



# Poly- or Decaglottism? On the Hierarchization of Languages in Nineteenth-Century Comparative Linguistics

Mircea Minică

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

The Sextil Puşcariu Institute of Linguistics and Literary History

Corresponding author email: mirceaminica@gmail.com

---

## Poly- or Decaglottism? On the Hierarchization of Languages in Nineteenth-Century Comparative Linguistics

**Abstract:** The starting point of this article is the ambivalence of Hugo Meltzl's position: while he establishes a broad principle of polyglottism for *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, he ultimately selects only ten working languages for the journal—specifically, ten European languages that he considers capable of producing major literatures. Building on this linguistic hierarchy, I aim to examine how historical and comparative linguistics in nineteenth-century Europe not only classified languages but also ranked them. I explore the criteria underpinning these hierarchies, the arguments used to justify them, as well as their occasional contestation and eventual abandonment in the latter half of the century with the rise of Neogrammarian approaches in linguistics. In the final section, I assess the extent to which the dominant linguistic hierarchies in historical and comparative linguistics remain relevant to the decaglot canon advocated by Meltzl.

**Keywords:** polyglottism, decaglottism, linguistic hierarchy, historical and comparative linguistics.

**Citation suggestion:** Minică, Mircea. "Poly- or Decaglottism? On the Hierarchization of Languages in Nineteenth-Century Comparative Linguistics." *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 41-54. <https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2025.5.04>.



In the programmatic statements accompanying the early issues of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Hugo Meltzl, the journal's chief editor, sets out the principles and directions he considers most appropriate for establishing the then-emerging discipline of comparative literature. Lamenting the fact that "every nation today insists on the strictest monoglottism, by considering its own language superior or even destined to rule supreme," a stance that, in his view, could lead only to a sterile "childish competition," Meltzl instead advocates for the principle of polyglottism—not only as an intrinsic value but also as an expression of the journal's equal interest in all literatures.<sup>1</sup> In the same 1877 statement, however, this ideal is tempered by a pragmatic consideration: "the limited space of our journal, of course, permits us only a limited realization of this principle."<sup>2</sup> One year later, as the ideal of polyglottism is effectively narrowed to a model of decaglottism, the motivations behind this decision seem to be not merely pragmatic but also shaped by a differential valuation of the literatures (and languages) in question. Alongside "the three great European languages, the German, French, and English," the journal was also to publish in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Icelandic, and Hungarian—languages that, according to Meltzl's estimation, had proven capable of producing "major" literatures, those "with truly world-literary characteristics"

---

1. "Statt aber dem Polyglottismus freies Spiel zu lassen und die goldnen Früchte dieses Spiels, welche docch nicht ausbleiben könnten, unbefangen der Zukunft anheimzustellen, sucht heutzutage jede polotische Nation den starrsten Monoglottismus geltend zu machen, indem jede ihre Sprache für die superiore, eder gar zur Allein-Herrschaft berufene hält: ein kindischer Wettlauf, aus welchem schliesslich das traurige Ergebniss folgt, dass jede – inferior bleibt." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* XV, October 15, 1877, 313; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Mbongiseni Buthelezi, and Natalie Melas (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009): 41–49, 46.

2. "Die beschränkten Baumverhältnisse unseres Blattes gestatten freilich nur beschränkte Verwirklichung dieses Prinzips," *Acta* 15, October 15, 1877, 308; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," 44.

and achieving a form of classicism in value.<sup>3</sup> However, the implicit hierarchy suggested by the binary opposition of major vs. minor literatures (and languages) is once again qualified in the same statement: "It is, however, self-explanatory that, despite this restriction to decaglottism, a comparative forum such as ours makes in principle allowance for every still minor literature, or every literature that is still counted as minor."<sup>4</sup>

The ambivalence of Meltzl's position, as it emerges from his programmatic texts, helps explain why some contemporary scholars have chosen to emphasize only the progressive and inclusive identity of the journal. For instance, Haun Saussy and David Damrosch et al. position *Acta Comparationis* and its chief editor at the forefront of efforts to overcome local nationalisms in favor of an egalitarian and transnational principle—one that sought to grant equal attention "to the world's folk poetry as well as to major literary masterpieces."<sup>5</sup> According to Saussy, the roots of this principle lie in the transfer of best practices from nineteenth-century historical and comparative linguistics into the field of comparative literature. In Saussy's interpretation, the comparative method and its results were fundamentally neutral, devoid of nationalist implications or identity-driven stakes: "the comparative method [...] if left to itself, had no respect for national frontiers. A consistent survey of the laws of phonetic drift and grammatical modification would lead to the conclusion that the Germanic, Romance, Celtic, Slavic, Persian, and Indic language-families [...] were at root forms of the same language [...] Linguistic or literary chauvinism is beyond the point when all roads lead to the shores of the Indus."<sup>6</sup> The key phrase in the argument above is probably "if left to itself." Indeed, in principle, the historical-comparative method was capable of producing scientifically valid and significant results regarding the comparison of languages and language families, as well as the partial reconstruction of long-lost proto-languages, without any subsequent value judgments attached to these findings. In reality, however—and this is precisely what this study aims to illustrate—this was rarely the case. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, and for the majority of scholars engaged in the study of language, the comparative approach was not simply "left to itself." Instead, the results of linguistic comparisons led to varying degrees of valorization and the establishment of hierarchies among languages and/or language families, with significant cultural, identity-related, and political implications.

The notion of prestige associated with a given language was by no means an invention of nineteenth-century linguistics. Long before that, European cultural discourse had already established a clear hierarchy of languages in terms of their religious and/or cultural prestige. This phenomenon is well documented, particularly with regard to the three sacred languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—which were for a long time considered superior to all others, with Hebrew being preeminent among them.<sup>7</sup> A similar dynamic can be observed in the gradual emergence of vernacular languages from under the dominance of an older cultural *lingua franca* in various regions of Europe. This latter process has been studied in detail in the case of French by Pascale Casanova, who reconstructs not only the trajectory of French "emancipation" from Latin but also the way in which it temporarily became Europe's quintessential language of culture, assuming the universalist role once held by Latin and engaging at various historical moments in a competition for prestige with Italian, English, and German.<sup>8</sup> Similar developments occurred in other parts of Europe. For instance, the rhetorical arguments promoting the (late) abandonment of Latin in favor of Hungarian in the Kingdom of Hungary bear striking similarities to the processes that had previously unfolded in Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> Even in Transylvania—an imperial periphery—the languages spoken in the region were engaged

3. "Dekaglott nennt der (als Extra-Beilage auch dieser Nr. beigegebene) Prospectus unser Litteraturblatt, weil es, u. E., gerade zehn *moderne Litteraturen mit wahrhaft weltlitterarischen Erscheinungen in Europa* giebt. u. zw.: neben den Litteraturen der 3 grossen europäischen Sprachen, der *deutschen, französischen und englischen*: die *italienische* (mit Dante u. Leopardi etc.); die *spanische* (mit Cervantes etc.); die *portugiesische* (mit Camoens); die *niederländische* (mit Reinaert de Vos); die *schwedische* (mit Tegnér); die *isländische* (mit der Edda) und schliesslich diejenige, welcher unser Litteraturblatt in allererster Linie angehört: die *magyarische* (mit Eötvös und Petőfi)." *Acta* 24, February 28, 1878, 494; Hugo Meltzl, "Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglottism," in Angus Nicholls, "Three Translations from the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: 'Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglottism'; 'Laws of Comparative Literary Research'; and 'Goethe's World Literature,'" *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 285–293, 286.

