

Daniel Kölligan

The Future of the Past: From Regional Studies to Human Heritage Research

Abstract: The paper argues that while there may be no intrinsic reason for giving preference to the study of European antiquity, it remains an indispensable part of human self-description as part of the general endeavor of understanding history and cultural productivity. Research need not end in a blind alley of compartmentalized paradigms. Taking the changing views on language relationship in antiquity and the early (European) modern age as an example, the paper traces the interplay between new data, insights and theories.

Keywords: Aeolism, language harmonies, language and identity

1 Human artefacts

In the discussion about the future of the studies of antiquity, a question that became ever more urgent since the end of the 19th c., it has become a topos to refer to this era, from a European or more broadly “Western” perspective, as that which is closest and at the same time foreign to us, in the famous formulation of Uvo Hölscher, as the “nächste Fremde” (Hölscher 1965). One may e.g. compare the discourse about sexual norms and behaviour in late antiquity with that of our own times to see that the dividing lines between acceptable and deprecated behaviour were quite different and probably do not meet many modern observers’ expectations.¹

The traditional argument for studying antiquity as the era producing norms and moral values still applicable in modern times has been fundamentally questioned e.g. by Friedrich Nietzsche, and no one would probably still claim today that reading classical authors from Homer via Plato to Vergil will make anyone a morally better (not to mention superior) being — any dictator, mass murderer, or terrorist may enjoy reading these authors, too, and many German Nazis did.²

Many thanks to M. Darling, W.P. Klein, N. Korobzow and Th. Venturott (Würzburg) for helpful remarks. All shortcomings of this paper are the author’s responsibility.

¹ Cf. Leppin 2019, 278–285.

² On the classicist agenda of the Nazi regime, cf. Chapoutot 2016.

The alternative, positivist approach to antiquity embracing all areas of science instrumental for its study was championed e.g. by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, cf. in his *Geschichte der Philologie*, 1921, 1: “Because the life [sc. of antiquity] we struggle to understand is a unity, our science is a unity.”³ While this avoids the problem of morality, it seems to lack a motivation for its subject area except maybe for knowledge for its own sake.⁴ While for a Platonic *academia* and an Aristotelian *lyceum* this would be self-sufficient and indeed the highest possible goal of human existence, modern utilitarianism is not satisfied with an answer which may be suspected to hide personal interests beyond an alleged common good: why should tax payers finance a few people’s fun? And, more generally, why should in an ever more connected world the “Western” position of what is closest to it be relevant for other world regions and societies which have their own “closest foreign” historical antecedents just as worthy of study? Any argumentation in favour of European antiquity as privileged as against the rest of world history runs the risk of perpetuating imperialism, as diluted as it may appear. Rather, human cultural production in general is worthy of study and commitment, irrespective of its contingent circumstances such as the place and time where it came into being: cheers to Argentinian tango in Finland, to the Bach Collegium Japan and to playing Sophocles on stages all over the world. On the other hand, it is for practical reasons not likely that everything can be studied everywhere, and probably each area of the world should at least focus on that part of human history that is most easily accessible to it, which for some time to come may still be those artefacts of human productivity found in physical proximity, without, of course, getting out of touch with more general pictures of human history. This should ensure that research on each area is not neglected, and that information becomes available to the international research community. Beyond a fruitful pluralistic view of human productivity, there may be two further points worthy of discussion, viz. the interdependence between data and the social environments in which they are discussed (2), and why we cannot ignore either of them (3).

³ “Weil das Leben, um dessen Verständnis wir ringen, eine Einheit ist, ist unsere Wissenschaft eine Einheit.”

⁴ Cf. Grethlein (2018, 1): “In the end, the classical canon fell victim to the positivist endeavour to cover the entire ancient material — from administrative inscriptions to the smallest scraps of papyrus” („Dem positivistischen Bestreben, das gesamte antike Material — von der Verwaltungsinschrift zum kleinsten Papyrusfetzen — zu erfassen, fiel letztendlich der klassische Kanon zum Opfer“.)

2 Constructing facts

2.1 History

Societies cannot forgo reflecting on and constructing their own past, and by extension have a notion of the general past of humankind. In bad cases, this is simply equated with one's perceived own history, as when G.F.W. Hegel denies that there is a history of Africa, because in his theory statehood is a prerequisite for history and in his view, Africa was a continent without states,⁵ or in the traditional ancient and medieval Iranian dualism of Eran vs An-Eran positing 'us against the rest'. Societies dispensing with this necessity and not investing in historical research cannot but replace it with ideology, i.e., with views of the past not based on evidence. In the end, this may lead to totalitarian attitudes, the suppression of information and free speech, often denouncing the latter as ideological itself and attacking the humanities among their first enemies.⁶ Those who ignore the call of Enlightenment (Germ. *Aufklärung*) to "dare and (at least try) to know for themselves" (*sapere aude*), run the risk of being told by others what to believe: the option is either to form one's own view of the past or to accept what others say about it. This requires research in all areas of the human past, and it requires societies to allow the deferment of possible answers and changing their view of the past. Research is often expected to give quick answers, but it is equally and perhaps more important to develop and ask questions and to keep them open and not to jump to premature conclusions. The idea is not new that history is constantly being rewritten and every generation needs to do this on its own and find its own relationship towards the human past. Ranke put it this way:

5 Cf. in the lecture series on the philosophy of world history (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Hoffmeister 1955, 216f.): "In this main part of Africa, no history can actually take place. There are only chance events, surprises that follow one other. There is no goal, no state to pursue." ("In diesem Hauptteile von Afrika kann eigentlich keine Geschichte stattfinden. Es sind Zufälligkeiten, Überraschungen, die aufeinander folgen. Es ist kein Zweck, kein Staat da, den man verfolgen könnte."), cf. also Kimmerle 1993.

