

Principles of linguistics [fragments][†]

Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu

AN OUTLINE OF PHILOLOGICAL STUDIES

[...]

§4. COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

A French periodical, founded about 40 years ago, is titled: *Revue de linguistique et de philologie comparée*.

And before that, a certain L.F. Jéhan de Saint Clavien had published in 1858 a thick volume entitled: *Dictionnaire de linguistique et de philologie comparée*.

What is linguistics and what might comparative philology be, as long as they are not the same thing?

Here is Whitney's reply:

“Comparative philology and linguistic science, we may say, are two sides of the same study: the former deals primarily with the individual facts of a certain body of languages, classifying them, tracing out their relations, and arriving at the conclusions they suggest; the latter makes the laws and general principles of speech its main subject, and uses particular facts rather as illustrations.”^{1*}

Comparative philology would then be a sort of analytic linguistics, opposed to a synthetic linguistics.

In other words, it is not even integral linguistics.

Such a notion would have been in place only in the past century, when classical philology was itself a type of analytic linguistics². Nowadays however, following Wolf and Böckh, as the area of classical philology extended far beyond the narrow circle of linguistic analysis, it is an anachronism to leave the parallel science of comparative philology in a parochial state; or at least—if it turns out that it is not a parallel science—it would be inappropriate to preserve the label philology, be it comparative or otherwise.

It is a very peculiar fact that many—among them even Littré³—persist in looking at classical philology through the hemianopia[‡] of the previous century. Mr. Hovelacque says: “Rollin defined the philologists

[†]The Romanian text on which this translation is based is taken from B.P. Hasdeu, *Cuvente den bătrîni. Tomul III: Istoria limbei române. Partea I: Principie de lingvistică*, Noua Tipografie Națională, București, 1881 (p. 7–16). The Romanian text was edited on the basis of its original version, and was compared with Gheorghe Mihăilă's edition (B.P. Hasdeu, *Scrieri*, XI, Întreprinderea Editorial-Poligrafică Știința, Chișinău, 2013, p. 522–528). Observing the current philological conventions, I have updated the writing and the punctuation, preserving the linguistic facts that characterized the language of the period. In contrast to Mihăilă's edition, I have also updated the critical apparatus (especially making the bibliographical references complete and correcting them) (editor's note).

¹W.D. Whitney, *The life and growth of language: an outline of linguistic science*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1887, p. 315 (first edition 1875). Cfr. A.H. Sayce, *Introduction to the science of language*, C. Kegan Paul & Co., Londra, 1880, vol. 1, p. 135–136.

²Hasdeu takes over this passage from the French version of the book: *La vie du langage*, Librairie Germer Baillièrre, Paris, 1875, p. 259 (translator's note); we have taken over the quote from the original English version, indicated in the footnote above.

³Philology was conceived as being nothing other than the general knowledge of languages, the critical analysis of language, the knowledge of proper and figurative meaning of words and expressions, etc. (Jakob Friedrich von Bielfeld, *L'érudition universelle, ou abrégée de toutes sciences, des beaux-arts et des belles-lettres*, Berlin, 1768, vol. 4, p. 384).

[‡]É. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, t. 3, p. 1097.

[‡]Hemianopia = blindness in one half of the visual field of one or both eyes. (Merriam-Webster, s.v. *hemianopia*) (translator's note).

as «those who worked on the ancient authors, examining them, revising them, explaining them, and updating them». *This definition still preserves its entire value*⁴. Where are then Wolf and Böckh in this framework?

As long as we oppose “comparative *philology*” to “the classical *philology*”, both—as *philology* itself—must have the same extension, contrasting only with respect to their point of view, which is approximately indicated by the adjectives “comparative” and “classical”.

Consequently, comparative philology, besides integral linguistics, endeavors to contain something extra, which corresponds to the social, religious and literary elements from classical philology.

[...]

§8. THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

The comparative method is specific to natural sciences; however, it does not follow that a science employing this method is itself a natural science. To a greater or lesser extent, all sciences seek to appropriate this method, although not all of them succeed to the same degree. The subject, undoubtedly a well determined one, not the method, constitutes the nature of a science. Statistics has all the external features of mathematics, yet it still is in fact a sociological science.

