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Language and Its History

IN THE YEAR 1812 a young German named Franz Bopp—he was twenty-one at the time—traveled to Paris to read Oriental languages. He stayed for four years, serenely unconcerned with the Napoleonic wars; his biographer Windischmann wrote,

In these labors he did not let himself be disturbed by the storms of the times; with every change in things he stayed peacefully in Paris, always cheerful and hard at work, and doubly happy to be visited by German friends.[1]

The appearance, in 1816, of his book *On the Conjugation System of Sanskrit, Compared with That of the Greek, Latin, Persian, and Germanic Languages,* marks the birth of the comparative method. Bopp was not the first to discover that Sanskrit was related to these other languages, the family we now term Indo-European (the English orientalist Sir William Jones made that discovery in 1786), but he was the first to establish comparison on a systematic basis as an autonomous science to explain the forms of one language by those of another.

The comparative method is not very complicated. Certain languages have similarities which are so numerous and so precise that they cannot be attributed to chance, to contact (borrowing), or to linguistic universals. The comparatist's hypothesis is that these resemblances among languages must be the result of their development from a common original language no longer spoken. The similarities are said to be *genetic* in character, and the languages are spoken of as *related*.

The same method is perfectly applicable to domains other than that of language. Though the term "comparative law" in jurisprudence normally refers to purely typological comparisons, it can also refer to genetic comparisons. A historian of Roman law, Leopold Wenger, has written that

Any comparison of legal institutions [in different societies], when it is able to establish identities or similarities, must attempt to give account for the causes of such phenomena. Three primary possibilities come to mind: reception [borrowing], common provenience [inheritance], independent but similar creation of legal institutions [universality].[2]

Such a statement could be found in any linguistics textbook.

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It is doubtless the model of linguistics which has been extended to other disciplines, and the method has been more successful in language than in other areas of culture. For comparison is a discovery procedure, not a discipline. It establishes the similarities and equations which presuppose a common origin. But the critical part comes afterward: as Antoine Meillet has stated of these similarities, "It remains to interpret them in a systematic manner. That is the object of comparative historical linguistics."[3]

Wherever the comparative method is carried to a successful conclusion, it leads to the restoration of an original, "initial" language. That is to say, it leads to the postulation of the grammar and lexicon of a protolanguage: in the case of our own family, Proto- or Common Indo-European. This is what we mean by the term *reconstruction*. In spite of all the cautionary hedges that we may put up, a reconstruction *is* a real model, constructed to the best of our ability, of how we think certain people talked at a remote period before recorded history. It remains true, as Mary Haas has put it, that a reconstructed protolanguage is "a glorious artifact, one which is far more precious than anything an archaeologist can ever hope to unearth."[4]

We must not forget, of course, that the reconstruction, the postulated grammar which is arbitrarily considered the initial point in the historical linguistic process, is an artifact reflecting the contemporary state of intellectual development. As such, it is subject to change, just as all intellectual artifacts or scientific propositions are. Linguists are for some reason continually surprised, indeed shocked, by this. The great Irish philologist Osborn Bergin once remarked wryly that no language had changed so much in the last fifty years as Indo-European. One tends to forget that in the quarter century between the first printing of a reconstructed Indo-European word and 1878, when Saussure's *Mémoire* appeared, the face of Indo-European changed more profoundly than during almost a century from that day to this.

This mutability applies also to the model of the kinship relations obtaining among a set of languages, the configuration of the family tree, which may also be modified—like any scientific proposition—by new data. The Hittite language, dating from the second millennium B.C. and deciphered only during the First World War, differs in many respects from the traditionally reconstructed Indo-European. Certain scholars, who have a following even today, decided that Hittite was only laterally related to Indo-European, and that the two should constitute a new family called *Indo-Hittite*. But this means accepting the traditional—indeed rather old-fashioned—reconstruction of Indo-European as an immutable natural entity, which it is not. As Benveniste has said, "we must integrate Hittite into an Indo-European whose definition and internal relations will be transformed by this new contribution."[5]

A grammar of Indo-European must take account of certain realities.