4. "Dass jedoch trotz dieser Beschränkung auf den Dekaglottismus ein vergl. Organ, wie das unsrige, jede noch so kleine, oder für noch so Mein geltende Litteratur principiell berücksichtigt versteht sich von selbst." *Acta* XXIV, February 28, 1878, 496; Hugo Meltzl, "Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglottism," in Nicholls, "Three Translations," 287.

5. Damrosch et al., *The Princeton Sourcebook* (2009), 42.

6. Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 3–42, 7.

7. George J. Metcalf, "The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), 233–257.

8. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

9. Henrik Hönich, "Which Language and Which Nation? Mother Tongue and Political Languages: Insights from a Pamphlet Published in 1790," in *Latin at the Crossroads of Identity: The Evolution of Linguistic Nationalism in the Kingdom of Hungary*, ed. Gábor Almási and Lav Šubaric (Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 35–64.



in a fierce competition for prestige and local cultural significance. On the one hand, in a 1790 article titled *Ueber die Lage und Hindernisse der Schriftstellerei in Siebenbürgen* [About the Status and Hindrances of Writing in Transylvania], the Lutheran bishop Daniel Neugeboren establishes a hierarchy of languages in the region based on their potential to serve as languages of culture and scholarship. In his assessment, Romanian occupies the lowest position, Hungarian an intermediate one, while German speakers have the greatest prospects for civilizational progress.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, many voices of the time strongly asserted the excellent potential of Hungarian to develop as a language of culture.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the representatives of the Transylvanian School based their political claims primarily on the prestige of the Romanian language, deriving from its Latin origins, which they reinforced with an Enlightenment-era confidence in the perfectibility of all languages—including the Romanian language's ability to become a vehicle for culture and science. These examples could easily be multiplied with reference to numerous other European languages. In encomiastic discourses, various authors sought to present their language in the most favorable light possible, aiming to secure for it—and for their linguistic community—a stronger position in the cultural prestige hierarchy, with the associated political advantages.<sup>12</sup>

### From the Historical-Comparative Method to the Hierarchization of Languages

What distinguishes nineteenth-century linguistics (with its roots in the preceding century) is the delineation—and often the hierarchization—of entire language families, grouped according to various taxonomies that emerged during this period. In principle, these classifications could be described as follows:

(a) *typological*—languages are distributed into families or classes based on their structural characteristics, using phonological, morphological, syntactic, and/or semantic criteria;

(b) *evolutionary*—languages are analyzed over long periods to document changes and derive general conclusions about linguistic development;

(c) *genealogical*—focus is placed on the origins and “genealogy” of languages, sometimes extending to considerations about the early history of the peoples who spoke them, including settlement patterns, social structures, and political formations.<sup>13</sup>

A key turning point that established “historical and comparative linguistics” as the dominant paradigm in the nineteenth century is generally considered to be the lecture given by the British orientalist Sir William Jones before the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786.<sup>14</sup> Sent to India as a judge at the Supreme Court of Bengal, Jones learned Sanskrit and observed its similarities to Latin and Greek. In his 1786 speech, he proposed that these affinities were too strong to be coincidental, suggesting that all three languages must have originated from a common but now lost source.<sup>15</sup> Later, in Paris, with the guidance of Alexander Hamilton, Friedrich von Schlegel studied Sanskrit and eventually came to regard it as the source language for what would soon be named the Indo-European family (often referred to as Indo-Germanic in German academic circles). In 1808, he published *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians], in which he argued that all languages could be classified morphologically into two broad categories: inflectional languages and those that rely on affixes. This binary classification was further developed by his brother, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, into a tripartite system: “les langues sans aucune structure grammaticale, les langues qui emploient des affixes, et les langues à inflexions [languages without grammatical structure, languages that use affixes, and inflectional languages].”<sup>16</sup> While

10. Apud Borbála Zsuzsanna Török, *Exploring Transylvania: Geographies of Knowledge and Entangled Histories in a Multiethnic Province, 1790–1918* (Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2015).

11. István Margócsy, “When Language Became Ideology: Hungary in the Eighteenth Century” in *Latin at the Crossroads of Identity*, 27–34.

12. For example, Maurice Olender frames the praise that Jan van Gorp bestows upon his native language, Flemish, as the very Adamic language—the original language of humanity; Maurice Olender *Languages of Paradise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Similarly, Tomasz Kamusella traces arguments used to advocate for the excellence of local vernaculars such as Czech, Polish, and Slovak, in the context of struggles for recognition or supremacy in Central Europe; Tomasz Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* (Chippenham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

13. Neville Edgar Collinge, “History of Comparative Linguistics,” in *Concise History of the Language Sciences from the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, eds. E. F. K. Koerner and R. E. Asher (Oxford: Pergamon, 1995), 203–212.

14. The phrase “historical and comparative linguistics” is often used as a standard term to designate the type of linguistics practiced in the nineteenth century. In principle, historical linguistics focuses on how a language evolves over time, while comparative linguistics examines either related languages to establish their genealogical relationships and reconstruct a proto-language or unrelated languages to develop typological classifications. In reality, many research endeavors combined historical and comparative approaches, making it difficult to clearly separate the two. As Collinge notes, “it is not easy in practice to distinguish ‘comparative’ from ‘historical’ linguistics.” Collinge, *Comparative Linguistics*, 195.

15. Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, translated by Sonia Wichmann (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

16. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençales* (Paris: La librairie grecque-latino-allemande, 1818), 14.

Wilhelm von Humboldt would later introduce the term “agglutinative” in place of “languages that use affixes,” and “languages without grammatical structure” would eventually be termed “isolating,” this classification remained the most widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

For neither of the Schlegel brothers was the proposed taxonomy purely descriptive or neutral in terms of value. Both wrote within the intellectual framework of Romanticism, which, in multiple ways, privileged the “organic” over the “mechanical.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of languages, the potential for organic growth and development—the only form of evolution deemed truly “authentic”—was, for the Schlegel brothers (and other early comparativists), a defining characteristic of the inflectional language family, namely Indo-European. By contrast, other language families were seen as increasingly susceptible to the sterility of mechanization. According to Friedrich von Schlegel, the superiority of the Indo-European language family over others stemmed from its inherent generative force, which allowed for optimal (= organic) linguistic development. In his view, this was only possible when all morphological modifications occurred within the root of a word:

“In the Indian and Greek languages each root is actually that which bears signification, and thus seems like a living and productive germ. Every modification of circumstance and degree being produced by internal changes; freer scope is thus given to its development, and its rich productiveness is in truth almost illimitable. Still, all words thus proceeding from the roots bear the stamp of affinity, all being connected in their simultaneous growth and development by community of origin. From this construction a language derives richness and fertility on the one hand, and on the other strength and durability. [...] Those languages, on the contrary, in which the declensions are formed by the supplementary particles, instead of inflections of the root, have no such bond of union: their roots present us with no living productive germ, but seem like an agglomeration of atoms, easily dispersed and scattered by every casual breath. They have no connexion beyond the purely mechanical adaptation of particles and affixes.”<sup>19</sup>

Equally explicit is the hierarchical arrangement of languages in August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s classification, which moves from isolating languages, through agglutinative ones, to the “perfection” of inflectional languages—the rationale being similar to that of his brother. First, he laments the limitations of isolating languages, which:

