

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE AUSTRONESIAN LANGUAGES

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1. In the present state of linguistics one cannot begin comparative research without a critical examination of the concepts used in the different types of comparative studies which have been developed in the past.

2. In the Indo-European field the aims of linguistic comparison have become more and more modest. Language comparison in this field started in the nineteenth century with the aim of wholesale reconstruction of the so-called parent language. After Schleicher this aim was more or less tacitly abandoned. Most comparatists in this field will now agree that all that can be done is the setting up of series of formulae by which one can account in a simple way for the existing divergence of a certain number of lexical items belonging to various languages and more intuitively collected on the basis of formal and semantic similarities. The merits of the historical-comparative method as applied in this particular field seem to be threefold : (1) a relative chronology between a group of languages can be established ; (2) a historically justifiable grouping of these languages can be effected ; (3) an insight into the working of the process of divergence can be gained.

The comparative method has been developed in a period of the history of linguistics when general linguistics was still in its infancy, that is, when the knowledge of the phenomenon of language in general was still extremely restricted and such concepts as ' relationship ', ' historical development ', etc., were handled without much critical sense and were often considered as being self-evident. The terminology of the comparative method was of a crude, heavily metaphorical type, which gave rise to many misunderstandings and unwarranted simplifications. In order to be able to evaluate this method and to determine its usefulness in other language areas, it is necessary to keep in mind the following facts :

(i) The classical comparative method does not deal with languages taken as a whole but with a rather small number of lexical elements.

(ii) The whole set of reconstructed forms bears no resemblance to a real language. There exists an essential difference between the Proto-Indo-European language as it must have been spoken in a distant past and the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European of the comparativists.

(iii) The process of language-divergence is a process which may take place under certain conditions, but which may be absent in other circumstances. The process is only one amongst other possible historical linguistic processes.

(iv) The results of the classical historical-comparative method depend on an exceptionally rich amount of extra-linguistic, historical information available.

3. Beside the genetic type of linguistic comparison there has existed since the early nineteenth century another way of comparing languages. The va

typological classifications proposed from von Schlegel onwards, however, suffered from a lack of method and were vitiated by the very superficial knowledge of languages outside the Indo-European area. Moreover, in setting up classifications one used to pay attention only to certain formal aspects of the morphology of the languages involved.

As Jakobson rightly observed in his report at the Oslo congress, typological studies imply the descriptive technique. In view of the progress descriptive and general linguistics have recently made, linguistic science is now in a much better position to deal with the problems raised by typology. Typological studies seem to be a natural enlargement and expansion of modern monolingual research and one may expect that from such studies insight into historical development may be gained too. As language typology can only be carried out satisfactorily if there is similarity in descriptive techniques, it will be necessary to reach a certain minimum of agreement on, or at least a mutual understanding of, the techniques used. Perhaps it is possible to establish a kind of 'translatability' between the various descriptive approaches. It goes without saying that language typology has to be freed from its exclusive preoccupation with morphology in its formal aspect. What is needed is a consistent comparison of linguistic sub-systems (sound system, morphonology, morphology, syntax, intonational system).

4. A survey of the different types of language comparison available at this moment ought to make mention of the glottochronological or lexico-statistical method introduced into linguistics by Swadesh about ten years ago and already applied to Austronesian language data by Elbert and Dyen. It seems difficult at this stage to pass a definitive verdict on the value of this method. Nevertheless it seems certain that if it has a value, this value will be extremely limited. Being by its very nature of a low degree of accuracy, lexico-statistics will only be able to furnish us with an indication of the direction in which it seems profitable to undertake structural comparative research. The danger of glottochronology and lexico-statistics is that it is a method easy to apply. One does not need to become familiar with a great number of intricate linguistic phenomena and in a very short time one may become a specialist in comparing word-lists of practically unknown languages. Therefore it is necessary to stress the fact that lexico-statistical conclusions have always to be followed up by precise comparative research based on a sound knowledge of the structure of the languages involved.

5. In order to be able to decide how comparative studies of the Oceanic languages may best be furthered, it is necessary to survey the Austronesian linguistic scene. Characteristic features seem to be (1) that the number of languages spoken in this area is high, (2) that the size of the speech communities is on the whole small, some communities in Java (Javanese \pm 40 million, Sundanese \pm 15 million speakers) excepted, (3) that historical data are scarce (notable exceptions being Javanese and Malay), (4) that in many areas there must have been and probably still is a lot of migration, (5) that there is in many areas a considerable

amount of bilingualism, (6) that owing to the development of national languages the language situation is changing rapidly.

As to our knowledge of the Oceanic languages, this is quite uneven. Some languages, as for instance Bare'e, Mori, Roti, Toba Batak, Tagalog, possess a considerable amount of data, of others we know hardly anything. The situation is certainly not improved by the fact that widely divergent methods are used. Compare, for instance, Bloomfield's description of Tagalog phonology and morphology with Jonker's awkward attempts to furnish us with a picture of the languages of Roti and Bima or with the detailed and much clearer descriptions of Bare'e and Mori by Adriani and Esser. Most descriptions are antiquated, modern descriptive techniques being but rarely applied (a notable exception being Robins' studies of Sundanese). On the whole our descriptive knowledge of Indonesian languages is much more extensive than that of the three other areas (Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia).

In addition some modest beginnings have been made with applying the historical-comparative method to Austronesian data (van der Tuuk, Brandstetter, Kern, and Codrington in the nineteenth century, followed by Schmidt, Thalbitzer, Ray, Brandstetter, Dempwolff, and Dyen), without much insight, however, into the limitations of this method or the fundamental differences between the language situation in this area and the unique Indo-European language conditions. Moreover, these comparative studies were characterized by a certain bias towards Indonesian languages, while sometimes too much value was attached to the well-known geographical distinction into four areas mentioned above. This distinction may be said to have had a retarding influence on the development of a comparative study based on purely linguistic criteria.

6. From existing methods of comparative study on the one hand and the *language situation in the Pacific area on the other, one may conclude that* supposing that co-ordination of our linguistic effort is feasible—the best procedure seems to be (1) to intensify the descriptive effort on those languages about which information is particularly needed; this can only be done satisfactorily in the field, by well-trained linguists; (2) to try to find out to what extent it is possible to cull from the more or less antiquated but extensive and detailed grammars and dictionaries we possess, descriptions which satisfy modern requirements; this does not need to be done on the spot, but may be undertaken in those places where there are enough library facilities; (3) to reach a certain amount of agreement on the descriptive techniques to be used in future descriptions and in restatements of older descriptions; (4) to start typological comparative studies for those languages or, better, for those sub-systems of which sufficient knowledge is deemed available. From the point of view of linguistics it is in my opinion preferable to postpone further comparative work of the traditional genetic type, in favour of typological comparative studies combined with intensification and further refinement of the descriptive effort.

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