6 Cf. e.g. Foucault 1966, 376: "Les «sciences de l'homme» font partie de l'épistème moderne comme la chimie ou la médecine ou telle autre science; ou encore comme la grammaire et l'histoire naturelle faisaient partie de l'épistème classique. Mais dire qu'elles font partie du champ épistémologique signifie seulement qu'elles y enracinent leur positivité, qu'elles y trouvent leur condition d'existence, qu'elles ne sont donc pas seulement des illusions, des chimères pseudo-scientifiques, motivées, au niveau des opinions, des intérêts, des croyances, qu'elles ne sont pas ce que d'autres appellent du nom bizarre d'«idéologie»."

History is always being rewritten ... Each epoch and its main direction make it their own and apply their views to it. Praise and blame are distributed accordingly. This goes on until one no longer recognises the thing itself. Then nothing can help but to return to the original message. But would one study it at all without the impulse of the present? ... Might a really true history ever be possible?⁷

As pointed out by Luhmann (1987, 118), history is not the sequence of events on a string of causality. For systems operating with what he calls “Sinn”, which applies to social and psychological systems, history is characterized by random access to the meaning of past or future events, i.e., precisely by *skipping* sequentiality. Systems create their own history by legitimizing access to specific events in the past — Luhmann’s examples are the destruction of the (Jewish) Temple, the crowning of the king by the pope, or, on a personal scale, one’s wedding, one’s first jail sentence, etc. — or by adding a *telos* to the future.⁸ History can only be

7 „Die Historie wird immer umgeschrieben ... Jede Zeit und ihre hauptsächliche Richtung macht sie sich zu eigen und trägt ihre Gedanken darauf über. Danach wird Lob und Tadel ausgeteilt. Das schleppt sich dann alles so fort bis man die Sache selbst gar nicht mehr erkennt. Es kann dann nichts helfen als Rückkehr zu der ursprünglichen Mitteilung. Würde man sie aber ohne den Impuls der Gegenwart überhaupt studieren? ... Ob eine völlig wahre Geschichte möglich ist?“ Cf. Leopold von Ranke, *Tagebuchblätter 1831–1849*, in: *Das politische Gespräch und andere Schriften zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Halle, 1925, 52, quoted here from Elias 1969, 14.

8 1987, 118: “Finally, it should be noted that history can be constituted in the special sense dimension of time. History is not to be understood here simply as the factual sequence of events, according to which the present can be understood as the effect of past causes or as the cause of future effects. What is special about the history of meaning is rather that it allows free access to the meaning of past or future events, i.e. a skipping of the sequence. History comes into being through the release of sequences. A system of meaning has history to the extent that it limits itself through free access — be it through certain past events (the destruction of the Temple, the coronation of the emperor by the pope, the defeat at Sedan; or on a smaller scale: the wedding, the dropping out of studies, the first sentence to prison, the “coming out” of the homosexual), be it through finalisation of the future. History is therefore always: present past or present future; always: distancing from pure sequence; and always: reduction of the freedom thus gained of erratic access to everything past and everything future.” — „Schließlich ist festzuhalten, daß in der besonderen Sinndimension Zeit Geschichte konstituiert werden kann. Unter Geschichte soll hier nicht einfach die faktische Sequenz der Ereignisse verstanden werden, derzufolge Gegenwärtiges als Wirkung vergangener Ursachen bzw. als Ursache künftiger Wirkungen verstanden werden kann. Das Besondere an der Sinngeschichte ist vielmehr, daß sie wahlfreien Zugriff auf den Sinn von vergangenen bzw. künftigen Ereignissen ermöglicht, also ein Überspringen der Sequenz. Geschichte entsteht durch Entbindung von Sequenzen. Ein Sinnsystem hat in dem Maße Geschichte, als es sich durch freigestellte Zugriffe limitiert — sei es durch bestimmte vergangene Ereignisse (die Zerstörung des Tempels, die Krönung des Kaisers durch den Papst, die Niederlage von Sedan; oder im kleineren: die Hochzeit, der Abbruch des Studiums, die erste Verurteilung zu einer Gefängnisstrafe, das “coming out” des Homosexuellen), sei es durch Finalisierung der

processed within the psychological and social system's basic unit *Sinn* and Ranke's ideal of a return to the "original communication" in order to arrive at the "really true history" is itself only possible within this sphere of "meaningful" operation which makes the idea of an extra-processual *Ding an sich*, an event in itself without any observer, pointless. The historical "fact" is only available with its interpretation.

2.2 Linguistics

The discussion of Labov (1975) about what a linguistic fact is, may be illuminating here: as he shows, it is gained by abstraction from "environmental noise", i.e., by the system-internal reduction of the complexity the system is confronted with in the interaction with its environment (Germ. *Umwelt*), e.g. regarding the interpretation of phonetic signals as representing phonemes:

... We do not demand narrow phonetic transcriptions of utterances, in fact reject them as inadequate unless they accompany a broader transcription, because they fail to include the linguistic facts as to whether nasalization, rounding, glottalization, etc., make a difference in that language. Thus omission of data and the simplification of transcription is one way of stating linguistic facts (p. 8).

Thus, what is needed for further processing, is information in the sense of Gregory Bateson as "a difference that makes a difference."⁹ Self-description obeys the same principle, i.e., it is another instance of the reduction of complexity, and hence it is to be expected that speakers produce contradictory evidence claiming that they do not use a linguistic feature which in fact they do:

It is not news to say that people will say one thing and do another. (Labov 1975, 32)

We were quite surprised [...] to find case after case where subjects used syntactic structures in the most natural kinds of social interaction, after their most conscientious introspection reported these forms to be quite impossible for them. (Labov 1975, 33)

This also applies to the difference in perception and production: speakers may hear sounds as identical in what could be minimal pairs, but at the same time be

Zukunft. Geschichte ist demnach immer: gegenwärtige Vergangenheit bzw. gegenwärtige Zukunft; immer: Abstandnahme von der reinen Sequenz; und immer: Reduktion der dadurch gewonnen Freiheit des sprunghaften Zugriffs auf alles Vergangene und alles Künftige."