Naturally, the first is that in dealing with an unattested reconstructed language, we must operate by inference and not by direct observation of speech or written texts. Consequently, a description of a reconstructed language is necessarily far from complete. One must have no illusions on this matter: even after 150 years of steady progress in the comparative method and in the establishment of Indo-European grammar, we are still incapable of reconstructing a single well-made Indo-European sentence of the most trivial complexity. Reconstructing sentences is, of course, not our aim, but to a lesser degree the same indeterminacy is to be found in most parts of Indo-European grammar.

The second reality is that the grammar of a reconstructed language cannot be *synchronic*. It cannot describe a whole linguistic system as it existed at any point in time. We can establish the relative chronology of individual reconstructed features of, for example, the grammar, but it is beyond our powers to associate the reconstructed features of the grammar with each other so as to form a picture of a total linguistic system as it might have existed at a specific time in prehistory. Indo-European, or any other reconstructed language, can refer only to sets of separate linguistic states in a temporal continuum, sequences which cannot with certainty be coordinated with one another.

The third reality is the most important. The reconstruction of Indo-European, the establishment, that is, of the grammar of that language to the best of our ability, is not our fundamental object, as it would be if we were writing a descriptive grammar of a known language. Rather, our ultimate aim is to write the linguistic history of known languages. We are seeking a historical explanation for the grammar of languages accessible to us by observation or from written texts. Reconstruction is only a tool, a means to the end of understanding linguistic history.

Even if we were, by some miracle, handed a complete grammar of Common Indo-European as spoken somewhere in, say, 4000 B.C. (the date is meaningless), the work of the Indo-Europeanist would scarcely be done. In fact, it would be barely begun. For his task would be, then as before, to relate the facts vouchsafed him to the facts of attested languages: to construct hypotheses, and to demonstrate precisely how it is possible, within a linguistic tradition or traditions, for a language to pass from one system at one point in time to another system at a later point. The position of the specialist in Romance languages offers a clear analogue.

But we are, in fact, not vouchsafed this Indo-European grammar, and must operate by inference from the attested languages to restore a common prototype, a prototype which serves only as a means to establish the history of these same attested languages. Thus historical linguistics and comparative grammar necessarily have a dialectic relationship.

Comparison is not, as Meillet thought, the only effective tool for illuminating linguistic history. Purely internal comparison, termed *internal*

reconstruction, in which the examination of synchronically alternating forms leads to historical statements, can be equally effective. We can explain the Latin *aes* "bronze," genitive *aeris*, and its adjectival derivative *aēnus* "brazen" on the basis of these forms alone. We can reconstruct the earlier form of the stem as the two syllable *aës-* with the adjectival suffix, *-nus*, and assume a set of phonological changes which are actually historical events: the earlier *aës* changed to *aes;* the earlier *aës-is* changed to the genitive *aeris*, and the earlier *aës-nus* changed to the three-syllable *aēnus*. An external comparison with the Sanskrit *ayas* "copper, bronze" would also tell us that a still earlier form of the word was *ayes-*, whence *aës-;* but it is the Latin evidence alone which discriminates the two vowels of the reconstruction, and the phonological changes we postulate are relevant only to the prehistory of Latin.

As Jerzy Kuryłowicz has stated: "Comparison is not an end in itself. It is one of the techniques which historical linguistics has at its disposal and which it makes use of for as long as it can be applied in a useful fashion."[6] As an alternative to the technique of straight comparison, the historical linguist may, and often must, formulate a hypothesis or reconstruction about a state of affairs in the parent or common language, and then control his hypothesis by reconstructing forward in time until he reaches historically attested documentation for the various languages of the family he is studying. The correctness of a hypothesis is proved precisely by its ability to predict—generate if you will—the correct output. Such a technique contrasts notably with the earlier view that the method of comparative historical linguistics was essentially retrospective, a working backwards in time. But *prospective reconstruction* is the only way we can hope to recover the internal dynamics of the process of change itself.

