

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD AS APPLIED TO NON-INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

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It has been said from time to time that comparative linguistics as a scientific method does not exist outside the Indo-European languages. It is further not seldom announced that comparative study in the field of non-Indo-European languages requires a different method from the one adopted for Indo-European. Both views are equally wrong. It is, however, easy to see how they have originated.

Regardless of the fact that the comparative study of language on a scientific basis began with the Indo-European languages—in connection with the acquaintance with Sanskrit—we find ourselves in a particularly favourable situation when it comes to the historical-comparative study of these languages. For comparative linguistics is basically historical linguistics. Even apart from the great advantages offered by the discovery of Sanskrit as an Indo-European language we should probably have got just as far, sooner or later, by means of the historical study of, for instance, Latin and Greek. Through it we should have been able to trace the evolution of language and observe the regularity with which it takes place. The idea of the *sound law*—one of the most fundamental principles of comparative linguistics—would no longer have been far-fetched. Incidentally, the existence of a regular correspondence between the consonant sounds in related languages was observed by a Danish scholar quite independently of the results gained by Sanskrit philology and within quite a different field, viz. that of the Germanic languages.

Comparing the evolution of comparative linguistics in, for instance, Semitic and Finno-Ugric, we find that within the former branch linguistics has tended to take the form of philology, owing to the fact that the integrant languages are too closely related and too little altered in the course of time to stimulate the study of a historical evolution (in the same way the closely related Romance languages have proved to be more interesting from the philological than from the linguistic point of view). On the other hand, the languages of the Finno-Ugric stock are a little too distant from one another to serve as a basis for the establishment of a comparative linguistic science in the same sense as for the Indo-European languages, and this becomes still more noticeable as we proceed further east with a view to including Samoyed, Yukaghir, and perhaps some other languages.

Before the rise of comparative Indo-European linguistics, comparative linguistics consisted in the confrontation of usually isolated words, having a similar sound and meaning, in the most different languages, presumably under the impression that all languages went back to one form of human speech, shattered and split up at the time of the great 'confusion of languages' in Mesopotamia. It is quite surprising that still in our days there are linguists who

apply more or less the same kind of method as soon as the study of language *outside the Indo-European domain is concerned*.

The mistake referred to by way of introduction lies in the very conception of a comparative linguistic method. It is clear that if such a method is conceived quite mechanically (as involving for instance 'sound shifts', *ablaut*, *umlaut*, 'roots' and 'root determinatives', etc.) this method could hardly have any application anywhere else than in dealing with the Indo-European languages. But this precisely is not *the* comparative method. The comparative method, *as I understand it, is fundamentally a historical one: the study of the various linguistic forms as they occur in different periods and areas, independent of which stock or type of language they may belong to, and the tracing of a system in their evolution, whether similar to what we find in the Indo-European languages or not*. Comparative linguistics is 'comparative' in a secondary sense only. But a serious problem arises when we are concerned with non-Indo-European languages, for here we often find ourselves deprived of historical documents which might *throw light on the earlier phases of the language in question*. Or else, where such documents are at hand, they are just as likely as not to give evidence of no evolution whatsoever. In cases like these, we are, however, to some extent aided by a detailed analysis of the dialects of such a language—if they exist or are known to us—or even of related languages or dialects provided the affinities are close enough. The underlying principle in this case is to find among these related languages or dialects certain ones which have the signs of being archaizing and which, therefore, *may permissibly serve the purpose of supplying an earlier stage in the linguistic evolution*.