⁹ Cf. Bateson 1972, 381: "The technical term 'information' may be succinctly defined as any difference which makes a difference in some later event."

consistent in producing them differently, e.g. *sauce* and *source* in varieties of English which Labov recorded in New York.¹⁰

This permanent reshuffling of description and self-description, including constant shifts between what is presumed to belong to oneself and what is deemed “foreign”, need not, however, lead to world views completely out of touch with each other, as Elias 1969, 18 describes it for the historical sciences:

In the field of historical research, it is still far more the rule than the exception that the efforts of researchers who worked three or more generations ago lie as dead books in libraries.¹¹

An extreme view of such compartmentalized and “incommensurable scientific paradigms” has been proposed by Kuhn in his famous essay on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962, spawning a fierce debate about the history of science. But it seems difficult to uphold such a strong version of paradigms as completely closed systems that can neither communicate with other views nor gradually develop into others.¹² Individuals may of course stick to one Wittgensteinian “language game” and one view of the world, ignoring further evidence as “external noise”: Christopher Columbus seems to have stuck to the idea that he had discovered a part of the East Indies for all his life — he died in 1506, i.e., after publications ascribed to Amerigo Vespucci in 1503 and 1505 had made it clear that he had actually reached a different continent.

2.3 Changing views on language relationships

To take an example from linguistics which shows that preconceived ideas, i.e., system-internal states and structures, guide information retrieval and research, yet may be overcome as further data are acquired and new aspects are taken into account and processed, we may look at two cases of the classification of languages changing in European history.

¹⁰ Cf. Labov 1975, 37.

¹¹ “Im Bereich der Geschichtsforschung ist es noch weit mehr die Regel als die Ausnahme, dass die Bemühungen der Forscher, die vor drei oder mehr Generationen arbeiteten, als tote Bücher in den Bibliotheken liegen.”

¹² As Phillips 1977, 110, inspired by Wittgenstein, puts it: “Individuals can learn to play more than one language-game. [...] I consider it a mistake to regard paradigms as closed systems.”

2.3.1 From Aeolism to the Tower of Babel

After the Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC, the question of the relationship between the conquerors and the conquered perceived as culturally preeminent also applied to their respective languages. Latin was believed by some scholars to be a dialect of Aeolic Greek or at least to be partly based on it. The Greek Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC – after 7 BC), living and working in Rome for at least 22 years, states in his *Antiquitates Romanae* (1.90.1):

Ῥωμαῖοι δὲ φωνὴν μὲν οὐτ’ ἄκρως βάρβαρον οὐτ’ ἀπηρτισμένως Ἑλλάδα φθέγγονται, μικτὴν δέ τινα ἐξ ἀμφοῖν, ἧς ἐστὶν ἡ πλείων Αἰολίς. τοῦτο μόνον ἀπολαύσαντες ἐκ τῶν πολλῶν ἐπιμιξιῶν, τὸ μὴ πᾶσι τοῖς φθόγγοις ὀρθοεπεῖν, τὰ δὲ ἅλλα ὅποσα γένους Ἑλληνικοῦ μηνύματ’ ἐστὶν ὡς οὐχ ἕτεροὶ τινες τῶν ἀποικησάντων διασώζοντες.

The language spoken by the Romans is neither utterly barbarous nor absolutely Greek, but a mixture, as it were, of both, the greater part of which is Aeolic. And the only disadvantage they have experienced from their intermingling with these various nations is that they do not pronounce all their sounds properly. But all other indications of a Greek origin they preserve beyond any other colonists. (Cary [Loeb])¹³

As the quotation shows, the supposed underlying reason for the similarity between languages was cultural contact such that, as Stevens 2006/2007, 116, states, “mixed cultures [...] produced mixed languages.” “Aeolism” thus reflects the awareness of the cultural and social influence of Greek on Roman society, and, from Dionysius’ perspective, this explanation of Roman linguistic origins adds to his general picture that “the Romans have achieved universal power because they were originally and are still essentially Greeks” (Stevens 2006/2007, 118), only with a funny accent. However, the idea of an Aeolic origin was not (just) a matter of covert revenge of the vanquished against the occupying forces. It is attributed also (and even) to Cato the Elder (234–149 BCE), traditionally seen as a dyed-in-the-wool anti-hellenic Roman (which is probably exaggerated), by Lydus (Var. fr. 295 Funaioli = Lydus *Mag.* R. 1.5), who claims that Cato wrote in his book on Roman antiquity that

ὁ Ῥωμύλος, ἡ οἱ κατ’ αὐτόν, δείκνυται κατ’ ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ τὴν Ἑλλάδα φωνήν, τὴν Αἰολίδα λέγω, ὡς φασιν ὁ τε Κάτων ἐν τῷ περὶ Ῥωμαικῆς ἀρχαιότητος ... Εὐάνδρου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων Ἀρκάδων εἰς Ἰταλίαν ἐλθόντων ποτὲ καὶ τὴν Αἰολίδα τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐνσπειράντων φωνήν.

¹³ Cf. Stevens 2006/2007, 115. The term “Aeolic” itself is quite vague, however, for most ancient authors it meant either roughly “any Greek that is not Ionic, Attic, or Doric”, cf. Hainsworth 1967, or more specifically, Lesbian, cf. Méndez Dosuna 2015, 460.