The term *prospective method* was used by Ferdinand de Saussure in a very different sense, to refer to the direct observation of *diachronic* change in a language by studying texts written at successive periods, a century or so apart. This exercise is valuable, but only in a limited way, for it reveals the results, the output of individual changes, but not the process of change. Only a dynamic, prospective model of the changes themselves can give a satisfactory account of the process; and the nature of such a model is still at issue. A historical sequence of texts is a series of outputs of successive *synchronic* grammars—grammars, in other words, which were complete at a particular point in time. The problem of the linguistic historian, however, is to determine how one grammar actually changes into a succeeding one.

It is to Ferdinand de Saussure that linguistics owes the concept of opposition between diachrony and synchrony in language, between the diachronic and the synchronic study of language. For Saussure there was an antinomy between the two, both as objects of study, and as branches of

study. He contrasted language as a synchronic state at a particular point in time, with language undergoing change as a diachronic process. He made a corresponding distinction between two kinds of linguistics:

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with the logical and psychological relations that bind together coexisting terms and form a system, as they are perceived by the same collective consciousness.
Diachronic linguistics, on the contrary, will study the relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the same collective consciousness, and which are substituted for each other without forming a system.[7]

A cornerstone of this antinomy was Saussure's assumption that only synchrony could constitute a system. He correlated this with his even more famous antinomy, placing a synchronic state of a language on the plane of *langue* ("language" and to some extent "competence"), and diachrony or language change on the plane of *parole* ("speech" and to some extent "performance"). Since for him the notion of system or "structure" (though Saussure never used the latter term) was a feature of *langue* but not of *parole,* his view[8] of diachronic linguistics as lacking system or "structure" was inevitable. For Saussure, following the nineteenth century view, saw language change as blind, fortuitous, isolated, and involuntary—something which could be studied only from outside the system it disrupted. He considered language change equivalent to a deterioration which obliged speakers at a later synchronic stage to reorder as best they could various *disiecta membra* to form a new synchronic system.

Yet with Saussure (as with his most illustrious pupil Antoine Meillet) one must balance his programmatic statements with his actual practice as a linguist. As we might expect, his rarely read doctoral dissertation of 1881, *On the Use of the Genitive Absolute in Sanskrit,* is the model of a rigorously synchronic study. It is concerned with the pure description of a feature of Sanskrit grammar of the classical period and accomplishes its task with rare precision. The work contains not a whisper of the diachronic, nor of the comparative.

It is instructive, however, to contrast this study with Saussure's first and greatest publication, the *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles en indo-européen,* which appeared in 1878 when Saussure was twenty-one. This contribution to Indo-European linguistics was destined to revolutionize the field, and to lay the foundation on which our notions of Indo-European grammar still rest today. The work is directed toward a problem which today would be regarded as diachronic or historical, namely the reconstruction of the Indo-European vowel system. The young Saussure, however, had already developed and refined the *classical structural* technique of linguistic analysis to a degree of perfection rarely equaled since. And in the *Mémoire* Saussure moves effortlessly and at will between the diachronic and the synchronic. The character of his demonstration and the relentless logic of his proof[9] is wholly structural, as he

proceeds systematically over what he called a "series of problems of phonology and morphology, some of which still await their solution, and most of which have not even been stated."[10] The result, however, is a set of rigorously synchronic statements—cast in the form of synchronically ordered rules, be it noted—about the protolanguage Indo-European. For Saussure, his task as historian was to free the ancient vowel system from "the modern humus which various accidents had heaped upon it."[11] Once so freed, the original system could be and was described as a synchronic fact.

The theoretical basis for the antinomy between synchrony and diachrony posed in the *Cours de linguistique,* published in 1916, three years after Saussure's death, was happily dispelled by Roman Jakobson in 1929, with the publication of his *Remarks on the Phonological Evolution of Russian Compared to That of the Other Slavic Languages.*[12] As Jakobson eloquently showed, language change is neither blind, nor fortuitous, nor isolated, nor involuntary. On the one hand, any destructive process or "deterioration" is followed by a creative reaction; on the other, the very existence of change—a necessary consequence of the fact that language must be learned anew by each succeeding generation—entails evolutive, teleological developments. The notion of *conspiracy* in current generative phonology, whereby unconnected rules in a grammar are said to *conspire* to produce a common effect, is only a manifestation (not always recognized) of this principle. Jakobson took the Saussurian image of synchronic language as a chess game in which the position of every piece on the board enters into a relation with every other piece, and brilliantly extended it to the diachronic plane. He saw the loss of a piece (or, with regard to language, a historical event) as provoking a series of displacements among other pieces to re-establish balance. He stated that

