

THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE



HENRY SWEET

THE TEMPLE PRIM

THE HISTORY OF
LANGUAGE

By HENRY SWEET, M.A.

PREFACE

WHEN asked by Mr. Dent to write an introduction to the principles of Comparative Philology for his series, I willingly consented, not only because I had the necessary materials ready to hand, but also because I felt there was still room for an addition to the already large literature of the subject; a subject which, however, admits of being approached from so many different points of view that any competent treatment of it is sure to have some special merits of its own.

The first part of this book deals with the definition of the science of language, its scope (p. 20) and methods, and the life of language generally. In this part I have aimed at clearness of statement and adequate illustration, and have tried to avoid truisms and superfluous generalizations on the one hand, and over-abstraction and linguistic mysticism on the other.

In order to give greater definiteness and concreteness to the reader's impressions I have added a second part, consisting of a brief sketch of the structure of that family of languages to which English belongs—the Aryan or Indogermanic—together with a discussion of its affinities to other families of languages, which last will serve both to widen the reader's linguistic horizon and to prepare him to follow problems which cannot be ignored much longer.

In the last chapter the reader is introduced to a still wider view of language by the discussion of some of the most interesting questions of general philology—that of the

individuality of language and the connexion between language and nationality.

It need hardly be said that care has been taken to exclude antiquated views and statements. Arguments founded on language are so often appealed to by investigators in other branches of knowledge, such as archæology and anthropology, and the science of language affords so many analogies for the biologist and naturalist that it is important that the information given in works on language should be as reliable as possible. And yet we still meet arguments founded on the assumption that such a language as Chinese represents the primitive stage in the evolution of speech (p. 70), that the languages of savages change completely in a single generation (p. 79), that the old inflectional languages are the most perfect types of speech, and so on.

I have tried to confine myself as far as possible to the statement of those views and results which are generally accepted. But comparative philology is still too young a science to make it possible to exclude all unsettled and disputed questions. It would, for instance, be unreasonable to ask me to cut out all reference to the most ancient language in the world merely because a small but noisy band of paradox-lovers and hunters after notoriety still profess to disbelieve the existence of a "so-called Accadian or Sumerian language."

In short, every one who undertakes to write a book of this kind must rely on his own judgment. He must avoid as far as possible the discussion of questions on which he feels doubtful; but on the other hand he is bound to express his opinion definitely on all questions on which his mind is made up, even if he stands alone in his views.

I foresee most opposition to the chapter on Aryan affinities. In philology, as in all branches of knowledge, it is the specialist who most strenuously opposes any attempt to widen the field of his methods. Hence the advocate of affinity between the Aryan and the Finnish languages need not be alarmed when he hears that the majority of Aryan philologists reject the hypothesis. In many cases this rejection merely means

that our specialist has his hands full already, and shrinks from learning a new set of languages—a state of mind which no one can quarrel with. Even when this passively agnostic attitude developes into aggressive antagonism, it is generally little more than the expression of mere prejudice against de-throning Aryan from its proud isolation and affiliating it to the languages of yellow races; or want of imagination and power of realizing an earlier morphological stage of Aryan; or, lastly, that conservatism and caution which would rather miss a brilliant discovery than run the risk of having mistakes exposed.

I have therefore pursued the affinities of Aryan as far as the impartial application of generally accepted principles seemed to yield definite results. I cannot but accept these results, because, if I reject them, I must also reject the results of comparative Aryan philology itself (p. 120).

But I have not gone a step beyond what I feel to be solid ground. If I had pursued all the tempting combinations and far-reaching generalizations suggested by the linguistic discoveries of the last twenty years, it would, for instance, have been easy to connect Aryan with Chinese. But plausible as Lacouperie's and Ball's affiliation of Chinese to Sumerian is, it cannot be regarded as proved in our present ignorance of the history of Chinese itself. Till the history of Chinese sounds has been written any comparison of it with other languages cannot be anything but tentative.

It would have been still more premature to include in a book of this kind a discussion of the relationships of those languages which lie—or seem to lie—outside the “Aryo-Altaic” and Semitic families, especially as regards partially deciphered languages such as Etruscan and Hittite.

But mischievous as it would be to mix up conjecture with fact in such a branch of the subject as this, there is a time for pure hypothesis, and there is a place for it even in an elementary book. It would, for instance, be a mistake to ignore the question of the origin of language merely because it cannot be approached except by *à priori* conjecture: indeed, the mere

fact of this being the only method obviates any danger of misleading. So also the illustration of the possibility of existing languages being only a few centuries old (p. 88) is on the face of it frankly conjectural; if it turns out to be untenable it will still serve to enlarge the reader's knowledge and stimulate his imagination. Similar remarks apply to the discussion of the age of Aryan (p. 99).