Romulus, or those around him, displayed the Greek language at that time, I mean the Aeolian, as Cato says in the work on Roman ancient history ... since Evander and the other Arcadians had come to Italy at some point and spread the Aeolian [language] among the 'barbarians'. (Manuwald [Loeb], adapted)

Also Quintilian (ca. 35–100 CE) took it up, cf. in his *Institutio Oratoria*:

1.5.58 *Sed haec divisio mea ad Graecum sermonem praecipue pertinet; nam et maxima ex parte Romanus inde conversus est, et confessis quoque Graecis utimur verbis ubi nostra desunt, sicut illi a nobis nonnumquam mutantur.*

But this classification of mine mainly means Greek, because Latin is largely derived from that language and we also openly use Greek words where we have none of our own, just as they sometimes borrow from us. (after Russell [Loeb])

1.6.31 *Continet autem in se multam eruditionem, sive ex Graecis orta tractemus, quae sunt plurima praecipueque Aeolica ratione, cui est sermo noster simillimus, declinata.*

It involves much erudition, whether we have to deal with words coming from the Greek, which are very numerous and are chiefly derived from Aeolic (this is the dialect which our language most closely resembles)... (Russell [Loeb])

The idea apparently had its heyday in the 1st c. BC. Without ever becoming a matter of doctrine, it was an object of discussion with positions ranging from the idea that Latin as a whole descended from Greek to less drastic claims about individual Latin words as borrowed from Greek. It then saw a “rapid move into obscurity in the 1st c. AD, after which it is taken up only by the grammarians”¹⁴ such as Priscianus in the 6th c. AD. It survived, however, somewhat subliminally into the nineteenth century, as can be seen e.g. in Ross (1859)¹⁵ who still tried to defend this ancient idea against the then recent and sweeping demonstrations of comparative philology championed by Bopp (1833) and many others.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stevens 2006, 122.

¹⁵ Cf. also Mühlhelt 1965, 70.

¹⁶ Cf. also slightly earlier W. v. Humboldt's “Essay on the Best Means of Ascertaining the Affinities of Oriental Languages”, presented at the Royal Asiatic Society of London in 1828 (published 1830, *GS*, vi, 78–84), cf. Morpurgo Davies 1998, 101.

2.3.2 From language harmonies to language trees

With the Christianization of Europe the Bible became the primary narrative that world history had to fit into. From late antiquity till modern times, this world view derived all languages from the three Biblical languages Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and it was Hebrew that was most often thought to have been the universal language of mankind originally. While early patristic authors like Tertullian (ca. 150–220) and Lactantius (ca. 250–325) did not yet favour one particular language as the unique origin, heavyweights like Hieronymus (348–420) and Augustine (354–430) declared Hebrew to be the mother of all languages (“*omnium linguarum matrix*”, Hieron. *In Sophoniam* 3.18), a view canonized in Isidor of Sevilla’s influential *Etymologiae* from the early 7th c.: in book 9, in the chapter *de linguis gentium*, he states that the *linguarum diversitas* is caused by the confusion of languages after the building of the tower of Babel:¹⁷

Linguarum diversitas exorta est in aedificatione turris post diluvium. Nam priusquam superbia turris illius in diversos signorum sonos humanam divideret societatem, una omnium nationum lingua fuit, quae Hebraea vocatur.

The diversity of languages arose with the building of the Tower after the Flood, for before the pride of that Tower divided human society, so that there arose a diversity of meaningful sounds, there was one language for all nations, which is called Hebrew.

Tres sunt autem linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellent.

There are three sacred languages — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin — which are preeminent throughout the world. (Barney 2006, 191)

In early modern Europe, scholars tried to connect the languages known to them such as German, Dutch and French with those sanctioned by the Holy Scripture in so-called “harmonies”, especially with Hebrew as the language closest to or identical with the language Adam conversed in with God in paradise.¹⁸ An early work

¹⁷ Cf. also Vineis/Maierù 1994, 155–158, Klein 1999, 27.

¹⁸ This also implied for some scholars that after the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment humans (in heaven at least) would converse in Hebrew again, cf. e.g. in Petrus Galatinus in his *De arcanis catholicae veritatis* (Basel 1550): *Quemadmodum enim ante linguarum divisionem in turri Babel factam, universa terra unius erat labii, ita in resurrectione generali omnes homines una loquentur lingua, Hebraica scilicet, qua primi parentes in paradiso loquebantur* “For as it was before the division of languages due to the building of the tower of Babel, namely that the whole earth spoke one language only, so all humankind will use one language only after the resurrection, namely Hebrew, which our first ancestors spoke in paradise.” Cf. also Klein 1992, 186f.

dedicated to this attempt is Sigismundus Gelenius' *Lexicon symphonum, quo quatuor linguarum Europae familiarum, Graecae scilicet, Latinae, Germanicae ac Slavinicae, concordia consonantiaeque indicatur*, published in Basel in 1537, followed by similar works like Konrad Gesner's *Mithridates. De differentiis linguarum tum veterum tum quae hodie apud diversas nationes in toto orbe terrarum in usu sunt* from 1555,¹⁹ with a collection of examples drawn from a great variety of languages, including e.g. Armenian from which Gesner notes, among other words, *Chahanaim* as the presumed Armenian form corresponding to Hebr. *Chohen* — the Armenian form is actually *k'ahanay*, pl. *k'ahanayk'*, and it is borrowed from Syriac *kahnā*. The use of the Hebrew ending *-im* added to the Armenian word betrays, if it is not simply a mistake, the attempt to make other languages look as similar as possible to Hebrew. Hieronymus Megiser's *Thesaurus polyglottus* from 1603 "includes comparative data from about four hundred languages, which are linked hierarchically to Hebrew",²⁰ the famous *Harmony* by Étienne Guichard from 1606, *Harmonie étymologique des langues ... où se démontre que toutes les langues sont descendues de l'hébraïque*, uses the *permutatio litterarum* in order to reach its goal, i.e., words are derived from those found in other languages (and ultimately in Hebrew) by the addition, subtraction, transposition, and inversion of letters, a method already advocated by Johannes Avenarius (1516–1590) in his *Liber radicum seu lexicon ebraicum* (Wittenberg 1568), deriving e.g. Germ. *kurz* 'short' from the Hebrew root *k-ṣ-r* 'brevity',²¹ and also used by Georg Cruciger in his *Harmonia linguarum quatuor cardinalium hebraicae graecae latinae et germanicae* from 1616, published in Frankfurt am Main, probably the most detailed attempt to identify Hebrew roots in the other three languages.²² The Semitic principle of triconsonantal roots served as the basis for identifying cognates in the other languages, e.g. Hebrew *d-k-r* 'perfodere, transfigere, configendo perimere' in Greek *θράξ, τραχύς, δράκων*, Latin *draco, trux, truculentus, Turca* and German *Türcke, Trotz, drucken, Drach(e)* and *dreist*.²³