the theory of a historical process is only possible on the condition that the entity undergoing change be considered as a structure governed by internal laws, and not as a fortuitous agglomerate. . . . A theory of the diachrony of language is possible only if viewed as a problem of the changes of structure and the structure of changes.[13]

In his *Remarks* Jakobson went on to demonstrate in elegant fashion the correctness of his view of linguistic change on the level of phonology. He showed the systemic character of sound change and counterchange, and the complex interplay of a great variety of implicational relations of the type "if *a,* then *b*" and "if *c,* then not *d,*" whose very existence had not hitherto been suspected, and whose consequences have not to this day been fully explored.

It was understandable and indeed predictable that phonology, dealing with the sounds of language, would be the first aspect of linguistics submitted to the notion of structure in diachrony, just as the regularity of sound changes, the "exceptionlessness of sound laws," had become the

rallying cry of the Neogrammarian movement in the 1870's. It is necessary
to assert, however, that sound change is by no means the whole of
language change, and that other aspects of grammar also have internal
dynamics which profoundly influence the direction of changes within
them. Indeed, we have yet to see a theory of diachronic linguistics which
gives a full principled account of these dynamics and of their operation.

Consider an illustration. On the evidence of forms like the Sanskrit
syāt we can confidently reconstruct the Indo-European third person
singular, optative mood, of the verb "to be," as *siēt*. In Classical Latin the
third person singular form is *sit*, this time in the subjunctive mood. *Siēt*
becomes *sit* as the result of four successive changes: (1) final voiceless
stops become voiced; *-p -t -k* go to *-b -d -g*, thus *siēt* changes to *siēd*,
a form which happens to be documented in an inscription of the sixth
century B.C. *Secondary* endings originally used in past tense and non-
indicative moods (the third person singular was *-d*) were eliminated in
favor of *primary* endings originally used only in the present indicative
(the third person singular was *-t*). Thus *siēd* changed back to *siēt*. (3) Long
vowels were shortened before certain final consonants, including *-t* but not
-s; thus *siēt* changed to *siet*. (4) The anomaly (occurring here only in
Latin) of alternating forms of the modal suffix in this verb, *-iē-* in the
singular but *-ī-* in the plural (the Latin plural is *sīmus*), was eliminated,
and the short form *-ī-* used in the singular as well as in the plural. Thus
the second person singular *siēs* was replaced by *sīs,* and the third person
singular *siet* became *sit*, the Classical Latin form.

Diagrammatically, and in chronological order, here are the four suc-
cessive changes:

(1) *siēt* goes to *siēd*
(2) *siēd* is replaced by *siēt*
(3) *siēt* goes to *siet*
(4) *siet* is replaced by *sit*.

Only (1) and (3) are straight sound changes. (2) and (4) are basically
morphological changes or replacements. They illustrate the elimination
or realignment of morphological or morphophonemic categories, which
have a profound effect on the phonetic shape of the forms which
implement such categories. Equally profound is the change of the func-
tion of the form, *siēt*. In Indo-European, the form was in the optative
mood, a modal category opposed both to the indicative and to the sub-
junctive; whereas in Latin, by the time of the first sound change in our
series, the only modal category opposed to the indicative was the new
"subjunctive" which used the old optative forms. (The old subjunctive
had been utilized to form the future tense which Indo-European lacked.)
It must be granted that beside these sweeping changes, the role of
straightforward sound change, of changes in phonological rules, is rather

small. Of course, the understanding of sound change remains an in-
dispensable part of historical linguistics, but the importance of morphologi-
cal change, of change in grammatical categories, has been consistently
underestimated. Generative grammar, both synchronic and diachronic,
has failed as well to appreciate this aspect of the nature of language and
language change.