The methodical comparison consists of minutely observing and collecting an as large as possible number of phenomena, grouping thereafter those which are related, so that the conclusion derives naturally, unconstrained, without any further stipulation. If the observed phenomena are too few to straightforwardly offer a reliable conclusion, if such a conclusion is easily drawn from an inexact clustering, which lacks the preliminary complete study of the essential conditions of the clustering in question, or if the result is due to a total or partial *a priori* assumption, then the comparison is utterly unmethodical or is not entirely methodical.

There is no other sociological science in which this method is more rigorously followed than comparative philology. In linguistics especially, Pott, Curtius, Corssen, Ascoli and others have pushed it to such a degree of accuracy that their procedure does not differ at all from that of the most exact naturalist, the one who is the most meticulous in the observation of biological phenomena.

[...]

§9. THE PLACE OF PHILOLOGICAL SCIENCES IN THE PANOPLY OF SCIENCES

If classical philology is a sociological or historical science—and nobody ever argued against this—, if a historical or sociological science is also ethno-psychology, as generally acknowledged, then *linguistics*—which is hard to tell apart from ethno-psychology and cannot drift away from classical philology—cannot be anything else but also a sociological or historical science.

The theory of the late Schleicher⁵, dismantled by Steinthal, Whitney and others, but which is still practiced by Hovelacque⁶, namely that *linguistics* in its own respect, separated from the rest of philology, is a natural or biological science, like botany for that matter, currently has only an anecdotal value⁷. Linguistics is not a natural science, even though it employs a biological method, and it is not a mathematical science

⁴Abel Hovelacque, *La linguistique*, C. Reinwald et C^{ie} Libraires-Éditeurs, Paris, 1876, p. 2.

⁵*Zur Morphologie der Sprache*, St. Petersburg, 1859, p. 1, 35–38; *Deutsche Sprache*, Stuttgart, 1860, p. 9–10, 122–127; *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft*, Weimar, 1863 etc.; cfr. S. Lefmann, *August Schleicher: Skizze*, B.G. Teubner, Leipzig, 1870, p. 42–51.

⁶Hovelacque, op. cit. p. 1; cfr. Girard de Rialle, *La théorie de l'évolution et la science du langage*, in *Revue de linguistique*, 1877, t. 10, p. 290, 300.

⁷Cfr. L. Tobler, *Über das Verhältniss der Sprachwissenschaft zur Philologie und Naturwissenschaft*, in *Neues Schweizerisches Museum*, Basel, 1865, t. 5, p. 193–214; Fr. Müller, *Grundriss der Sprachwissenschaft*, Alfred Hölder, Wien, 1877, t. 1, p. 10–14; A.H. Sayce, *Introduction to the science of language*, C. Kegan Paul & Co., London, 1880, t. 1, p. 72–78; W.D. Whitney, *Schleicher and the physical theory of language*, in *Oriental and linguistic studies*, t. 1, p. 298–331, cf. *ibid.* p. 292–297.

either, although it frequently resorts to algebraic formulæ with *plus*, with *equation*, with *proportion*, etc. – it does not even shy away from the symbol $\sqrt{\quad}$.

Every sociological science more or less needs the following: first, the insights of all other sociological sciences, and second, the insights of some of the natural sciences, grounded as a basis for the entire sociology. In this situation is philology as well, be it classical, or comparative.

History, without being itself philology, law, political economy, philosophy or something analogous, distils in itself, to different degrees, all sociological (or historical) sciences, along with their biological basis. However, the domain generally occupied by philology in the sociological sphere is so large and, at the same time, its biological roots go so deep, that history, this synthesis of sociology, sometimes seems to get confused with philology, not being able to go one step further without the support of philology⁸.

[...]

[Edited and translated by Alexandru Nicolae]

⁸Cfr. H. Steinthal, *Philologie, Geschichte und Psychologie in ihren gegenseitigen Beziehungen*, Ferd. Dümmler's Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin, 1864, passim.