“n’ont qu’une seule espèce de mots, incapable de recevoir aucun développement ni aucune modification. On pourroit dire que tous les mots y sont des racines, mais de racines stériles qui ne produisent ni plantes ni arbres. [...] De telles langues doivent présenter de grands obstacles au développement des facultés intellectuelles; leur donner une culture littéraire ou scientifique quelconque, semble être un tour de force; et si la langue chinoise présente ce phénomène, peut-être n’a-t-il pu être réalisé qu’à l’aide d’une écriture syllabique très-artificiellement compliquée, et qui supplée en quelque façon à la pauvreté primitive du langage [They have only one type of word, incapable of any development or modification. One might say that all their words are roots, but sterile roots, from which neither grass nor trees can grow. [...] Such languages must present significant obstacles to the development of intellectual faculties; establishing any kind of literary or scientific culture in them seems an extraordinary feat. And if the Chinese language presents such a phenomenon, perhaps it could only be achieved through a highly artificial and complex syllabic writing system, which in some way compensates for the language’s original poverty].”<sup>20</sup>

Occupying an intermediate position, languages composed of formally stable roots with added affixes “peuvent avoir de certains avantages, malgré leurs imperfections [may have certain advantages despite their imperfections].” However, the family of inflectional languages stands at the apex of the hierarchy:

“Je pense, cependant, qu’il faut assigner le premier rang aux langues à inflexions. On pourroit les appeler les langues organiques, parce qu’elles renferment un principe vivant de développement et d’accroissement, et qu’elles ont seules, si je puis m’exprimer ainsi, une végétation abondante et féconde. Le merveilleux artifice de ces langues est, de former une immense variété des mots, et de marquer la liaison des idées que ces mots désignent, moyennant un assez petit nombre de syllabes qui, considérées séparément, n’ont point de signification, mai qui déterminent avec précision les sens du mot auquel elles sont jointes [I believe, however, that inflectional languages should be placed at the highest rank. We might call them organic languages because they contain a living principle of growth and expansion, and they

17. Joseph H. Greenberg, *Language Typology: A Historical and Analytic Overview* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

18. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); see also Olga Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought: The Development of Linguistics from Bopp to Saussure* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1987).

19. Quote and entire discussion in Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*, 39–40.

20. Schlegel, *Observations*, 14.



alone, if I may put it this way, possess an abundant and fertile vegetation. The marvelous ingenuity of these languages lies in their ability to form an immense variety of words and to indicate the connections between the ideas they express by means of a relatively small number of syllables which, when considered in isolation, have no meaning of their own but precisely determine the sense of the word to which they are attached].<sup>21</sup>

Neither of the Schlegel brothers was involved in the applied research required for “comparative grammar.” Their contemporary, however, Franz Bopp, was its true pioneer. Through his comparative analysis of multiple languages, Bopp corrected Friedrich von Schlegel’s hypothesis regarding Sanskrit in his work *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache* [On the System of Conjugation in Sanskrit, in Comparison with Those of Greek, Latin, Persian, and Germanic]. He demonstrated that Sanskrit was not the source language of the Indo-European family but merely one of its members. Considered above all a “technician,” whose research was largely empirical and applied, Bopp exemplifies what many scholars have noted about nineteenth-century linguistics—namely, that it “oscillates somewhat uneasily between technical work and theoretical discussion.”<sup>22</sup> The theoretical positions of linguists—whether rooted in philosophy or other intellectual traditions of the time—were not always aligned with the practical methodologies of linguistic research. As a result, by the end of the century, problematic theoretical assumptions were reevaluated and replaced when they conflicted with empirical findings. However, such revisions were not characteristic of the early generations of comparativists (a point extensively demonstrated throughout Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*, 1987). In his monumental work, *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Litthauischen, Altslawischen, Gotischen und Deutschen* [Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Old Slavic, Gothic, and German], Bopp challenged Friedrich von Schlegel’s understanding of inflection, disputing the reasoning behind his bipartite classification and proposing his own interpretation of inflection as well as an alternative classification of languages. However, despite its strongly empirical orientation—through detailed morphological comparisons of related languages to establish genealogical relationships—Bopp’s work did not lead to strictly neutral and descriptive conclusions, either regarding the purpose of linguistic research or in terms of language classification.

The theoretical assumptions that Bopp inherited from the European linguistic tradition influenced the way he conceptualized his approach.<sup>23</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, Bopp believed that the Indo-European languages had reached perfection in an earlier period, after which each of them underwent a continuous process of degradation and “self-forgetting.” In his view, none of the modern languages could even come close to the excellence of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Gothic. A deeper understanding of the relationships between these ancient languages also served an important identity-building and prestige-enhancing purpose, particularly for Germans. Through comparison with Sanskrit, the kinship of the Gothic language with Latin and Greek became clearly demonstrable. Bopp rhetorically asks: “What is more important, or can be more earnestly desired by the cultivator of the classical languages, than their comparison with our mother tongue in her oldest and most perfect form?”<sup>24</sup> Although the tripartite taxonomy of languages that Bopp proposed differed from the one generally accepted at the time, it did not diverge in terms of its evaluative undertones—the laurel crown still belonged to the Indo-European family:

“We here gladly award to the Sanskrit family of languages a great superiority over the Semitic, which we do not, however, find in the use of inflexions as syllables per se devoid of meaning, but in the copiousness of these grammatical additions, which are really significative, and connected with words used isolated; in the judicious, ingenious selection and application of them, and the accurate and acute defining of various relations, which hereby becomes possible; finally, in the beautiful adjustment of these additions to a harmonious whole, which bears the appearance of an organized body.”<sup>25</sup>

Far from being a mere technician like F. Bopp, Wilhelm von Humboldt engages in a complex reflection on the nature of language and individual languages, drawing (among other sources) on insights from comparative

---

21. Schlegel, *Observations*, 15.

22. Anna Morpurgo-Davies, “‘Organic’ and ‘Organism’ in Franz Bopp” in *Biological Metaphor and Cladistic Classification: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Henry M. Hoenigswald and Linda F. Wiener (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 81–108, 82.

23. W. Keith Percival, “Biological Analogy in the Study of Languages Before the Advent of Comparative Grammar” in *Biological Metaphor*, ed. Henry M. Hoenigswald and Linda F. Wiener (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987): 3–38, 24–25; see also Morpurgo-Davies, *Organic* (1987).

24. Franz Bopp, *A Comparative Grammar of the Sanscrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Gothic, German, and Slavonic Languages*, vol. I, translated by Edward B. Eastwick (London: Willims and Norgate, 1885), viii.

25. Bopp, *Comparative Grammar*, 103.

linguistics and deeply rooted in the philosophies of Kant, Herder, and Leibniz.<sup>26</sup> For Humboldt, every language should be viewed as an expression of the human spirit as a whole—"an involuntary emanation of the spirit, no work of nations but a gift fallen to them by their inner destiny." At the same time, however, he considers language from the perspective of how each speech community actively contributes to shaping its own language: "languages, for all that, must always have evolved with and by way of the burgeoning of peoples, must have been spun out of their mental individuality, which has imposed many restrictions on them."<sup>27</sup> Humboldt's argument—that each human group necessarily conceptualizes and represents the world through the terms of its own language, shaping and being shaped by it in a unique and unrepeatable way—has had an intellectual legacy extending far beyond the nineteenth century. This leads to the conclusion that every existing language at any given moment in time is a unique and irreplaceable entity, enabling a distinct way of understanding the world for a particular segment of humanity. However, this does not mean that all languages hold equal value. While the spirit (*der Geist*) that manifests within them drives all languages toward perfection, the degree of excellence they achieve varies. As Humboldt puts it, "that nations of happier gifts, and under more favorable circumstances, possess languages superior to others lies in the very nature of the case."<sup>28</sup> The level of perfection of any given language is, to a large extent, predetermined. Cultural and civilizational advancements may refine a language to some degree, but "only within the limits prescribed to it by the *original design of the language*. A nation can make a more imperfect language into a tool for the production of ideas to which it would not have given the original incentive, but cannot remove the inner restrictions which have once been deeply embedded therein."<sup>29</sup>