A profitable area of observation for the linguist concerned with the
internal dynamics of linguistic history is observable change. Recent in-
vestigations of "sound change in progress" by W. Labov[14] involve very
detailed observation of phonological variation within a speech community,
and correlation of the variants (which may be phonetically minute) with
styles of speech, or with social groups determined, for example, by class
or age. The approach is certainly promising, although clearly it can only
be used by trained linguists. Indeed, to assure effective coverage of a
speech community of any size, it probably requires a considerable team
of linguistic observers.

A more serious drawback, however, is the implicit assumption of the
study that sound change, phonetic or phonological, is the only kind of
language change, which it is not. Other vast areas of language change,
in lexicon and grammar, whose effects on the fabric of the language are
far more immediately observable than straight sound change, should show
up in the same sort of investigation. A little over a hundred years ago,
for example, cookbooks might give directions on how to "seethe" an egg;
it is certain that between then and now there was a period when both
"seethe" and "boil" were available as competing variants, with the choice
governed by a variety of doubtless quite subtle factors. This period was
followed ultimately by the total elimination of "seethe" in this context.
Nothing theoretical would lead us to suppose that similar variants could
not be observed in a fine-grained synchronic investigation, and correla-
tions with speech style and social class might indicate the direction of
future change.

It is to be hoped that in the future such studies will encompass a far
greater range of observation than those of the present, which are essentially
confined to phonology or to relatively surface-level morphological features.
There is no principled reason why, for example, changes in whole systems
of grammatical categories should not be equally observable. It would be
of great theoretical interest if we could observe the precise mechanism by
which a language loses a case system in its nouns, as did the Romance
languages, or reduces or gives up entirely the opposition of grammatical
genders, as did English, and Armenian in its prehistoric period.

In such synchronic investigations of language change in progress, what
is of greatest theoretical interest is not the fact of change but the manner
of change. We need much more precise information than we have about

the interplay of competing variants, alternate styles, and linguistic inter-action among the social groups differing, sometimes widely, in class, age, occupation, and cultural allegiance, which make up a speech community of any complexity. Such investigations, founded squarely on the nature of language as a social fact, would shed much light on the social factors in linguistic change.

A more traditional area of observable linguistic history within lin-guistic synchrony deals with the distinction between productive and nonproductive forms within a language at a particular time. *Productive* forms, or features, or rules, are those which can be freely extended to new words, or utilized to form new derivatives, while *nonproductive* ones cannot. As Jakobson has put it, productive forms are those which have a future. The English past suffix "-ed" ("televise" : "televised") is pro-ductive, while the past with vowel change ("take" : "took") is not. Pro-ductivity is frequently a sign of relative lateness. It follows that a catalogue of the "irregularities," the nonproductive forms of a language, is at the same time a catalogue of the most archaic features of that language and those which are most valuable as tokens of its past. As Meillet has said, "We reconstruct on the basis of the exceptions, not of the rules."[15] There is a real difference between the descriptive linguist, who looks first for the synchronic rules of greatest generality, and the historical linguist, for whom the synchronic rules of least generality are the most valuable as evidence.

The cases considered so far—language change in progress and the relative productivity of linguistic features—presume the presence of the linguist as an observer of "history in progress," of diachrony in synchrony. Scarcely a human society is to be found, however, where the speakers themselves are not fully aware of differences in speech habits between generations; the age correlate makes the appellation "old-fashioned" an obvious one. In fact, the notion that a language—as spoken by a human society, however small—forms a totally unified whole, a synchronic system at a particular point in time, is in fact an illusion, as has long been known. William Dwight Whitney recognized this when he wrote in 1867, "There are words, or meanings of words, no longer in familiar use, antiquated or obsolescent, which yet may not be denied a place in the present English tongue."[16] The speaker has active or passive control (linguistic competence) over a great range of equivalent features of grammar and lexicon of variable age; a great deal of discourse, particularly of affective content, plays on these different registers. Within a single synchronic state of a language, there can be genuinely old features in, for example, the speech habits of certain members of the older generations, or in non-standard dialects. But it is also possible for younger members of the so-ciety to mimic these older speech habits, and the reverse. *Homo loquens* is the original *homo ludens*.