From what has been said it is evident that although this book is not intended to be an original contribution to comparative philology, it must almost inevitably contain some original views and results. In the statement of the principles of sound-change will be found several modifications of earlier views: thus the inconsistencies pointed out by P. Passy in the exposition of these views has led me to a still further divergence from the views of the latter, culminating in the axiom that "the imitation of sounds is generally perfect" (p. 19). Much of what I have said about the conditions of linguistic change and stability is, I think, new, as also my view of the origin of the Aryan race (p. 129), which has already received the approval of some eminent scholars.

Oxford,
December 1899.

CONTENTS

I. LANGUAGE AND ITS STUDY

	PAGE
What is Language?	1
Language Imperfect and 'Traditional'	2
Change; Dialects and Cognate Languages	4
Comparative and Historical Philology	5
General Grammar; Principles and Methods of Grammar	6
Effects of Change; the Science of Language	10

II. SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE

Phonetics, Phonology	12
Consonants	13
Vowels	15
Synthesis; Glides	17

III. SOUND CHANGES

The Imitation of Sounds Generally Perfect	19
Organic Shifting	20
Acoustic Changes	21
Combinative Changes	22
External Changes; Changes Gradual	23
Sound-Laws	24
Phonetic Looseness	27
General Principles: Economy; Comparative Ease of Sounds	30
Relative Stability of Sounds	31
Influence of Race and Climate	32

IV. MORPHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

	PAGE
The Origin of Language	33
Logical and Grammatical Development	38
Word-Order	39
Composition	41
Derivation; Form-Words	42
Inflection	44
Reduplication; Origin of the Parts of Speech	47
Evolution of the Verb	50
Evolution of the Preposition	52
Concord	56
Gender	58
Morphological Classification of Languages:	
Isolating	61
Agglutinative	62
Inflectional	63
Polysynthetic; Incorporating	65
Analytical	68

V. CHANGES IN LANGUAGE

Periods; Development of Dialects	72
Strata: Literary and Colloquial	74
Families of Languages; Mixed Languages	76
Rapidity of Change	79
Changes in Morphological Structure	85
Antiquity of Language	86
General Results of Change	89
Control of Change	90
Limitations of Control; General Levelling of Structure	94

VI. THE ARYAN LANGUAGES

Original Home	98
Age; General Structure	99
Sounds	101
Accentuation	103
Gradation	105
Inflections	106
Concord; the Inflectional Instinct	109
Primitive Aryan Inflections	110

CONTENTS

x1

VII. AFFINITIES OF ARYAN

	PAGE
Ugrian	112
Altaic	121
Sumerian	124
The Aryan Race	129

VIII. THE INDIVIDUALITY OF LANGUAGES

Phonetic Individuality	135
Range of Expression	137
Language and Nationality	139

THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE

CHAPTER I

Language and its Study

What is Language? Language may be defined as the expression of thought by means of speech-sounds. In other words, every sentence or word by which we express our ideas has a certain definite form of its own by virtue of the sounds of which it is made up, and has a more or less definite meaning.

The first thing in the study of language is to realize clearly this duality of form and meaning, constituting respectively the *formal* and the *logical* (or psychological) side of language.

Although language is inconceivable without this polarity of form and meaning, it is often convenient—and even necessary—to look at language from a more or less onesidedly formal or logical point of view, as the case may be. The study of the formal side of language is based on *phonetics*—the science of speech-sounds; the study of the logical side of language is based on *psychology*—the science of mind.

But every expression of meaning by sound does not necessarily constitute language in the strict sense of the word.

Such sounds as *oh!* *ah!* *pah!* and the other interjections with which we express emotions, call for attention, utter commands, and so on, convey definite enough ideas, but by themselves they no more constitute language than the corresponding cries of animals do. Some of them indeed are

excluded from the language of the speaker by their form. Thus we have interjections consisting entirely of consonants, such as the lengthened *sh*! with which we enjoin silence, and the *pst*! with which Germans call waiters in restaurants: we have to make *sh*! into *bush* before we can admit it into the English language.

What these sounds lack is “articulation”—that is, logical articulation. From a formal point of view, such interjections as *pah*! or the cry of the cuckoo, or the bleat of the sheep, or the series of whistles with which a monkey expresses surprise or curiosity, are fairly articulate; but they are not logically articulate like the sentences of language proper, in which words are combined together to express corresponding combinations of ideas into thoughts. Such an interjection as *sh*! expresses the same ideas as the sentences *I wish you to be silent* | *be silent!* | *don't make so much noise!* but it expresses them vaguely: it is equivalent to a sentence, and yet is not a sentence. It is true that we can have sentences consisting of a single word, such as the imperative *come*! We regard *come* in itself as a word because we can freely combine it with other words to form sentences, which we cannot do with *sh*! till we have transformed it into a real word; it is therefore, as we have said, neither a word nor a sentence, but something between the two.