It is important to clarify, however, that Humboldt does not directly correlate a language's excellence with the level of civilization achieved by its speakers. As he states, "language and civilization by no means always stand in a like relation to each other." To illustrate this point, he notes that while Peru during the Inca period was by far the most advanced civilization in the Americas, "assuredly no linguist will equally give preference over the other New World languages to the common Peruvian tongue [...] notably inferior to the Mexican." When addressing the familiar comparison between Chinese (as a representative of the isolating language type) and Sanskrit (a flexional language from the Indo-European family)—in the context of the argument that a gradual evolution from one type of language to another could not have occurred—Humboldt chooses to emphasize the creative principle that each embodies in its own distinct way. He adds that only in idealized terms could one speak of a progressive trajectory in the development of language with reference to these particular linguistic types:

"An example may be drawn from the structure of the Chinese and Sanscrit languages. One might certainly suppose here a gradual progression from the one to the other. But if we truly feel the nature of language as such, and of these two in particular, if we reach the point of fusion between thought and sound in both, we discover there the outgoing creative principle of their differing organization. At that stage, abandoning the possibility of a gradual development of one from the other, [...] only within the general trend of linguistic evolution, and thus ideally only, will regard them as stages in a successful construction of language."<sup>30</sup>

Belonging to the second generation of scholars in nineteenth-century comparative-historical linguistics, H. Steinthal believed that Humboldt's taxonomy of languages had not been developed sufficiently and took it upon himself to provide the necessary refinements and clarifications.<sup>31</sup> Steinthal lamented what he saw as a division among comparative and historical linguists of his time—between those who engaged in a purely technical analysis of linguistic facts and those who favored an excessively philosophical approach, insufficiently supported by empirical data. What Steinthal fundamentally proposed was the establishment of a "true science [...], which does not merely reconcile, unite the philosophical and the empirical, but merges them, so that it is neither the one nor the other, nor the sum of both, but something new, a third, higher unity, which completely contains each of the components'

26. Since the focus of this study is limited to the issue of linguistic hierarchization, the presentation given here is necessarily partial and inevitably simplified. For a more detailed account of the complexity and evolution of Humboldt's position on language, particularly regarding language classification and the evaluation of Chinese in comparison to inflectional languages, see Jean Rousseau, *La classification des langues au début du XIXe siècle* (2001) and Markus Messling, *Wilhelm von Humboldt and the 'Orient': On Edward W. Said's Remarks on Humboldt's Orientalist Studies* (2008).

27. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, translated by Peter Heath, with an introduction of Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, first published in 1836), 24.

28. Humboldt, *On Language*, 27.

29. Humboldt, *On Language*, 34.

30. Humboldt, *On Language*, 32.

31. Tonio Sebastian Richter, "Early Encounters: Egyptian-Coptic Studies and Comparative Linguistics in the Century from Schlegel to Finck" in Eitan Grossman, Martin Haspelmath, Tonio Sebastian Richter, eds., *Egyptian-Coptic Linguistics in Typological Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015): 3-68.



essences.”<sup>32</sup> In reality, however, Steinthal would be remembered in the history of linguistics primarily as a *theorist*, a commentator and continuator of Humboldt, whose work he sought to integrate with Hegelian thought.<sup>33</sup> Later, alongside M. Lazarus, he would go on to establish a new discipline, *Völkerpsychologie*.<sup>34</sup> Interpreting Humboldt’s concept of “inner form” in his own way, Steinthal assigned it a decisive role in the linguistic taxonomy he developed in his 1850 work, *Die Classification der Sprachen dargestellt als die Entwicklung der Sprachidee* [The Classification of Languages Represented as the Development of the Idea of Language], later expanded in his 1860 study, *Charakteristik der hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbaues* [Characteristics of the Main Types of Linguistic Construction].<sup>35</sup> Following the Humboldtian tradition, Steinthal believed that all languages tended toward an ideal of form, and

“the essential criterion for judging a language’s success in reaching the ideal is whether it has only material elements (*Stoff*), or whether in addition to material elements it has also *Form* that expresses the mental relations between the items of *Stoff*. His broader project was then a kind of typology, where each language was classified – and judged – at the highest level by the putative presence or absence of *Form* (he eventually settled on the dichotomy of *Formsprachen* vs. *formlose Sprachen*), and then into subordinate categories common in nineteenth-century morphological language classification.”<sup>36</sup>

The result of this approach is a classification of languages into 13 categories, structured within the broader distinction between *Formsprachen* and *formlose Sprachen*. According to Steinthal, only Indo-European, Semitic, Egyptian, and Chinese languages possess “form.”<sup>37</sup> Steinthal’s taxonomy is heavily evaluative. Positioned at the lowest tier of this classification, the languages of Southeast Asia are

“the least developed, most formless languages, corresponding to the zoophytes in terms of zoology. As these mark the transition from the realm of plants to that of animals, those languages mark the borderline of human speech, being close to the dumbness of gesture language. In fact they must be called *acritae*, since any grammatical distinction is still lacking. These languages do not have any construction at all, like those animals do not have a skeleton. They consist of merely monosyllabic roots, equalling fungi and algae. Their clause formation is an analogy of the lowest mechanical procedure, the fall: One word falls onto the other one;”

At the top of the hierarchy, the Indo-European language family is described as “the rose among the languages.”<sup>38</sup> In his 1860 work, Steinthal correlates his proposed classification with reflections on the characteristics of the peoples who speak these languages:

The Caucasian race includes the Egyptians, the Semitic, and the Sanskrit peoples... I treat the languages of these families together as they form an absolute contrast to the languages of all other peoples...: The latter have been presented as being *material, substantial*. Only now, with these languages, do we enter the sphere of *form*. These are the languages of the *peoples of world history* [*weltgeschichtliche Völker*], and their importance for the evolution of the human mind [*Geist*] is anticipated in their language.”<sup>39</sup>

As T. S. Richter argues, it is precisely this correlation between language and people that justifies the inclusion of Egyptian and Chinese among the *Formsprachen*. Based on the morphological features that were valued in nineteenth-century language classification, both Chinese and Egyptian would have been placed much lower in the hierarchy—indeed, Chinese was ranked lower in several taxonomies, while Egyptian could not be included in early classifications due to insufficient knowledge of the language at the time. What Steinthal does, however, is to prioritize historical reality—namely, the fact that both Chinese and Egyptian were languages spoken by peoples who had built great civilizations (the so-called *weltgeschichtliche Völker*)—over the conclusions that common morphological evaluation would have imposed. He nuances and expands the prevailing classification

---

32. Quoted and discussed in Gerald Hartung, *Beyond the Babylonian Trauma: Theories of Language and Modern Culture in the German-Jewish Context*, translated by Aengus Daly (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 10-11.

33. Richter, *Early Encounters*.

34. Hartung, *Beyond the Babylonian Trauma*.

35. James McElvenny, “Grammar, Typology and the Humboldtian Tradition in the Work of Georg von der Gabelentz,” *Language & History* 60, no. 1 (2017): 1-20.

