Goals and Tasks of the Historical Study of Language

Handout

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According to the Book of Genesis, there was a time when the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. The people decided to build "a tower whose top may reach unto heaven," the tower of Babel. They wanted the tower to be a proud monument to themselves and the symbol that would keep them united as a powerful people. God´s reaction to this development was not favourable. He said: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. (NIV, Genesis 11:6-7)

The myth says that thanks to the people´s disobedience, now there is a diversity of languages. Whether taken as a myth or reality, the fact remains that there are hundreds of languages over the world and their history partly remains the secret. Yet, let us take a look at a short summary of what has already been discovered.

History of language is traditionally explored within a broad concept of linguistics, the scientific study of language. Linguistics incorporates a number of sub-branches of linguistic inquiry. These sub-branches are mutually inclusive. Some relevant sub-branches and approaches will be listed below to provide students with a solid background for further "expedition" into the history of the English Language.

1.1 Synchronic and Diachronic study of language

Historical study of language can be looked upon from two perspectives: the synchronic perspective and the diachronic one, even though the diachronic perspective remains dominant (diachronic from Greek *dia* – "thorugh" and *chromos* – "time). Both approaches reflect the dynamic character of language and justify accommodating language to the actual needs of its speakers. The **diachronic** approach studies changes in language over time. On the contrary, the **synchronic** approach studies language as a cross-section of historical processes at a particular time. (Widdowson, 1996). As Lančarič puts it, the **synchronic** approach describes the language as a final static product of its historical development. The synchronic approach studies changes in language in the present, or in the past, or in a very specific time in the past supposing that no changes are taking place in the time of the

description (Lančarič 2010). Widdowson used the following diagram to illustrate the difference between the synchronic and the diachronic approach:
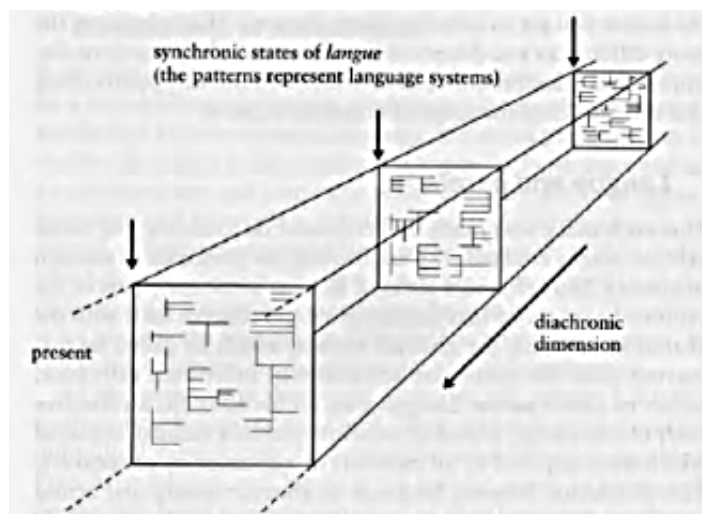
In the diagram, each square represents a period of time. If research into language is conducted in that period of time only, regardless the development throughout the stages (squares), we speak of the **synchronic** approach. If language is explored throughout the stages (squares) comparing more than one stage of the development, then this approach is referred to as the **diachronic** approach.

One of the fundamental tasks of linguistics is to describe language and its processes. As far as the scientific study of language is concerned a pure description of language, is referred to as descriptive linguistics.

1.2. Sub-branches of Linguistics

1.2.1 Descriptive Linguistics

Descriptive linguistics deals with the description of language and how language operates and is used by a given set of speakers at a given time (Repka 2008). Descriptive linguistics is a synchronic study because it describes and analyses language at a given period of time, regardless of the past and the possible future processes which may arise from the stage in question. Also, the descriptive linguistics describes one language only and does not take into account the relations of the language in question to other languages.

1.2.2 Comparative and Contrastive Linguistics

Contrary to descriptive linguistics, both comparative and contrastive linguistics explore the relations among languages. **Comparative linguistics** makes a diachronic comparison between two languages which are genetically similar, or related. We say that languages are

related to one another when they descend from (are derived from) a single original language, a common ancestor (for example modern Romance languages which include Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and others descend from earlier Latin) (Campbell 1999). **Contrastive linguistics** contrasts the structures of two genetically non-related languages in order to pick all the relevant differences. The difference is also in their scope and goals. **Contrastive linguistics** is mostly applied into teaching English and into translation, as being part of the so–called applied linguistics. On the other hand, **comparative linguistics** concerns the already mentioned historical comparison of language throughout different stages of time.