Language, then, implies the differentiation of *word* and *sentence*. It is evident that until it has reached this stage, it cannot claim to be an efficient expression or instrument of thought. This differentiation has not been attained by animals: they can express ideas by sounds, but they cannot combine these sounds together to express corresponding combinations of ideas. Thus they can make a sound which serves—whether intentionally or not—to warn their companions of danger; but they cannot, as far as we know, combine other sounds with it to indicate the nature of the danger; and if they indicate the source or locality of the danger, it is only by instinctive movements or glances.

There are other ways besides speech by which ideas may be communicated. One of these, as we have just seen, is *gesture*. When gestures, instead of being isolated, are consciously combined to show combinations of ideas, we have a true gesture-language, perfectly analogous to speech-language. Among the natives of North America the multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages has led to the development of a common gesture-language in which conversations of some length can be carried on. A similar means of communication is often spontaneously developed among deaf-mutes in civilized countries. This natural language of deaf-mutes must be carefully distinguished from the artificial "deaf-and-dumb alphabet," which is a mere mechanical reproduction of the letters with which the words of the ordinary language are written.

This gesture-language is—in its simpler forms, at any rate—practically the same all over the world: it is said that deaf-mute children readily understand the sign-language of savages.

Language Imperfect and Traditional. In ordinary language or "speech-language," on the other hand, the connection between form and meaning is much less direct. It is far easier to find appropriate gesture-symbols than it is to find appropriate and self-interpreting phonetic ones. It is true that it is easy enough to suggest such ideas as those of blowing and drinking by sound, and we can perceive a certain connection between the initial consonants of the English words *mouth* and *nose* and the things these words stand for; but the gesture-speaker has a much simpler and surer way of expressing them by merely pointing to them with his finger, and in the same way he can indicate other parts of the face, and find gestures to express such ideas as hearing and seeing, which cannot be directly suggested by any combination of sounds.

Of course, in a highly developed gesture-language the meaning of the gestures would not be always self-evident; but the number of self-interpreting signs is always infinitely greater than in speech-language. The consequence is, as regards the latter, that a fully developed speech-language has

to be learnt from the beginning by each generation of its speakers; that is, it is kept up by tradition. This further implies permanent communities of some extent. The absence of these conditions among animals is alone enough to explain why they have not developed their interjectional cries into a genuine language.

But the superiority as regards directness of association is not invariably on the side of gesture-language, as we see in such an imitative word as *cuckoo*. It is evident, therefore, that ideas must from the beginning have been expressed by a combination of gesture and sound. As gesture is only available in the light of day or of the camp-fire and when the speakers are face to face, there would also be a tendency from the first to develop the more convenient sound-signs and to extend their use as much as possible, till at last they constituted the majority of the words, and what was at first an easily learnt natural language became a complex traditional one of infinitely greater convenience and range of expression.

Change ; Dialects and Cognate Languages. As soon as language became traditional, the connection between sound and meaning became practically arbitrary, so that not only was there a necessity of continually adding to the vocabulary and making the means of expression more precise, but there was nothing to check the natural tendency to change which we observe in all languages. Languages thus began to have histories.

Again, natural gesture-language is uniform everywhere. A traditional speech-language, on the other hand, requires uninterrupted intercourse between the whole body of its speakers to keep it uniform, and as this is difficult or even impossible beyond a certain area, all languages tend to split up first into a group of dialects and then into a group of cognate languages, as when Latin split up into an Italian, a Gaulish, a Spanish dialect, etc., and these dialects developed into the separate languages Italian, French, Spanish, which together form part of the Romance family of languages, whose common parent-language is Latin.

Most of the changes in language are so gradual that the speakers of each language are unconscious of them at the time. Even those changes which are the result of conscious innovation must be the result of some natural tendency or general want; otherwise they would not be adopted by the majority of the speakers of the language. Besides, if every individual speaker modified the common language differently, the result would be mutual unintelligibility, which could be avoided only by keeping the language entirely unchanged; hence the mere fact of language changing implies uniformity of change in the language of each individual speaker of it.

Hence linguistic changes are, on the whole, regular. Given, for instance, a Latin word, we can generally tell beforehand with considerable accuracy what form it will assume in Italian and the other Romance languages; and if it is lost in any of these languages, we can often give a reason for the loss, as also for any changes of meaning a word may undergo in any one Romance language.

Comparative and Historical Philology. Conversely, by comparing words of similar form and meaning in the different Romance languages we can often tell beforehand what was the original Latin word of which they are all descendants; thus by comparing Italian *chiamare* with Spanish *llamar* we can infer the parent form, Latin *clamare*. In this way the science of comparative philology, as it is called, is able to re-construct to some extent the lost parent of such a family of languages as the Aryan by comparing together Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English and the other members of the family.