Too often we have to depend on the latter method—unfortunately, since there are pitfalls in this procedure. Generally—and this I know from what has been done in comparative linguistics in the field of the Amerindian languages—it is assumed that all forms which are supposed to be comparable, owing to their meaning, have to represent the regular evolution of *one* 'primitive' form. Every case in which the related languages or dialects diverge phonetically has to be projected on to the primitive form, even though the number of categories so obtained or examples representing the supposed phonetic evolution be extremely limited. The danger consists in thinking that the forms compared must needs have an identical origin. Even in Indo-European linguistics the same mistake has not seldom been made: I shall only mention that the English word 'head' (Anglo-Saxon *hēafod*) has not strictly speaking the same origin as Latin *caput*, although many scholars have tried to combine them by various manipulations of the source laws, and in order to compare and identify the Latin *ursus* or the Sanskrit *ṛkṣ* ('bear') with the Greek *árktos* (along with a very limited number of analogous words) a special sibilant has been reconstructed of which not a trace is directly perceivable in any of the Indo-European languages (similar objections are expressed in G. B. Milner's 'Notes on the Comparison of Two Languages

For exactly such reasons, I should seriously question the identity of, for instance, Javanese, etc. *wai* and Malay *ayer* 'water'.

How, then, are we to proceed in order to do comparative linguistic research in the circumstances described just now? I think the first condition is perhaps to investigate the languages—preferably such as are geographically or culturally contiguous¹—without any *a priori* notions as to their relationship; the relationship which might exist between them will then probably announce itself in the course of the research. It is perhaps not out of the way to point to the fact that the demonstration of *dissimilarities* between any two or more languages also falls within comparative linguistics. As a matter of fact, there is some danger in thinking that comparative linguistics is nothing but tracing words in different languages back to a common origin. 'Relationship' is a very vague term, but it certainly consists in something more than having a number of forms in common. The 'genetic' theory of relationship is concerned with one single phase of linguistic evolution: the mechanical one by which existing forms are gradually worn down, eventually to disappear. Were no other factors at work in linguistic evolution, it is imaginable that language as such would soon cease to exist.

An important aspect is relationship of structure. If we say that previous to the rise of comparative Indo-European linguistics comparative linguistics consisted in the study of isolated words and that the comparative Indo-European linguistic science from its very beginnings became concerned with comparative morphology rather than with comparative lexicology, we might perhaps anticipate comparative linguistics as applied in the field of non-Indo-European languages, at least in the initial stages, as a comparative study of structure. Since, however, structure has to do with 'form' and morphology is the study of linguistic forms, 'comparative structure' is in the first place comparative morphology *in a wider sense*.

Usually the analysis of structure is conceived synchronistically. If possible, however, 'comparative structure' ought to be viewed historically as well. For although it is often found that the main features of morphological structure change less in proportion than do the individual elements, yet there are cases in which we are able to perceive an evolution of the structure, whereby a possibility is furnished to sort out primitive elements from more recent ones. Linguistic patterns no doubt change. Of this we are easily convinced through observation of those Indo-European languages whose history is well known. The change of structure in a language has its greatest interest from the point of view of the *innovations* which are created in the process. The rôle played by innovation is an important factor in linguistic evolution and one which, unfortunately, has been rather neglected at all times. It is important not least because it carries with

¹ cf. G. B. Milner's 'Notes on the comparison of two languages', P. J. Honey and E. H. S. Simmonds' paper on Thai and Vietnamese, and H. L. Shorto's paper on Northern Mon-Khmer, with references to W. S. Allen and to Emeneau's definition of 'linguistic area'.

it the necessary assumption that a rather small part of any language represents elements which are really old. The indubitable fact that much in language depends on innovation is, however, not to be referred to structure only: it affects the individual concrete elements as well¹ and to an extent which may be more considerable than is usually suspected. Nothing, probably, comes from nothing but as soon as a change takes place we have in a sense something new, and since the actual evolution is not always perceived, I think we might accept the independent evolution of language as a reality in the same way as we have accepted its negative counterpart, or the changes due to the course of use.² By trying to sort out the more recent elements—to the extent that this is feasible—we should eventually arrive at an earlier form and possibly get an idea of the earlier structure as well.

¹ That is, elements within the range of 'system', to accept the terminology used by H. Shorto in his paper on Northern Mon-Khmer.

² I feel much tempted to quote here the final remark in H. L. Shorto's paper on Northern Mon-Khmer—in itself a quotation—'The important thing about an influence is not where it comes from but what it turns into'.