1.2.3 Historical linguistics

Historical linguistics deals with the ultimate origin of human language and how it may have evolved from non-human primate call systems, gestures or whatever; to have the properties we now associate with human languages in general. **Historical linguistics** is also about determining or preserving pure "correct" forms of language or attempting to prevent changes. (Campbell 1999). **Historical linguistics** is sometimes called diachronic linguistics as it makes use of the diachronic approach. According to Campbell, there are various ways to study language diachronically, e.g. historical linguistics may study changes in the history of a single language, for example the changes from the Old English to Modern English. Often, the study of the history of a single language is called Philology (e.g. *English Philology*). **Historical linguistics** may also study changes revealed in the comparison of related languages, often called comparative linguistics (Campbell 1999).

1.2.3.1. Goals and tasks of the historical study of language

Among others, the goals and tasks of the historical study of language are (1) to describe and account for observed changes in particular languages, (2) to re-construct the pre-history of languages and to determine their relatedness, grouping them into language families, (3) to develop general theories about how and why language changes, (4) to describe history of speech communities (5) to study the history of words – *etymology*.

1.3 Other subfields of study

Morphology – the branch of linguistics which deals with the structure of words.

Syntax – the branch of linguistics which deals with the structure of higher units of language, namely phrases, clauses and sentences

Etymology – the branch of linguistics which examines the origin and the history of words

Phonetics and phonology – both study pronunciation. Each of them though considers different aspect. Whereas phonetics is primarily concerned with the physical aspects of sounds, phonology is the study of the abstract systems underlying the sounds of language (Repka 2008).

Study Guide

1. What is the origin of the word „diachronic"?
2. What is the difference between the synchronic and the diachronic study of language?
3. What is the scope of descriptive linguistics?
4. Is the descriptive linguistics a synchronic or a diachronic study of language? Explain why.
5. Explain the difference between the comparative and contrastive linguistics.
6. What is meant by saying two or more languages are genetically related?
7. Give an example of genetically related languages and their ancestor.
8. Explain the concept of contrastive linguistics as a part of applied linguistics.
9. What is the scope of historical linguistics?
10. Why historical linguistics is also called the diachronic linguistics?
11. Explain the term „Philology"
12. What are the goals of the historical study of languge?
13. What does morphology deal with?
14. What is the scope of syntax?
15. What is the difference between phonetics and phonology?

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Lesson 2

Some Facts from the History of Diachronic Linguistics

Handout

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Some sort of comparison of languages follows as an early consequence of any study or even awareness of languages. Linguists have studied and compared languages for years in attempt to find similarities and differences among them. More recently, these efforts gave rise to the branch of linguistic studies called Historical or Diachronic linguistics. Historical (diachronic) linguistics can be defined as the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of phonological, grammatical, and semantic changes, the reconstruction of earlier stages of languages, and the discovery and application of the methods by which genetic relationships among languages can be demonstrated. Historical linguistics had its roots in the etymological speculations of classical and medieval times, in the comparative study of Greek and Latin developed during the Renaissance, and in the speculations of scholars as to the language from which the other languages of the world were descended (encyclopedia Britannica).

The key concept in the definition of historical linguistics is the word "comparative" which gave rise to the latter linguistic orientation towards the genetic comparison of language in an effort to find a parent language from which other languages might have evolved.

1. Genetic Comparison of Languages

Even some attempts to compare and contrast languages had been made earlier, the real research was delayed until late 18th century when, in 1786, **Sir William Jones** brought up the idea of Sanskrit, the ancient Hindu language and its similarities to Latin and Greek. A solid base for his linguistic research was given by his previous studies. He studied Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Persian and Arabic. As an orientalist and jurist, he even took up Sanskrit to equip himself for the preparation of a vast digest Hindu and Muslim law. While studying Sanskrit, he developed the idea of a common source for languages which proved to be his greatest achievement. In *The Sanskrit Language* Jones wrote of how he observed that Sanskrit had strong resemblance to Greek and Latin which led him to suggest that the three languages not only had a common root but they were related to Gothic, Celtic and
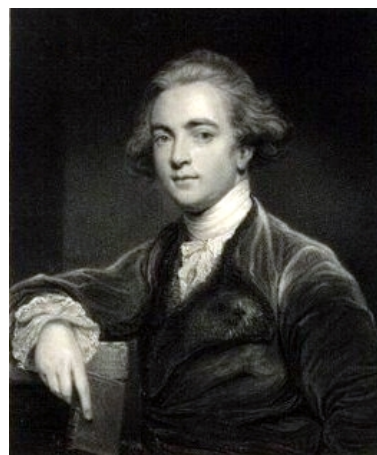
Persian languages. The extensive knowledge of Sanskrit, the member of the family of Indo-European languages, nurtured the idea of a common ancestor to all Indo-European languages. Using Sanskrit, Jones (and other linguists afterwards) traced back the idea of the ancestor language and restored the hypothetical ancestor language so-called Proto Indo European. Proto Indo European language is believed to have been spoken in a great part of the world from 4500 to 2500 B.C even though there is no direct evidence of Proto Indo European being a real language. It only was restored from its present-day descendants using comparative method.