The attitude of the speaker or listener, his perception and identification of these different registers, will frequently be more positive toward features which are mimicked than toward genuine vestigial remains of earlier speech habits in those to whom they are native. For example, most of us find it easier to recognize the stage-Irish dialect than many real Irish dialects. People are sensitive to what they have been culturally trained to recognize.

Such imitation or mimicry of older features of speech, which I will term *pseudo-archaism*, deserves more investigation than it habitually receives. For the descriptive linguist, the mimicked archaism is the only *real* archaism. A linguistic feature is archaic as a synchronic fact only if the speech community regards it as one. It is here that we find the psychological and cultural realities of the notion of linguistic archaism. Older speakers and speakers of dialect do not consider their speech archaic; to them, and thus to the descriptive linguist, it is still current. Speakers only consider their speech archaic if they are deliberately engaging in imitation or pseudo-archaism. The attitude of the speaker is the same toward what he perceives or imitates as archaic, whether he is basing his view on earlier texts, on the habits of older speakers, or on pure convention. For the descriptive linguist, pseudo-archaism is only one of the many styles, registers, or dialects that co-exist as components in the linguistic competence of individual members of a speech community. It is the duty of the linguist to record this as a fact of the language to be entered in an adequate description.

Yet for the historical linguist the pseudo-archaism is equally important. To him, or to the philologist or the scientific antiquarian, a diachronic vestige such as an old text, or a synchronic vestige such as a linguistic feature found only in speakers over seventy, is a primary piece of linguistic evidence, while mimicked older speech is, in some ways, rather an annoyance, something not to be trusted as evidence and apt to misguide. Nevertheless, although it does not, by definition, reflect a normal linguistic feature of the time it is observed and thus cannot be utilized, for example, in dating a text, it does, by definition, serve as an index of speech forms anterior to the time when it is observed. A speaker's intuition about the archaic is, by and large, correct. Pseudo-archaism in vocabulary or in grammar (phonology, morphology, or syntax) cannot give a valid total picture of the language at a given anterior period; in fact different pseudo-archaisms in a grammar may and usually do reflect linguistic features of widely differing ages. But it is rare that a pseudo-archaism does not directly or indirectly reflect a real fact about the language at an earlier—and sometimes considerably earlier—period. One may draw the wrong conclusion in a particular instance, but the general inference is virtually always right.

The formal mechanism of pseudo-archaism, at least in phonology,

consists in reversing a change: applying it backwards, so that the normal output (current usage) becomes the input, and vice-versa. Prehistoric Latin underwent a sound change (termed *rhotacism*) of the form $s \rightarrow r$ between vowels, with earlier *r*'s in the same position remaining intact. When Cicero wished to clothe the laws he proposed in his philosophical treatise *De legibus* with an aura of venerability appropriate to the legal style, he replaced certain intervocalic *r*'s by *s*'s, thus applying the change backwards: $s \leftarrow r$. In so doing, he may have wrongly changed some instances of *r* to *s* where the *r* had always been *r* and never *s* (it is still debatable whether he in fact did so). But despite the uncertainty with regard to particular words, one can correctly restore a general phonological rule regarding a historical change $s \rightarrow r$ between vowels on the basis of Cicero's conscious pseudo-archaism. As it happens, we know from other sources that the sound change took place between three and four hundred years before Cicero's time.

The rhotacism rule $s \rightarrow r$ in Latin illustrates the cultural role played by pseudo-archaism, and its cultural transmission. We can infer from scattered notices throughout Latinity that every educated Roman was aware of this change. It was part of Latin metalinguistic "folklore," and we find references to it as part of a continuous tradition down at least to the eighth century A.D., when it passed into the humanistic tradition through the writings of the lexicographer and antiquarian Paul the Deacon.

