental development of mankind' which originally was intended as an introduction to the Kawi grammar.

# Some of Humboldt's questions

- Why do languages of different peoples manifest such regularly different structures?
- Why is a language with one type of structure spoken by the Delaware Indians and a language with a different type of structure by the Chinese?
- What effect does a language have on the ideas of the people who speak them

# Inner form and external form

*Now in language, insofar as it actually appears in man, two constitutive principles may be distinguished: the inner linguistic form (by which I understand, not a special power, but the entire mental capacity, as related to the formation, and use of language, and thus merely a tendency); and sound, insofar as it depends on the constitution of the organs, and is based on what has been handed down already.*

In Humboldt's view the historical comparative method was too much concerned with the mechanical *sound* part of language

# Activity or product

- Language is an activity (*energeia*), not a product (*ergon*)
- It is “the ever-repeated *mental labour* of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought [. . .] language proper lies in the act of its real production”
- At the same time, the sound-form of language is based on what has been handed down already; therefore ‘the mental activity which, as earlier explained, produces the expression of thought, is always directed at once upon something *given*; it is not purely creative, but a reshaping activity”.



# Original languages

- All languages were once created by their people/nation/race
- “Words well up freely from the breast, without necessity or intent, and there may well have been no wandering horde in any desert that did not already have its own songs. For man, as a species, is a singing creature, though the notes, in his case, are also coupled with thought.”
- Notice that this seems to no longer assume that thought is universal.
- “Language and intellectual endowment, in their constant interaction, admit of no separation, and even historical destinies may not be so independent of the inner nature of peoples and individuals, for all the connection is far from being evident to us on every point.”

# Creativity in language development

- the goal, therefore, of mankind's developing progress is always the fusion of what is produced independently from within with what is given from without

# Language and thought

*Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a union with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the idea become a concept.*

# Language and thought

*Subjective activity fashions an object in thought. For no class of presentations can be regarded as a purely receptive contemplation of a thing already present. [...] But language is indispensable for this. For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. Thus the presentation becomes transformed into real objectivity, without being deprived of subjectivity on that account. Only language can do this; and without this transformation [...] all true thinking is impossible.*

# Linguistic relativism

*The true synthesis springs from the inspirations known only to high and energetic power. In the imperfect one, this inspiration has been lacking; and a language so engendered likewise exerts a less inspiring power in its use. [...] The smaller mental power of the nation, which carries the blame for this deficiency, then evokes the same again, through the influence of a more imperfect language, in subsequent generations [...]*

# Linguistic universalism

*Since the natural disposition to language is universal in man, and everyone must possess the key to the understanding of all languages, it follows automatically that the form of all languages must be essentially the same, and always achieve the universal purpose. The difference can lie only in the means, and only within the limits permitted by attainment of the goal.*

# The ideal language

*a form must be disclosed, which of all those imaginable coincides the most with the aims of language, and we must be able to judge the merits and defects of existing languages by the degree to which they approximate to this one form.*

(Sanskrit is the closest to this ideal and Chinese the furthest away!)

# The ideal language

*If I have succeeded in depicting the method of inflection in all its completeness, how it alone imparts true inner fixity to the word for both mind and ear, and likewise separates with certainty the parts of the sentence, in keeping with the necessary ordering of thought, then there can be no doubt but that it harbours exclusively the sure principle of languagestructure. In that it takes every element of speech in its two-fold significance, its objective meaning and subjective relation to thought and language, and designates this duality in its relative weight by sound-forms appropriate thereto, it elevates the most primary essence of language, viz. articulation and symbolization to their highest degree.*

(Germanic and Romance languages would be very imperfect according to this criterion, but they have kept their inflecting ‘inner form’)