While most scholars in the 17th c. thus opted for Hebrew as the original language from which all others were said to descend, there were also other voices, e.g. that of the architect John Webb (1611–1672) who favoured Chinese, which he assumed Noah had brought to the east, in his *Historical Essay Endeavouring the Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language*

19 Cf. also Klein 2004, 12.

20 Simone 1997, 162.

21 Cf. also Klein 1999, 48–50.

22 Cf. Klein 1992, 303; 2004, 21.

23 Cf. Klein 2004, 21.

from 1669, mostly because of its writing system using symbols for entities which he thought revealed the true nature of things.²⁴ But opinions on the comparative merit of writing systems varied and maybe unsurprisingly also later there were European scholars who among these praised the alphabet as the highest possible achievement, e.g. Rousseau in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* from 1761 and Hegel in his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* from 1830 (3rd ed., III §459):

These three ways of writing correspond fairly exactly to the three different states in which we can consider men gathered into nations. The painting of objects is suitable for savage peoples; the signs of words and propositions, for barbaric peoples; and the alphabet, for civilised peoples.²⁵

The alphabet is in itself the more intelligent (way of writing); in it the word, which is the most dignified way of expressing the ideas of intelligence, is brought to consciousness and made the object of reflection.²⁶

As for the primeval language, even Flemish was proposed, by the — surprise — Flemish scholar Abraham Mylius (1563–1637; *Lingua belgica*, Leiden 1612)²⁷ and by Johannes Goropius Becanus (1519–1573) in his *Origines Antwerpianae, sive Cimmeriorum Becceselana novem libris complexa* (Antwerp, 1569), where he proposed that despite the Babylonian confusion of languages, one of Noah's sons, Japhet, who did not partake in the construction of the tower, continued to use the original language of humankind.²⁸ His fanciful explanations, including those of Biblical names, by the means of Dutch words such as *Adam* as *haat-dam* 'a dam against the hate (of the snake)' soon became the object of satire and G.W. Leibniz (1646–1716)

24 One might see this as a repetition of the Stoic idea of etymology which tried to find this by the study of words. On Webb, cf. Frodsham 1964.

25 "Ces trois manières d'écrire répondent assez exactement aux trois divers états sous lesquels on peut considérer les hommes rassemblés en nations. La peinture des objets convient aux peuples sauvages; les signes des mots et des propositions, aux peuples barbares, et l'alphabet, aux peuples policés."

26 "Die Buchstabenschrift ist an und für sich die intelligentere; in ihr ist das Wort, die der Intelligenz eigentümliche würdigste Art der Äußerung ihrer Vorstellungen, zum Bewusstsein gebracht, zum Gegenstande der Reflexion gemacht." One is tempted to compare W. v. Humboldt's ideas about the ideal language type realized by inflecting languages, as they are best at succinctly expressing principal and concomitant concepts, in contrast e.g. to isolating languages, in which, in his view, the expression of grammatical information by single words distracts the mind from the main points of the utterance; cf. for a discussion Morpurgo Davies 1998, 111–114.

27 Cf. Metcalf 1953.

28 Cf. also Klein 1992, 298f.

even coined the term *goropisieren* ‘to goropize’ to denote such arbitrary attempts²⁹ in his *New treatises about the human mind* (*Neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*), vol. 3. (“about words”), ch. 2 (“about the meaning of words”):

Theophilus. [...] *And in general one must not give credence to etymologies except when one has a lot of concordant testimony, otherwise one goropises.*

Philalethes. *One “goropises”? What does that mean?*

Theophilus. *One says so because the strange and often ridiculous etymologies of Goropius Becanus, a learned physician in the sixteenth century, have become proverbial.*³⁰

The discussion about the original language and its relation to both ancient and modern languages was complicated by further questions that were often discussed at the same time, mixing theological, patriotic or *avant la lettre* nationalistic and other interests into the debate.³¹ One pivotal question was whether language in general was to be seen as of divine or human origin. In early modern theorizing the former was often taken for granted, based on the authority of the Bible, which presented God as conversing with Adam and telling him to give names to all things created (Gen. 2:20) and which presented the story of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11) as an explanation for the multiplicity of languages in the world.³²

²⁹ Cf. also Droixhe 1978, 54.