36. McElvenny, *Grammar*, 9.

37. Richter, *Early Encounters*.

38. Both citations, interpreted in the same sense, in Richter, *Early Encounters*, 24–25.

39. Quoted and interpreted in the same sense in Richter, *Early Encounters*, 25.

criteria to recognize positive features in both languages: Egyptian possesses grammatical gender, while Chinese compensates with a highly developed syntax.<sup>40</sup> However, this exception is made strictly for these two languages and not for other related ones, a decision that was already criticized by Steinthal's contemporary, Georg von der Gabelentz, who pointed out the inconsistency of this classification, noting that: "the syntactic rules of Chinese are counted as a virtue, and since Siamese, Annamite, and Barmanish [Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese] make use of the same means, [...] Chinese is violently torn apart from its genetic cousins, just because we did not want to deny the old civilised nation [the Chinese] a *Formsprache*, and were afraid of accepting those poorer cousins into the best company."<sup>41</sup>

If Steinthal remained in the history of linguistics as a thinker in the Humboldtian tradition, his contemporary August Schleicher continued the applied analysis of linguistic facts initiated by Rask, Grimm, Bopp, and Pott. He positioned himself within the strand of comparative and historical linguistics that would culminate, toward the end of the century, in the work of the Neogrammarians.<sup>42</sup> Schleicher's major contributions include the introduction of the genealogical tree (*Stammbaum*) to illustrate the lineage of languages within the Indo-European family, the identification of reconstructed forms of Proto-Indo-European (which he marked with an asterisk), and, more broadly, the reinforcement of the empirical and scientific basis of comparative-historical linguistics.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, Schleicher distinguished between philology and what he at one point termed "glottics" (*Glottik*), considering only the latter as the true science of language—one that should adopt the rigorous methods of the natural sciences.<sup>44</sup>

The sources and evolution of Schleicher's linguistic thought have been the subject of divergent assessments, though the widely accepted view holds that over the course of his career, he moved from a Hegelian understanding of language to one shaped by evolutionary thinking, similar to the theories applied after Darwin to describe the evolution of species in the plant and animal kingdoms.<sup>45</sup> Olga Amsterdamska, in particular, sees Schleicher as an illustrative case of how, by the mid-nineteenth century, the appeal of Romantic intellectual frameworks had begun to wane. However, rather than being discarded, the ideas about language they had produced were preserved and reintegrated into a different intellectual system.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, despite the fundamentally applied nature of his research, Schleicher adopted theoretical assumptions from his predecessors even when they could not be empirically verified. For instance, he maintained the analogy between language and an organism—this time without any metaphorical connotation. To Schleicher, languages were organisms just like those in the plant and animal kingdoms, existing and evolving entirely independently of their speakers. He also retained the belief that languages follow a dual evolutionary trajectory: they develop in prehistoric times until reaching a peak of excellence, after which, in the historical period, they begin to decline.<sup>47</sup> Since empirical data could not explain this rupture in linguistic evolution, Schleicher justified it in philosophical terms, "in a truly Hegelian manner":

"He posited an identity between language and thought, and argued that as long as language is not fully developed, men are not free to act with full consciousness and cannot create history. Once language allows men to think consciously and act freely, once men enter the historical world, language begins to decay. The freer the spirit participating in history, or even the more active this history, the greater will be the phonetic decay and the more rapid the degeneration of inflectional forms."<sup>48</sup>

But, as Amsterdamska also observes, the dual influence—of Hegelian thought and the natural sciences—remains evident in Schleicher's approach: "even here, where Schleicher was operating most openly with Hegelian concepts and modes of thought, he sought for an analog in the lives of natural organisms and argued that the degeneration or decay of linguistic forms is similar to the process of 'regressive metamorphosis' (*rückschreitende Metamorphose*) in natural history."<sup>49</sup> Schleicher's classification of languages structurally mirrors that of August von Schlegel, but in

40. Richter, *Early Encounters*; see also McElvenny, *Grammar*.

41. See the quotation from Gabelentz and its interpretation in McElvenny, *Grammar*, 12.

42. R. H. Robins, "The History of Language Classification" in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Henry M. Hoenigswald, Robert E. Longacre (ed. asoc.), *Current Trends in Linguistics - Volume 11: Diachronic, Areal, and Typological Linguistics* (The Hague & Paris: Mouton, 1973): 3-41.

43. Robins, *Language Classification* (1973); see also Winfred P. Lehmann, *Theoretical Bases of Indo-European Linguistics* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993).

44. E. F. K. Koerner, *Practicing Linguistic Historiography: Selected Essays* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989).

45. E. F. K. Koerner, in several works (e.g., Koerner, *Essays*, 1989), argues that the preference for understanding language in evolutionary terms is present even in Schleicher's early writings, with Hegel's influence on his thought remaining minimal.

46. Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*.

47. August Schleicher, *Compendium of Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin Languages* (London: Trubner, 1874).

48. Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*, 47.

49. Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*, 48.



his interpretation, the categories of “isolating,” “agglutinative,” and “inflectional” do not merely describe taxonomic groups; they also represent actual stages in the evolution of languages.<sup>50</sup> It has been claimed that Schleicher, in his descriptions of languages and language families, “is relatively free of value judgments.”<sup>51</sup> However, one could argue that his evolutionary perspective on language classification inherently contains an evaluative dimension: in the struggle for “linguistic survival,” Indo-European languages are portrayed as having adapted most successfully, standing as the pinnacle of linguistic evolution. Schleicher himself makes this point explicit: “In the current moment in the life of humanity, it is especially the languages of Indo-European stock that are victorious, continually in the process of expansion.”<sup>52</sup>

Yet, even among Indo-European languages, not all are equal. Regarding Schleicher’s 1850 work, *Die Sprachen Europas in systematischer Übersicht* [The Languages of Europe in Systematic Perspective], E. F. K. Koerner points out that the section on Romance languages—actually written by Nikolaus Delius (as noted in a footnote of the work)—had Schleicher’s full approval, particularly in its negative assessment of Romanian and Romansh: “it may be gathered from the style in which this section is written that Schleicher found it to his liking; indeed, it appears that especially the harsh comments on the linguistic corruptedness of Romanian and Romansh were largely due to Schleicher.”<sup>53</sup> In the relevant passage on the Romanian language, as translated into English by Natalie Zemon Davis, it is described as a Romance language, yet: “diminishing in quality and disorganized. The sounds are arbitrary and without rational rules, the inflection is full of elements not found in the general body of Romance idioms; the dictionary is inundated with a flood of Hungarian, German, Greek, Turkish, and Slavic words.”<sup>54</sup>

### Reassessments and Challenges to Linguistic Hierarchies

In the second half of the nineteenth century, voices began to emerge questioning the validity of linguistic hierarchies. One such case, discussed in Richter, *Early Encounters*, is that of Heinrich Ewald, a scholar of Arabic, Hebrew, and Sanskrit. Ewald lamented the widespread belief that “often it has been, and is still heard, that one language, from its origins and by its unchangeable nature as it were, is more beautiful than the other, or one language family more perfect and more capable of higher development than the other, and this or that language surely deserves priority over all others.” On the contrary, Ewald argued, “it does not seem right to praise one’s own language, or one’s own language family over all the others and, for example, to agree with what is said so often in our days, that the Indo-European... languages were the most perfect ones from the beginning.” He maintained that:

“all languages and language families are completely equal in terms of their highest (and eventually their only) importance, as a means of the perfectly clear expression of all thinkable thoughts of the human mind... Given the range of historical diversity, ... one language or language family may apply some of those means or matters (by which all of them eventually achieve the same goal) in a more elegantly proportioned, or more beautiful, or more perfect way; however, no single one holds all of these merits alone, and such readily despised languages as the ancient and modern African languages have, in several respects, significant merits over other, much higher esteemed ones”.<sup>55</sup>

The criterion on which most linguistic evaluations associated with morphological taxonomies were based—namely, the presence or absence of inflection—was itself challenged. According to Archibald Henry Sayce, a professor of Assyriology at the University of Oxford, linguistic hierarchies favoring the Indo-European family were, in fact, a result of scholars’ greater familiarity with these languages and even a form of nationalism that sought to cast their own language in the best possible light:

“The spirit of vanity has invaded the science of language itself. We have come to think that not only is the race to which we belong superior to all others, but that the languages we speak are equally superior. That inflection is the supreme effort of linguistic energy, that it marks the highest stage in the development of speech is regarded as a self-evident axiom. The Greek and Latin classics have formed the staple and foundation of our education, and if we have advanced beyond them, it is generally to the study of Hebrew or Sanskrit, themselves also inflected tongues.