Another famous linguist who contributed to and is considered the father of comparative linguistics is **Franz Bopp**, the professor of Oriental literature and general philology at the University of Berlin. His masterpiece *Uber das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* (On the system of Conjugation in Sanskrit) published in 1816, foreshadowed his major achievement. He traced the common origin of Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Latin and German. First he compared the grammatical category of verb and then he added more grammatical categories and all his work grew into an elaborated analysis of the above mentioned languages.
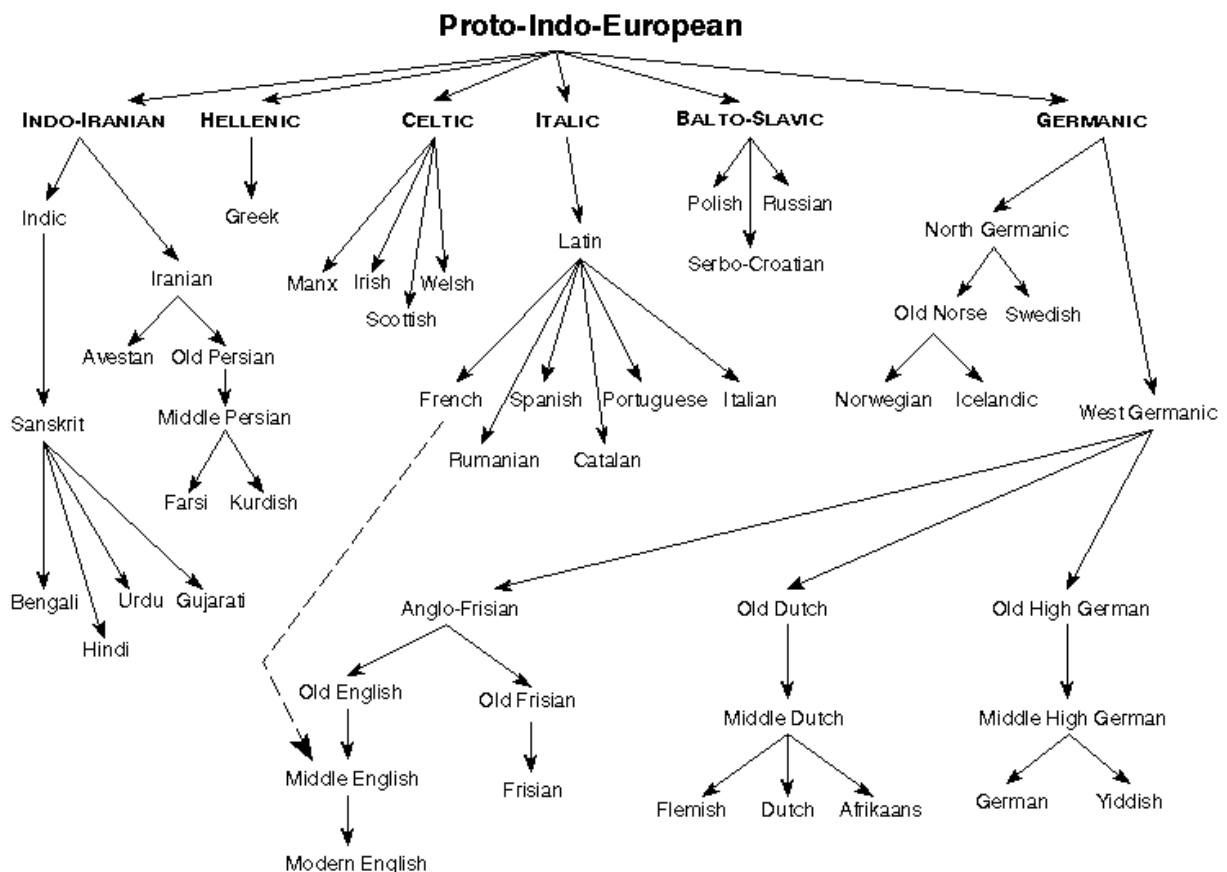
The Danish linguist **Rasmus Rask** completed his *Investigation of the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language* in 1814. His work demonstrated the relation of Germanic to Latin, Greek and Slavic. Rask showed that in the consonant sounds, words in the Germanic languages vary with a certain regularity from their equivalents in the other Indo European languages e.g. En: father, acre and Latin pater, ager. What Rask observed, proved to be the basis of a fundamental law of comparative linguistics, later referred to as the Grimm's Law enunciated in 1822 by Jacob Grimm.