³⁰ “Theophilus. [...] *Und im allgemeinen darf man den Etymologien keinen Glauben schenken, als wenn man eine Menge zusammenstimmender Zeugnisse hat, sonst goropisiert man.* Philalethes. *Goropisiert man? Was heißt das?* Theophilus. *Man sagt so, weil die seltsamen und oft lächerlichen Etymologien des Goropius Becanus, eines gelehrten Arztes im sechzehnten Jahrhundert, sprüchwörtlich geworden sind.*” Probably Goropius felt encouraged for his explanations because the German-Dutch mystic and reformer Hendrik Niclaes (ca. 1501–1580), founder of the “family of love”, to which Goropius belonged, declared Dutch to be the holy language of the books of his confraternity; cf. Delfos 1958, 87. For similar ideas related to German cf. Justus Georg Schottelius (1612–1676) in his *Ausführliche Arbeit Von der Teutschen HauptSprache*, Braunschweig 1666, 19 (“So sol dennoch nunmehr im gegenteilh die Teutsche Sprache durch zustimmung der Hebraischen / den Griechen und Lateinern selbst vorleuchten / und ihnen nicht allein ihren eigenen verborgenen Ursprung und Ankunft in vielen entdecken / sonderen sol auch ihre folgere und vertretere [...] auf den rechten Weg bringen.”)

³¹ Cf. for German Huber 1984.

³² The Adamic language itself was often thought to be so rich in synonyms as to contain all the words found in the post-Babylonian languages, cf. e.g. in Nicolaus Cusanus’ *Compendium* ch. 3: *primam humanam dicendi artem adeo fuisse copiosam ex multis synonymis, quod linguae omnes postea divisae in ipsa continebantur. Omnes enim linguae humanae sunt ex prima illa parentis nostri Adae, scilicet hominis, lingua*, “The original human art-of-speaking was so replete with synonyms that in it were contained all the languages that were later separated out. For all human languages derive from that first language of our parent Adam, i.e., man” (Hopkins 1996), cf. also Klein 1992, 29.

Connected with this, there was a discussion about the language of humans vs the language of angels³³ — which looks like a distant echo of the tradition of the “language of men vs language of the gods” found in various Indo-European cultures.³⁴ The language of Adam and Eve was often seen as the perfect model of language “ordered and constructed according to the rules of reason”,³⁵ and this view was often accompanied by the complaint about the imperfection of human language caused by the fall of man out of paradise, and by attempts to reform and improve human language in order to restore it to its original perfect state, “both for an educational and ‘civic’ purpose, and also in order to improve scientific and philosophical communication or to enhance religious and political peace.”³⁶ The discussion about the relationship between language and thought, knowledge and logic permeates the works of among others Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, and the grammar of Port Royal, and the idea of a “universal grammar” common to all languages was current, based on the idea that all languages must have such common features qua product of the divinity and/or the human mind; “universal grammars” in this sense, mainly based on Latin grammar, were published up to the 18th c.³⁷ Language change presented one of the greatest challenges to linguistic thought in these centuries. Two basic explanations were offered: a) “change was attributed to the use that human beings make of languages and to the element of whim which it involves (the ‘common people’ are often quoted as a cause of change as well)”;³⁸ this apparently explained the gradual corruption and degeneration of languages, moving away ever more from the perfect “Adamic” state; b) others like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, however, ventured the opposite view, i.e., to see language as a basically arbitrary product of the human mind without any natural basis and therefore liable to change.³⁹

As pointed out above, the steady increase of data may bring a specific research “paradigm” to an end. This was also the case of the idea of a *harmonia linguarum* based on Hebrew:⁴⁰ works like those of Hieronymus Megiser (1554–1619) made it ever more difficult to find plausible traces of it in other languages. He published a

33 Cf. Simone 1997, 152: “a classic Thomistic theme, which also turned up in Dante”, Klein 1992, 185–202; most scholars assumed that angels (and demons) qua incorporeal beings communicated their thoughts directly without the need for oral or written transmission.

34 Cf. Watkins 1970.

35 Simone 1997, 152.

36 Simone 1997, 154. Cf. also Klein 1992, 280–296.

37 Cf. Simone 1997, 155.

38 Simone 1997, 155.

39 Cf. for further discussion Klein 1992, Lepschy 1994 and 1998.

40 Cf. also Klein 1992, 307–317.

collection of the Lord's prayer in forty languages (*Specimen quadraginta diversarum atque inter se differentium linguarum et dialectorum; videlicet, Oratio dominica, totidem linguis expressa*, Frankfurt 1593) and a dictionary comprising vocabulary from 400 languages listed under semantically corresponding Latin lemmas, without, however, an attempt to connect them etymologically (*Thesaurus polyglottus: vel dictionarium multilingue: ex quadringentis circiter tam veteris, quam novi vel potius antiquis incogniti orbis nationum linguis, dialectis, idiomatibus et idiotismis, constans*, Frankfurt 1603). He published the first Turkish grammar in German in 1612 and in 1623 a dictionary of the language of Madagascar (*Dictionarium der Madagascarischen Sprach*) remarking (p. 76) that this language could not be connected with any other language known to him: "...weil eine eigne sprache in gemelter Insul gebreuchlich / welche sich sonst mit keiner andern in der Welt confirmirt."⁴¹ Also Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) renounced the *harmonia* model in his work on the classification of European languages (written 1599, published 1610), the *Diatriba de europaeorum linguis*, arguing that the eleven main languages ("matrices") identified by him were in fact unrelated to each other.⁴²

The rise of comparative philology was not least furthered by additional data: when Sanskrit became known to European audiences, its similarities with Latin, Greek and other European languages made a hypothesis about some kind of connection between them unavoidable, and, as is well known, it was Sir Williams Jones' (1746–1794) who spelt the idea out in detail in his discourse delivered to the Asiatic Society (which he had founded himself on January 15th, 1784) on February 2nd, 1786:

The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very dif-

⁴¹ Cf. Klein 1992, 310.