---

50. Schleicher, *Compendium*.

51. Greenberg, *Language Typology*, 39.

52. Quoted in the same interpretation in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Listening to the Languages of the People: Lazare Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish, and French* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022), 10.

53. Koerner, *Practicing Linguistic Historiography*, 334.

54. Quoted in Zemon Davis, *Listening to the Languages*, 11.

55. All three quotations reproduced from Richter, *Early Encounters*, 34–35.

The inflected Aryan languages, whether living or dead, have formed our canons of taste, and our judgement of what is right or wrong in the matter of language. Even the grammars of our own English speech have been forced into a classical mould and been adorned with tenses and cases, if not genders. The belief that whatever is unfamiliar must be either wrong or absurd exercises a wider influence than is ordinarily imagined. Everything has tended to make the European scholar see an inflected language the normal type of a perfect and cultivated tongue. The dialects he speaks or studies are mostly inflectional ones, and even should he be acquainted with languages like Chinese or Basque, which belong to another class of speech, the acquaintance has seldom been made in the earlier and more impressionable years of life. But there is a further reason for the widespread opinion that an inflectional language must necessarily rank before all others. The founders and cultivators of comparative philology were Germans, who spoke therefore one of the most highly inflected languages of modern Europe. The vanity of race and education was thus supplemented by the vanity of nationality and custom."<sup>56</sup>

The two main directions in the development of nineteenth-century linguistics continued into the final decades of the century (and, indeed, into the following one), with representatives of both schools increasingly distancing themselves from their predecessors in several respects. Following the Humboldtian tradition, the sinologist Georg von der Gabelentz rejected Steinthal's taxonomy of languages, viewing it as excessively hierarchical, overly evaluative, and incapable of capturing the irreducible uniqueness of each language. Gabelentz also critically examined the nineteenth-century preference for morphology as the primary basis for typological classifications and overturned the long-standing tradition of considering inflection as the highest linguistic feature.<sup>57</sup> He remarked that "looking at Indo-European inflection, Gabelentz (1891: 379-381) calls it a 'defective system' (*Defectivsystem*), whose multiple forms for the same grammatical category would seem to be 'waste of energy' (*Energievergeudung*) in contrast to the 'infinitely rich plasticity' (*unendlich reiche Bildsamkeit*) achieved through the simple consistent means of the agglutinative languages."<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, based on the hypothesis that a language's features reflect the particular qualities of its *Volksgeist*, Gabelentz still saw the inflectional forms of the Indo-European family as indicative of the strong intellectual abilities of their speakers: "It might be difficult for us to grasp how our ancestors in prehistoric times came to develop such an intricate language, but it makes sense that in the acquisition and mastering of such a language there lay a powerful and constantly working training of mental forces."<sup>59</sup>

Like other contributions of nineteenth-century linguists, the role of the Neogrammarians in the development of linguistic science has been assessed in different ways.<sup>60</sup> The focus of this study is not so much on detailing their contributions as on highlighting how their linguistic theory diverged from earlier conceptualizations, with significant consequences for typological comparisons of languages. From the perspective of what has been described as the "tension" between theory and practice in nineteenth-century linguistics, the Neogrammarians mark the end of a cycle. With their strongly positivist and anti-speculative orientation, they abandoned the overarching theoretical frameworks that had been passed down through generations of linguistic thought. Language was no longer conceptualized as an organism, nor was it assumed to follow an organic trajectory of growth, peak, and decline. Instead, they argued that language development processes operate uniformly in both prehistory and history, governed by the same psycho-physiological laws. As a result, the goal of historical linguistics was no longer to recover a perfect original language, understood as an "ancestral tongue" in its purest form, but rather to reconstruct the most probable ancient forms of words from an unattested proto-language.<sup>61</sup> In light of this understanding of linguistic science, the Neogrammarians lost interest in typological classifications. As Greenberg notes: "They were attempting to found a genuine science of laws based on rigorous methods and the discovery of sound law rested on historical comparison. Hence, they saw no point to the comparison of unrelated languages and considered it to be useless."<sup>62</sup> The type of linguistic comparison practiced by the Neogrammarians focused on precise analysis of linguistic data within a single language family to draw verifiable conclusions, rather than making broad evaluations of languages to establish hierarchies.

56. Archibald Henry Sayce, *Introduction to the Science of Language*, vol. II (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co, 1890), 66-67; despite positions like those mentioned above, Sayce also makes value judgments about the inequality of languages. For examples of this, see Joseph L. Subbiondo & Marcin Kilariski, *Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) and the Transition from 19th-century Comparative Philology to 20th-century General Linguistics* (2023), which cite Sayce's opinions on the Greenlandic language as well as the language and native inhabitants of Tasmania.

57. McElvenny, *Grammar*.

58. McElvenny, *Grammar*, 14.

59. Quoted and interpreted in McElvenny *Grammar*, 14–15.

60. See Kurt R. Jankowsky, *The Neogrammarians: A Re-Evaluation of their Place in the Development of Linguistic Science* (1972) and Koerner, *Practicing Linguistic Historiography* (1989) for various assessments of the contributions of the Neogrammarians.

61. This argument is extensively developed in Amsterdamska, *Schools of Thought*.

62. Greenberg, *Language Typology*, 39–40.



### Final Remarks

The conclusions that emerge from this study, I hope, show that nineteenth-century comparative-historical linguistics encompassed a variety of theoretical positions, making it difficult to adopt an overly globalizing approach—whether entirely critical or wholly celebratory<sup>63</sup>. Despite Saussy's optimism, "linguistic chauvinism" can, in fact, be frequently identified in the writings of nineteenth-century linguists. As has already been noted and as I hope this study has further confirmed through additional details and examples, the classifications of languages and language families developed within comparative-historical linguistics were rarely neutral<sup>64</sup>. More often than not, these classifications were accompanied by a ranking of languages or, more frequently, language families, in which the Indo-European family almost invariably occupied the top position. Officially, the criteria for these rankings were purely morphological, with the presence of inflection being the feature that granted the Indo-European family its exceptional status among other language families. However, as was already observed in the period and later as well, the praise directed at the Indo-European family cannot be separated from the fact that many linguists themselves were speakers of Indo-European languages<sup>65</sup>. Their assessments were inevitably pleadings *pro domo sua* (for the significance of reconstructing the proto-language of the "ancestors" and the symbolic role of these ancestors). Furthermore, these evaluations did not merely reinforce linguistic prestige but also carried significant social and political consequences.<sup>66</sup>

Meltzl's hesitations between promoting the broadest possible multilingualism, on the one hand, and restricting it, on the other, to a pragmatically motivated but also evaluatively framed decaglottism seem to reflect, to a significant extent, the orientation and internal tensions of his time. As most nineteenth-century linguists did, Meltzl believed in the irreducible value of every language, both in itself and as a vehicle for a corresponding literature. Yet, also like most linguists of his era, he did not appear to see any contradiction between genuinely appreciating each language in its uniqueness and considering that, in certain respects (for example, because they had already produced "major" literatures), some languages could be regarded as superior to others.