One should not make the mistake of equating the reversal of a *diachronic* phonological rule to create a pseudo-archaism (such as the reversal of the Latin rule $s \rightarrow r$ to $s \leftarrow r$), with the probable or possible simultaneous *synchronic* existence in the grammar of normal language of the same rule applied to different words. The psychological processes are different. The pseudo-archaism is clearly on a fully conscious level and reflects an awareness or preserved memory of the historical change as a historical event.

To take an example from English, we are told by Chomsky and Halle[17] that the group of sound changes known collectively as the Great Vowel Shift, which took place in the fifteenth century, are incorporated in essentially similar form as a set of synchronic rules in contemporary standard English, in such cases as "sūth" (pronounced "sooth") $\rightarrow$ "south." Yet no ordinary speaker of English can reverse these rules to produce an archaic-sounding form: from "mouse," for example, he would get "moose." Where contemporary variants still exist in their original form, when, in Anglo-Irish, "tea," for example, is pronounced to rhyme with day, they are quite correctly perceived by speakers as regional or social rather than archaic.

There is another aspect of the pseudo-archaism which has gone largely unnoticed by the linguist. Certain language changes are remembered, become part of the folklore, or perhaps of the mythology, of a language,

while others, once they have occurred, are soon forgotten. The rhotacism rule was remembered throughout Latinity. But the elimination of secondary endings in the subjunctive and certain past tenses in favor of primary endings (the third person singular -*d* became -*t*), which occurred at more or less the same time as the rhotacism change, was wholly forgotten. No trace of it whatsoever survives in the grammatical and glossatorial literary tradition which so faithfully preserved the memory of the rhotacism rule. Why should this be so? Consider the statement of Meillet:

For someone who proposes to study the Romance languages, the features of Latin which have disappeared without trace are of little importance. What is useful to him are the elements which have served to constitute the new forms taken by Latin.[18]

We may guess either that the language—the collectivity of its speakers, that is—in some sense "flees" what it perceives consciously as old, old-fashioned, or archaic; or else that the language moves by extrapolation in the direction indicated by what it preserves. The forward movement of language in time synchronically is *ex post facto*. Its anterior history may be of relevance or it may not. We have yet to determine whether the consciousness of the past of a language on the part of its speakers at a given point in time has any profound consequences on the direction of its future evolution.

It is tempting to suggest that this awareness of the past history in the present structure is a potent factor in explaining why, as Edward Sapir noted, languages have a "cut" to their jib.[19] Languages can maintain a characteristic personality for extraordinarily long periods. Irish is the oldest vernacular language of Western Europe, and this language, whose recorded history goes back some fourteen centuries, is a seamless garment. There have been changes, to be sure, and profound ones, but the essential uniqueness of the language, what differentiates it from other languages, has remained surprisingly intact over this whole period. It is a problem for the future to determine why this should be so.

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7. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 4th ed. (Paris: Payot, 1949), p. 140.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

9. The reader may grasp Saussure's own appreciation of this aspect of scholarship from the following excerpt from the draft of a letter to an unknown addressee (one suspects Meillet): "Je veux malgré cela résumer quel est pour moi l'exact état des preuves, car ce que je déteste chez tous les Germains comme Pedersen, c'est la manière subreptice d'amener la preuve, et de ne jamais la formuler, comme si la profondeur de leurs reflexions les dispensait de mettre à nu leur opération logique. Il y a là, en même temps, une impertinence sur le temps que ces messieurs croient devoir être consacré à chacun de leurs travaux qui dépasse toute limite et m'a toujours révolté."

10. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (1878; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), p. 1.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

12. Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings I* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), pp. 7-116.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110. Readers will recognize the rhetorical figure used by Jakobson thirty years later in his "Grammar of Poetry and Poetry of Grammar."

14. William Labov, "The Study of Language in Its Social Context," *Studium Generale*, XXIII (1970), 30-87.

15. Antoine Meillet, "Caractère secondaire du type thématique indo-européen," *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique*, XXXII (1931), 194-202.

16. William Dwight Whitney, *Language and the Study of Language* (1867; abridged reprint in *Whitney on Language*, ed. Michael Silverstein [Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971]), p. 13.

17. Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), *passim.*

18. Antoine Meillet, *La méthode comparative*, p. 15.

19. Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), p. 127.