⁴² Scaliger divides the languages of Europe into four major families, going by the word for 'god', i.e., the *deus*-type (Romance), the *theos*-type (Greek), the *godt*-type (Germanic) and the *boge*-type (Slavic), and seven smaller groups, Albanian, Tartar, Basque, Hungarian, "Finno-Lappic" (Finnish and Sami), Irish and Breton. On this scholar, in many aspects ahead of his times, cf. Grafton (1983/1993), and for the general context Grafton (1994).

ferent idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family. (Jones 1824, 28–29).⁴³

This was a substantial change of how the relationships between the languages known to Europeans at that time were seen and on the methodological level of how further language relationships could be discovered — something impossible before the development of the comparative method. One such discovery / proof was that of Heinrich Hübschmann in 1875, who showed that Armenian was an independent branch within the Indo-European language family and not a part of Iranian as it had been assumed before this. This implied that, from now on, all the Iranian-looking words formerly suspected to be inherited were to be treated as loanwords: the history of the Armenian language had to be re-written.

43 This is not to deny, of course, that there were precursors noting similarities between European and/or non-European languages, be it in connection with the view of Hebrew as origin of all languages or independent from this, e.g. Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerallt Cymro, Gerald of Wales, ca. 1146–1223) who stated in his *Descriptio Cambriae* (1194) 1.15: *Notandum etiam, quod verba linguae Britannicae omnia fere vel Graeco conveniunt vel Latino. Graeci Ydor aquam vocant, Britones Duur; salem Hal, Britones Halein; Mis, Tis, pro ego et tu, Britones autem Mi, Ti; Onoma, Enou; Penta, Deca, Pimp, Dec.* “It is noteworthy that almost all words in the British language correspond either with the Greek or Latin, the Greeks say ὕδωρ for water, the Britons *dwr*; salt is ἅλ(ς), in British, *halen*; they say *Mis Tis* for me and you, the Britons say *Mi Ti*; ὄνομα (‘name’) equals *enou*; πέντε (‘five’) *pump*; δέκα (‘ten’) *deg*.” (It is unclear which Greek words are meant to be *Mis Tis*, cf. Dimock 1868, 194: “As to where Giraldus found his Greek *Mis* and *Tis*, for *I* and *You*, is beyond my Greek scholarship.”) In his *Itinerarium Cambriae* 1.8 he notes: *Hal enim Graece, Halein Britannice, Halein similiter Hibernice; Halgein, g interposita lingua predicta. Item sal Latine — quia, ut ait Priscianus, in quibusdam dictionibus pro aspiratione ponitur s; ut Hal Graece sal Latine; hemi, semi; hepta, septem — sel Gallice, mutatione a vocalis in e, a Latino; additione t literae, salt Anglice, sout Teutonice.* (cf. Dimock 1868, 77). In the 16th c., the Italian merchant Filippo Sassetti (1540–1588), who dwelt in Goa in 1583, noted correspondences between Italian and Sanskrit (“Sanskrita ... lingua ... nella quale sono molti de’nostri nomi”) naming the numerals ‘6’ (cf. Ital. *sei* : Skt. *ṣaṣ*), ‘7’ (*sette* : *sapta*), ‘8’ (*otto* : *aṣṭa*), ‘9’ (*nove* : *nava*), and the words for ‘god’ (*dio* : *devas*, *devo*) and ‘snake’ (*serpe*, *serpente* : *sarpa*, *sarpant*) — his letters were published only much later, however, in the 19th c. (Marcucci 1855; cf. Droixhe 1978, 76; Muller 1986). The German Christian missionary Benjamin Schulze (1689–1760), who was active in South India, published grammars of Telugu and Hindustani and worked on the translation of the Bible into Tamil, noted the similarities between the numerals of Latin and Sanskrit, etc. Most scholars, however, explained such convergences as due to language contact.

3 Language and identity

As the examples have shown, social, political and religious changes affect the views about languages and language relationships. As an integral part of social and individual identity, discourse about language is constantly subject to socio-political change, negotiating integration and separation, affirmation and denial: how do Greek and Latin relate to each other, how can the existence of the many different languages on earth be explained in the light of a single original “Adamic” language in paradise, etc. The answers that are given are not a matter of linguists only, as shown by modern nationalist discourse about origins, homelands, being autochthonous, denying the factual existence or the right to exist of others including their language, history, and culture. As is well known, there is no shortage of examples for the suppression of languages, usually proclaimed to be enacted for the welfare of its victims, e.g. the “terreur linguistique” during the French revolution against other languages and language varieties (including Breton, Basque, Picardian and Provençal) in the name of a common language for all French citizens,⁴⁴ the ban on sign languages in schools as promoted at the *Second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf (ICED)* in Milan in 1880 by oralists, formally rejected only in July 2010 at the *21st ICED* in Vancouver,⁴⁵ the system of residential schools in Canada, operating since the 1880s until the late 20th c., suppressing indigenous languages and cultures⁴⁶ and currently Ukrainian as object of Russian war propaganda denying its existence or status as a language different from Russian.

4 Summary

The study of the human past is indispensable for any society aspiring to a self-determined future, and European antiquity is one of the pieces in the puzzle of human history to be studied for an ever-richer picture of human life and cultural productivity. Research need not end in incommensurable compartmentalized silos of specialization or conflicting world views. A pluralistic view of past human productivity including European antiquity without excluding the study of the

⁴⁴ Cf. the infamous *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir le patois, et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française* by Abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoire (1750–1831) published in 1794.

⁴⁵ On the history of the debate, cf. Tellings 1995.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hanson et al. 2020.

other world regions may open research to a broader comparative and fruitful study of what it meant and what it means to be human. It is only then that one may reasonably follow St. Paul's advice in 1 Thess. 5.12 πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε "Test everything, and hold fast to what is good."