The programmatic texts of the *Acta Comparationis* suggest that Meltzl was primarily interested in language as an ancillary tool, whose essential function was seen as the creation of literature: "Literature and language are closely related; the latter being substantially subservient to the former, without which the servant would have not only no autonomy but no existence at all."<sup>67</sup> A similar perspective is expressed by Sámuel Brassai, co-founder and second editor of *Acta Comparationis*, in a letter to Ferenc Toldy: "For me, the value of any language in itself is worthless, the moment I reached a certain level, I tried to learn more about the literature of this language."<sup>68</sup> In Brassai's case, this attitude may seem somewhat surprising. A scholar familiar with and appreciative of Bopp's works, he began teaching both Sanskrit and comparative linguistics at the newly founded University of Cluj (then Kolozsvár) in 1878.<sup>69</sup> However, he does not appear to have been actively engaged in nineteenth-century debates on the ranking of languages or language families. This may be attributed to his adherence to the idea of the equality of all languages, but also to the fact that he was not particularly interested in morphology and historical phonology—the core research areas of comparative-historical linguistics—preferring instead to focus on syntax

---

63. See Saussy, *Exquisite Cadavers*.

64. See, e.g., Richter, *Early Encounters*.

65. See H. Ewald, A. H. Sayce.

66. It is striking that Saussy chooses "the shores of the Indus" as the privileged site of a supposed linguistic reconciliation and harmony: "Linguistic or literary chauvinism is beyond the point when all roads lead to the shores of the Indus" (Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers," 7). In reality—and even his own enumeration suggests this—not all linguistic paths were presumed to lead to the shores of the Indus, but only those of the Indo-European family. As T. R. Trautmann extensively argues, the relationship between languages derived from Sanskrit, hence of Indo-European origin, and other language families spoken in India was explicitly framed in racial and political terms in the nineteenth century, India arriving "at the centre of the growing quarrel between ethnology and philology or, to put it more exactly, between race science and the Sanskritists" (Thomas R., Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 182). The discovery made by F. W. Ellis in 1816, what Trautmann has termed "the Dravidian proof," namely the realization that the language family spoken in southern India, later called Dravidian, was not of Indo-European origin, played a decisive role in shaping "a deep and lasting consensus [...] respecting India, which I call the racial theory of Indian civilization: that India's civilization was produced by the clash and subsequent mixture of light-skinned civilizing invaders (the Aryans) and dark-skinned barbarian aborigines (often identified as Dravidians)" (Trautmann, *Aryans*, 4). For the consequences of this theory on British colonial policies in India, see also Trautmann, *Aryans*.

67. "Bei der engen Veischwisterung von Litteratur und Sprache, welche letztere eigentlich nur die Dienerin der ersteren ist, ohne welche die Dienerin nicht nur keine Selbstständigkeit, sondern überhaupt keine Existenz besitzt." *Acta IX*, May 1877, 179; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," 42.

68. Quoted in Levente T. Szabó, "À la recherche... de l'éditeur perdu: Sámuel Brassai and the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies" in *Storia, identità e canoni letterari (Strumenti per la didattica e la ricerca)*, 152, ed. Ioana Both, Ayşe Saraççıl, and Angela Tarantino (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2013), 177–188, 184.

69. András Imrényi, Zsuzsa Vladár, "Sámuel Brassai in the history of dependency grammar," in *Chapters of Dependency Grammar: A historical survey from Antiquity to Tesnière*, ed. András Imrényi and Nicolas Mazziotta (Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2020), 163–187; see also Szabó, *À la recherche* (2013), 178.

and the pedagogy of language teaching.<sup>70</sup>

It is difficult to determine the exact weight of different considerations—literary, linguistic, and political—in shaping the list of ten languages included in the decaglottist project proposed by Meltzl and Brassai.<sup>71</sup> Officially, the literary criterion was decisive: as indicated by the programmatic texts of *Acta Comparationis*, each language's inclusion was justified by reference to the (assessed) value of its corresponding literature. The role of linguistic criteria—if we assume some form of dialogue with nineteenth-century comparative-historical linguistics—is harder to estimate in the absence of explicit positions from Meltzl and Brassai on this matter.<sup>72</sup> From the perspective of the linguistic hierarchies established at the time, it is notable that nine of the ten selected languages belonged to the Indo-European family, meaning that, according to those hierarchies, they would be considered “equal” among themselves and superior to any language from a different family. However, I find less convincing the interpretation advanced by Saussy, namely that Hungarian, the only non-Indo-European language on the list, was included solely to lend the project a broad universalist reach by explicitly defying linguistic hierarchies and their criteria.

On the contrary, it seems undeniable that political considerations also played a role in both the selection of some of the ten decaglottist languages and the exclusion of others. Political motivations behind the exclusion of Russian (both language and literature) have already been noted, whether this decision is interpreted as an act of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, whose language had been banned by Tsarist authorities (leading *Acta Comparationis* to refuse publication of any texts in Russian; or as an act of retribution against those who, having fought against the Hungarians in 1849, were seen as responsible for the death of Petőfi.<sup>73</sup>

Regarding the political significance of Hungarian's inclusion, which has also been observed, I hope to explore in a future study how its (perceived) status at the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century compared to that of the other languages in the decaglottist project, especially in relation to German, the other privileged language of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>74</sup> This is particularly relevant given that Hungarian, the only non-Indo-European language proposed in *Acta Comparationis*, was at the time the subject of linguistic controversies centred precisely on its non-Indo-European origin—controversies that had strong social and political reverberations in Hungary. Meltzl was undoubtedly aware of these debates, and I do not believe he could have ignored their implications.

**Acknowledgement:** This work was funded by the EU's NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania—Pillar III-C9–18, through the project *A Global History of Romanian Comparatism: A Case Study in Inter-Imperial Comparative Literature (1877–1944)*, PNRR-III-C9–2023-I8-CF 22/27.07.2023, contract no. 760276/26.03.2024.

### Bibliography

- Amsterdamska, Olga. *Schools of Thought: The Development of Linguistics from Bopp to Saussure*. Boston, MA: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1987.
- Avidsson, Stefan. *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, translated by Sonia Wichmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [2000].
- Bopp, Franz. *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache*, Herausgegeben von K. J. Windischmann. Frankfurt a. M.: Andreae, 1816.
- Bopp, Franz. *A Comparative Grammar of the Sanscrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Gothic, German, and Slavonic Languages*, vol. I, translated by Edward B. Eastwick. London: Willims and Norgate, 1885 [1833–1852].

70. Levente T. Szabó, “The Subversive Politics of Multilingualism in the First International Journey of Comparative Literary Studies,” in *Paradoxes du plurilinguisme littéraire 1900. Réflexions théorique et études de cas (Nouvelle poétique comparatiste, vol. 34)*, ed. Britta Benert (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015), 229–250, 241; see also Imrényi & Vladár, *Sámuel Brassai*, 165–166.

71. As has been noted (Szabó, “Subversive Politics”), the ten languages discussed in the programmatic texts of *Acta Comparationis* are not the only ones in which the journal published. Many others, including lesser-known languages and dialects, expanded its multilingual and inclusive scope.