We see, then, that the comparison of such cognate languages as Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin is only an extension of the purely historical investigation which traces the changes of a single language, as when we trace the development of Old English (Anglo-Saxon) through the Middle English of Chaucer down to Modern English. So also, if all the Romance languages except Italian had been lost, comparative Romance philology would shrink to historical Italian grammar.

In reconstructing a hypothetical parent-language it is necessary to take all the languages of the family into account, for even those which have diverged most widely from the parent-language may preserve sounds or grammatical forms and other linguistic features which are lost in the other languages. Thus in the Aryan family English alone has preserved the original Aryan sound of *w*, and French still preserves the *s* of the plural of nouns, which is lost in Italian. And yet English and French are on the whole the least archaic, the least conservative languages of their respective families.

General Grammar. Historical and comparative philology content themselves with tracing the phenomena of a language or a group of cognate languages as far back as possible without necessarily trying to explain the origin of the oldest linguistic phenomena thus arrived at. This latter is the task of general (or philosophical) grammar, which deals, not with any special languages, but with the general principles which underlie the grammatical phenomena of all languages, whether cognate or not. In fact, general grammar prefers to compare languages which are genealogically distinct—or, at any rate, only remotely connected—because, when we find the same grammatical constructions and linguistic changes developing independently in several unconnected languages, we have all the more reason for believing that they are the result of some general tendency in language, as when we see English and Chinese developing almost the same principles of word-order.

Principles and Methods of Grammar. The imperfect nature of the association between sound and meaning in language not only makes it liable to continual change, but also determines its structure generally, so that language is only partly rational and logical: there is in all languages an element of irrationality.

In the first place, only a part of the phenomena of a language can be brought under general rules. Hence the separation of dictionary and grammar, the former dealing with the isolated facts of language, the latter only with what can be

brought under general rules. In an ideally perfect language such an antithesis would not exist; and the connection between the form and meaning even of such primary words as *man* would fall under general principles just as much as the formation of its plural or its place in an interrogative sentence—so that we should be able to give rules by which, perhaps, the *m* in *man* denoted “living being,” the *n* denoted “rationality,” and so on. It is evident that in such a language everything would be grammar, and the dictionary would be simply an alphabetical index to the grammar.

As science is concerned only with what can be brought under general principles, we can understand how the science of language deals mainly with grammar; in fact, if we only widen our conception of grammar a little, comparative grammar and comparative philology become convertible terms.

But even in grammar everything is not rational and symmetrical. The grammar of every language is full of irregularities, exceptions, anomalies, and inconsistencies—that is, the correspondence between grammatical form and grammatical function is imperfect. Hence the separation of *accidence* and *syntax*, which obliges us, for instance, to learn all about the different forms of the subjunctive mood in one part of the grammar, and learn the rules for its use in another place. Those who try to define accurately and consistently the line between *accidence* and *syntax* forget that the separation between the two is entirely a matter of practical convenience, not of scientific principle, and that in a perfect language any such separation would be not only irrational but impossible.

Even in *syntax* we can make a distinction between *formal* and *analytical syntax* on the one hand and *logical* or *synthetic syntax* on the other hand, the former being the point of view of the hearer, the latter of the speaker. The hearer has the forms given to him and has to infer their meanings, partly from the forms themselves, partly from the context; the speaker has the meanings in his mind, and has to select those forms which convey them most clearly. So also in the scientific investigation of a language we can either take such a

form as the nominative case—supposing the language has one—and examine its syntactical uses or grammatical meaning; or we can take such a grammatical relation as that of subject and predicate, and inquire into the different ways in which it is expressed grammatically either in some language or group of cognate languages or in language in general. It is evident that formal must precede logical syntax, which latter belongs more to general grammar.

Every grammatical category is—or ought to be—the expression of some logical category. Thus the grammatical categories “plural of nouns,” “plural of verbs,” or the more general ones “plural” or “number” are the formal expressions of the logical categories “more-than-ones” or “discrete quantity.”

In a perfect language every grammatical category would correspond exactly to some logical category, but in actual language they often diverge from one another. Often, too, a grammatical category is more or less completely wanting. Thus, in many languages there is no grammatical category number, such an idea as that of “men” being expressed by the unmodified *man* and left to be gathered from the context, or else expressed by the addition of some such word as *many* or *some*, which is a “lexical” and not a grammatical method of expression.

Or a grammatical category may have so many disconnected functions that it is impossible to find any one logical category to correspond, as is the case with such an inflection as the dative in Greek and with some of the English prepositions.

Or it may have so vague a meaning that it is difficult or impossible to find any corresponding logical category; thus the distinction between such abstract nouns as *whiteness*, *goodness* and the adjectives *white*, *good* is a purely grammatical one, there being no logical difference between such pairs as *white* and *whiteness*.

Besides these negative defects, the grammatical and logical categories often contradict one another more or less directly