Bibliography

- Barney, S.A. (2006), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge/New York.
- Bateson, G. (1972), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, Aylesbury.
- Bopp, F. (1833), *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Lithauischen, Gothischen und Deutschen*, Berlin.
- Chapoutot, J. (2016), *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, Oakland, CA.
- Delfos, L. (1958), 'Der goldene Zirkel. Die Antwerpener Offizin Plantin-Moretus 1555–1866', in: *Tradition: Zeitschrift für Firmengeschichte und Unternehmerbiographie* 3 (2), May 1958, 79–97.
- Dimock, J.F. (1868), *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, Vol. VI, London.
- Droixhe, D. (1978), *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire: (1600 – 1800; rationalisme et révolutions positivistes*, Genève.
- Elias, N. (1969), *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, Berlin/Neuwied.
- Foucault, M. (1966), *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris.
- Frodsham, J.D. (1964), 'Chinese and the primitive language: John Webb's contribution to 17th century sinology', in: *Asian Studies* 2 (3), 389–408.
- Grafton, A. (1983), *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols., Oxford.
- Grafton, A. (1994), *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450 – 1800*, Cambridge, Mass./London.
- Grethlein, J. (2018), 'Die Antike, das nächste Fremde', in: *Merkur* 824, 22–35.
- Hainsworth, J.B. (1967), 'Greek views of Greek dialectology', in: *Transactions of the Philological Society* 66(1), 62–76.
- Hanson, E./D.P. Games/A. Manuel (2020), 'The Residential School System', in: *Indigenous Foundations*. <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/residential-school-system-2020/>. (accessed Sept., 29, 2023).
- Hoffmeister, J. (ed.) (1955), *G.W.P. Hegel: Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Band 1: Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, 5th ed., Hamburg.
- Hölscher, U. (1965), *Die Chance des Unbehagens: drei Essays zur Situation der klassischen Studien*, Göttingen.
- Hopkins, J. (1996), *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*, Minneapolis.
- Huber, W. (1984), *Kulturpatriotismus und Sprachbewusstsein: Studien zur deutschen Philologie des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main/New York.
- Hübschmann, H. (1875), 'Über die Stellung des Armenischen im Kreise der indogermanischen Sprachen', in: *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 23, 5–49.
- Humboldt, W. v. (1903–1936), *Gesammelte Schriften, im Auftrag der Königlichen Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, A. Lietzmann et al. (eds.), 17 vols., Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin (reprinted Berlin, 1968).
- Jones, W. (1824), *Discourses delivered before the Asiatic Society: and miscellaneous papers, on the religion, poetry, literature, etc., of the nations of India. By Sir William Jones. With an essay on his name, talents,*

- and character. By the Right Hon. Lord Teignmouth. Selected and edited by James Elmes, 1746–1794, London.
- Kimmerle, H. (1993), 'Hegel und Afrika: das Glas zerspringt', in: *Hegel-Studien* 28, 303–325.
- Klein, W.P. (1992), *Am Anfang war das Wort: theorie- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Elemente frühneuzeitlichen Sprachbewußtseins*, Berlin.
- Klein, W.P. (1999), 'Die ursprüngliche Einheit der Sprachen in der philologisch-grammatischen Sicht der frühen Neuzeit', in: A. Coudert (ed.), *The Language of Adam. Die Sprache Adams*, Wiesbaden, 25–56.
- Klein, W.P. (2004), 'Was wurde aus den Wörtern der hebräischen Ursprache? Zur Entstehung der komparativen Linguistik aus dem Geist etymologischer Spekulation', in: G. Veltri/G. Necker (eds.), *Gottessprache in der philologischen Werkstatt. Hebraistik vom 15. bis 19. Jahrhundert*, Leiden, 3–23.
- Kuhn, T.S. (2009), *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen/The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2. rev. und um das Postskriptum von 1969 erg. Aufl., Nachdr., Frankfurt am Main.
- Labov, W. (1975), *What is a Linguistic Fact?*, Lisse.
- Leppin, H. (2019), *Die frühen Christen. Von den Anfängen bis Konstantin*, München.
- Lepschy, G.C. (ed.) (1994), *History of Linguistics, Vol. II: Classical and Medieval Linguistics*, London.
- Lepschy, G.C. (ed.) (1998), *History of Linguistics, Vol. III: Renaissance and Early Modern Linguistics*, London.
- Luhmann, N. (1987), *Soziale Systeme*, Frankfurt a.M.
- Marcucci, E.M. (1855), *Lettere edite e inedite di Pilippo Sassetti raccolte e annotate*, Firenze.
- Méndez Dosuna, J. (2007), 'The Aeolic dialects', in: A.-Ph. Christidis (ed.), *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 460–474.
- Metcalf, G.J. (1953), 'Abraham Mylius on Historical Linguistics', in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 68(3), 535–554.
- Morpurgo Davies, A. (1998), *History of Linguistics, Volume IV: Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*, ed. by G.C. Lepschy, London.
- Muller, J.-C. (1986), 'Early stages of language comparison from Sassetti to Sir William Jones (1786)', in: *Kratylos* 31, 1–31.
- Mühmelt, M. (1965), *Griechische Grammatik in der Vergilerklärung*, München.
- Phillips, D.L. (1977), *Wittgenstein and Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Perspective*, Totowa, N.J.
- Ross, L. (1859), *Italiker und Gräken: Lateinisch ist Griechisch*, 2., veränd. und erw. Bearb., Halle.
- Simone, R. (1998), 'The early modern period', in: Lepschy 1998, 149–236.
- Stevens, B. (2006/2007), 'Aeolism: Latin as a Dialect of Greek', in: *The Classical Journal* 102, 115–144.
- Tellings, A.E.J.M. (1995), *The Two Hundred Years' War in Deaf Education: A Reconstruction of the Methods Controversy*, Nijmegen. URL: https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/146075/mmubn000001_211203076.pdf?sequence=1 (last visit June 2024).
- Vineis, E./A. Maierù (1994), 'Medieval Linguistics', in: Lepschy 1994, 134–346.
- Watkins, C. (1970), 'Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions', in: J. Puhvel (ed.), *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, Berkeley, CA, 1–17.
- Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, U. von. (1921), *Geschichte der Philologie*, Leipzig.