Jacob Grimm pursued scholarly research on German language history publishing the first edition of the book Deutsche Gramatik (German grammar) in 1819. Apart from his research into linguistics, him and his brother Wilhelm are famous for a series of fairy tales translated into Slovak as *Rozprávky bratov Grimovcov*.

Another prominent comparative linguist is **August Schleicher**. From 1850 to 1857 Schleicher taught classical philology and comparative study of Greek and Latin at the University of Prague. During this period, he turned to study of Slavonic languages. He did research into Lithuanian which, in the same time, was his first attempt to study Indo European Language directly from speech rather than from texts. Following his previous work, he published his masterpiece *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo European,*

Sanskrit, Greek and Latin Languages, in which he studied the common characteristics of the languages and attempted to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European Parent language. Schleicher believed that language is an organism exhibiting periods of development, maturity and decline. As such, it could be studied by the methods of natural science. Developing the system of language classification resembling a botanical taxonomy he traced groups of related languages and arranged them into genealogical tree. His model came to be known as the family-tree theory, and was a major development in the history of Indo-European studies.

Proto-Indo-European

INDO-IRANIAN · HELLENIC · CELTIC · ITALIC · BALTO-SLAVIC · GERMANIC

Indic — Greek — Manx Irish Welsh — Latin — Polish Russian — North Germanic

Iranian — Scottish — Serbo-Croatian — Old Norse Swedish

Avestan Old Persian — French Spanish Portuguese Italian — Norwegian Icelandic — West Germanic

Sanskrit — Middle Persian — Rumanian Catalan

Farsi Kurdish

Bengali Urdu Gujarati — Anglo-Frisian — Old Dutch — Old High German

Hindi

Old English Old Frisian — Middle Dutch — Middle High German

Middle English Frisian — Flemish Dutch Afrikaans — German Yiddish

Modern English

An important role in comparative philology and the development of the languages of the Indo-European language family was played by **Neogrammarian school** *(Junggrammatiker).* Their hypothesis stated that sound laws have no exceptions. Their principle was very controversial because there seemed to be several irregularities in language change not accounted for by the sound laws, such as Grimm's law, that had been discovered by that time. (Britannica). Any explanation of forms can only be done in terms of regular sound-laws. The thesis of the unexceptional character of the sound-laws was programmatically declared. (Vachek). The neogrammarian theory was summarized by **Hermann Paul** in his book *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte (Principles of the History of Language).* In this book Paul formulated the well-known neogrammarian maxim that a truly scientific grammar of language

can only be based on historical research. The results of the neogrammarian research were codified in their five-volume compendium whose English translation was published under the title *Elements of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-Gemanic languages.*

       All linguists mentioned earlier had something in common – they attempted to establish the connections between the current and the ancestor languages and restore the common source language, so-called the Proto Language (Proto-Indo-European). Thus the names like Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Germanic share the prefix *"proto"* meaning *"first, original or from which other similar things develop"* Also, all the linguists mentioned earlier explored genetically related languages. The type of their exploration may well be traced in the word *"genetic"* as such… genetic may refer to the word *"genus"* (pl. *genera*) used in biology for the usual major subdivision of a family or sub-family in the classification of organisms.

Study Guide

1. Explain the relation between the historical and comparative linguistics
2. Explain the term *Comparative linguistics*
3. What is the difference between the *comparative* and the *contrastive* linguistics?
4. Explain the term of *Genetic comparison of languages*
5. What was *Sir William Jones* famous for?
6. Explain the relationship of *Gothic, Celtic* and *Persian language* to *Sanskrit*.
7. Give the time range in which *Proto-Indo-European language* might have been spoken.
8. What method did *Franz Bopp* use to trace the common origin of *Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Latin* and *German*?
9. Why was *Schleicher's* research into *Lithuanian* different from the type of research that had been done before?
10. Explain why *August Schleicher* organized languages into the *Genealogical Tree*?
11. What is the *Neo-grammarian maxim*?
12. Give the name of the linguist who summarized the *neogrammarian theory* in his book *"Principles of the history of language"*
13. Explain the prefix *"proto"* and us it in a name of a language.