72. In advocating for the legitimacy of a comparative literature journal even before the full consolidation of the discipline, Meltzl refers to “comparative philology” as “our older sister”: “Der Skrupel, dass eine “erst im Entstehen begriffene” Wissenschaft eigentlich kein Organ haben darf, würde auf die ältere Schwester unsrer Zukunftswissenschaft, nämlich die vergleichende Sprachforschung angewendet, (die eben auch nur erst im Entstehen begriffen, wenn auch in vielen ihrer riesigen Partien bereits wohl ausgebaut ist) grossen Widerspruch hervorrufen. Übrigens hat auch die vergl.,” *Acta* 9, May 1877, 182; Hugo Meltzl, “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature,” in *The Princeton Sourcebook*, 43.

73. See Szabó, *Subversive Politics*, 234; and David Marno, “The Monstrosity of Literature: Hugo Meltzl's World Literature and its Legacies” in Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, *World Literature, World Culture* (Aarhus University Press, 2008), 37–50, 40.

74. Marno, *Monstrosity of Literature*.



- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*, translated by Ralph Manheim, preface and introduction by Charles W. Hendel. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980 [1923].
- Collinge, Neville Edgar. "History of Comparative Linguistics." In *Concise History of the Language Sciences from the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, edited by E. F. K. Koerner and R. E. Asher, 203–212. New York: Pergamon, 1995.
- Damrosch, David, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, eds. *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Greenberg, Joseph H. *Language Typology: A Historical and Analytic Overview*. Paris: Mouton, 1974.
- Hartung, Gerald. *Beyond the Babylonian Trauma: Theories of Language and Modern Culture in the German-Jewish Context*, translated by Aengus Daly. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Hónich, Henrik. "Which Language and Which Nation? Mother Tongue and Political Languages: Insights from a Pamphlet Published in 1790." In *Latin at the Crossroads of Identity: The Evolution of Linguistic Nationalism in the Kingdom of Hungary*, edited by Almási, Gábor, Lav Šubaric, 35–64. Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2015.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, translated by Peter Heath, with an introduction of Hans Aarsleff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1836].
- Imrényi, András, and Zsuzsa Vladár. "Sámuel Brassai in the History of Dependency Grammar." In *Chapters of Dependency Grammar: A Historical Survey from Antiquity to Tesnière, Studies in Language* companion series 212, edited by András Imrényi and Nicolas Mazziotta, 163–187. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2020.
- Jankowsky, Kurt R. *The Neogrammarians: A Re-Evaluation of their Place in the Development of Linguistic Science. Janua Linguarum*. Series Minor, 116. Paris: Mouton, 1972.
- Kamusella, Tomasz. *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*. Chippenham and Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Koerner, E.F.K. *Practicing Linguistic Historiography: Selected Essays*, vol. 50 of *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989.
- Lehmann, Winfred P. *Theoretical Bases of Indo-European Linguistics*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Margócsy, István. "When Language Became Ideology: Hungary in the Eighteenth Century." In *Latin at the Crossroads of Identity: The Evolution of Linguistic Nationalism in the Kingdom of Hungary*, edited by Gábor Almási and Lav Šubaric, 27–34. Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2015.
- Marno, David. "The Monstrosity of Literature: Hugo Meltzl's World Literature and its Legacies." In *World Literature, World Culture*, edited by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, 37–50. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008.
- McElvenny, James. "Grammar, Typology and the Humboldtian Tradition in the Work of Georg von der Gabelentz." *Language & History* 60, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.
- Meltzl von Lomnitz, Hugo. "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 9, May 15 (1877): 179–182.
- Meltzl von Lomnitz, Hugo. "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur: II. Das Prinzip des Polyglottismus." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 15, October 15 (1877): 307–315.
- Meltzl von Lomnitz, Hugo. "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur: III. Der Dekaglottismus." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 24, February 28, (1878): 494–501.
- Messling, Markus. "Wilhelm von Humboldt and the 'Orient': On Edward W. Said's Remarks on Humboldt's Orientalist Studies." *Language Sciences* 30, no. 5 (2008): 482–498.
- Metcalf, George J. "The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." In *Studies in the History of Linguistics. Traditions and Paradigms*, edited by Dell H. Hymes, 233–257. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974.
- Morpurgo-Davies, Anna. "'Organic' and 'Organism' in Franz Bopp." In *Biological Metaphor and Cladistic Classification. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Henry M. Hoenigswald and Linda F. Wiener, 81–108. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.
- Nicholls, Angus. "Three Translations from the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: 'Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglottism,' 'Laws of Comparative Literary Research,' and 'Goethe's World Literature.'" *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 285–293.
- Olender, Maurice. *Languages of Paradise*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Percival, W. Keith. "Biological Analogy in the Study of Languages Before the Advent of Comparative Grammar." In *Biological*

- Metaphor and Cladistic Classification: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Henry M. Hoenigswald and Linda F. Wiener, 3–38. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.
- Richter, Tonio Sebastian. "Early Encounters: Egyptian-Coptic Studies and Comparative Linguistics in the Century from Schlegel to Finck." In *Egyptian-Coptic Linguistics in Typological Perspective*, edited by Eitan Grossman, Martin Haspelmath, and Tonio Sebastian Richter, 3–68. Berlin & Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Robins, R. H. "The History of Language Classification." In *Current Trends in Linguistics, Volume 11: Diachronic, Areal, and Typological Linguistics*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, Henry M. Hoenigswald, and Robert E. Longacre, 3–41. Paris: Mouton, 1973.
- Rousseau, Jean. "La classification des langues au début du XIXe siècle." In *History of the Language Sciences: An International Handbook on the Evolution of the Study of Language from the Beginnings to the Present*, 1414–1426. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Saussy, Haun. "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes." In *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy, 3–42. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Sayce, A. H. *The Principles of Comparative Philology*. London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1875.
- Sayce, A. H. *Introduction to the Science of Language*, vol. II. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co, 1890.
- Schlegel, August Wilhelm von. *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençales*. Paris: La librairie grecque-latine-allemande, 1818.
- Schlegel, Friedrich von. "On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians" [1808]. In *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works*, translated by E.J. Millington. London: Bohn, 1849.
- Schleicher, August. *Compendium of Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin Languages*. London: Trubner, 1874.
- Schleicher, August. *Die Sprachen Europas in systematischer Übersicht*. Bonn: König, 1850.
- Steinthal, Heymann. *Die Classification der Sprachen dargestellt als die Entwicklung der Sprachidee*. Berlin: Ferdinand Dummler, 1850.
- Steinthal, Heymann. *Charakteristik der hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbaues*. Berlin: Ferdinand Dummler, 1860.
- Subbiondo, Joseph L., and Marcin Kilarski. "Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) and the Transition from 19th-Century Comparative Philology to 20th-Century General Linguistics." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 58 (2023): 39–72.
- Szabó, Levente T. "À la recherche... de l'éditeur perdu. Sámuel Brassai and the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies." In *Storia, identità e canoni letterari (Strumenti per la didattica e la ricerca, 152)*, edited by Ioana Both, Ayşe Saraççıl, and Angela Tarantino, 177–188. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2013.
- Szabó, Levente T. "The Subversive Politics of Multilingualism in the First International Journey of Comparative Literary Studies." In *Paradoxes du plurilinguisme littéraire 1900. Réflexions théorique et études de cas (Nouvelle poétique comparatiste, vol. 34)*, edited by Britta Benert, 229–250. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015.
- Török, Borbála Zsuzsanna. *Exploring Transylvania. Geographies of Knowledge and Entangled Histories in a Multiethnic Province, 1790–1918*. Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2015.
- Trautmann, Thomas R. *Aryans and British India*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
- Zemon Davis, Natalie. *Listening to the Languages of the People: Lazare Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish, and French*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022.