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Schools of Linguistics

Competition and evolution

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Hutchinson

London Melbourne Sydney Auckland Johannesburg
For Vera

who told me to get back to linguistics
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The study of linguistics has grown up in many widely separated parts of the Western world. Often one individual or a small group of original minds has founded a tradition which has continued to mould approaches to language in the university or the nation in which that tradition began; between adherents of different traditions there has usually been relatively limited contact. Hence this book. It cannot fail to be an advantage to any student of linguistics (whether he is a ‘student’ in the formal or the amateur sense) to learn something of the ideas that have been current in traditions other than the one with which he is most familiar. This is not only because some of the ideas he has been taught as received truth are likely to be wrong (although I do believe that there are fundamental errors in the thinking of the most fashionable contemporary linguistic school, and I hope this book may encourage questioning of those points). In many cases one school has directed its attention to issues which simply have not been considered by another school, so that one can gain by studying other orthodoxies without necessarily rejecting any elements of one’s own. Furthermore, it is impossible fully to appreciate a scholar’s ideas without some understanding of the intellectual atmosphere within which, and in reaction to which, those ideas were evolved; so that one needs to learn something about past theories if only, in some cases, to see why they were wrong.

In a book of this size it is not possible to do more than sketch broad, general tendencies of thought shared, more or less, by sizable groups of linguistic scholars. Happily, scholars do not come in well-defined categories. Some individuals mentioned here conform more clearly than others to the tendencies I ascribe to their ‘schools’; even those who seem easiest to categorize will often be found to have made remarks at some
point in their careers which, taken in isolation, might appear to place them in a different camp altogether.

I cannot claim that the book is wholly comprehensive. I know less about developments outside the English-speaking world than within it; in particular, I suspect that I should have found the French 'linguistic geography' movement and Italian 'neolinguistics' worthy of extended discussion, if I had known more about them. No doubt there are other developments about which I do not even know that I am ignorant. And on the other hand there is only one group represented here (the 'stratificationalist' followers of Sydney Lamb) about whom I can claim to be unusually knowledgeable. However, I have had the fortune, during my time as a student and a teacher at ten British and American universities and university colleges, to be exposed perhaps more than most colleagues to a variety of linguistic orthodoxies in their respective native habitats. In case partisans of one school or another should feel tempted to refer to the proverb about Jack of all trades, let me say that to my mind by far the greatest danger in scholarship (and perhaps especially in linguistics) is not that the individual may fail to master the thought of a school but that a school may succeed in mastering the thought of the individual.

I have intentionally limited the book to 'core' linguistics, excluding various peripheral branches of the field. Subjects such as sociology, psychology and anthropology are discussed when they are particularly relevant (as they often are) to the linguistic theories of given schools. But there also exist brands of 'hyphenated linguistics' (socio-linguistics, psycho-linguistics, and the like) which involve investigating the relationships between, for example, sociology and a current linguistic theory irrespective of whether that particular version of linguistics forces one to think in sociological terms. Such studies can be quite legitimate, but I ignore them here.

Still less do I discuss so-called 'applied linguistics', which in practice means the study of language-teaching methods. This is because I do not believe that linguistics has any contribution to make to the teaching of English or the standard European languages. The many people who claim that it has seem to me to deceive themselves and others. (This would not matter, were it not for the extent to which the 'applied linguistics' industry,
like so many other dubious modern enterprises, is financed not by those who see it as having some value but by taxpayers helpless in the grip of a voracious and tyrannical state.) Linguistics has an honourable role to play in the teaching of 'exotic' languages lacking a pedagogical tradition, which is presumably likely always to be a small-scale activity; but what is relevant there is not a special applied version of linguistics, but straightforward descriptive linguistics as discussed in this book.

I have not hesitated to allow my own views about the various issues treated in the book to become apparent, although I hope I have avoided the danger of confusing my views with those of the various writers I discuss. A book of this kind does its readers more service by offering reasoned judgements with which they may agree or disagree, than by treating each figure and each school at their own self-evaluation and thus leaving the reader no wiser than if he had been given a bibliography and left to read the sources for himself. Furthermore I have not striven, as scholars often do, to eradicate all expression of the personal tastes, foibles, and unscientific prejudices which may have affected my judgement of the issues discussed. As an admirer of the philosophy of Imre Lakatos, I regard such a procedure as positively undesirable, serving only to lend to the writer's work the appearance of an impartial authority which no product of a human mind possesses in reality. It goes without saying that the reader should feel free to disagree frequently and strongly with my opinions. All my friends do.

I owe a special debt of gratitude in connexion with this book to Dick Hudson, who first asked me, six years ago, to give the course of lectures out of which the book has finally grown. He has furthermore been kind enough to comment on drafts of the manuscript, as have Richard Hogg and Nigel Vincent on part of it. The book owes a great deal also to Charles Hockett, from whom I have learned much without ever meeting him. Over and over again I have discovered the source of some idea which I had fondly imagined to be original on re-reading The State of the Art or another of his publications. None of these people, of course, are to be blamed for the shortcomings of my work.

It is a pleasure to thank the library staffs of Lancaster University and the British Museum for their very considerable help, always given with willing enthusiasm; and I must thank
Lancaster University also for permitting me the leisure to write. I thank the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Linguistic Society of America, for permission to quote passages by Edward Sapir on pages 82–3.

To Vera, my debt is inexpressible.

Ingleton, Yorks.
September 1977
This book deals primarily with linguistics as it has developed in the twentieth century. The scientific study of language did not of course, begin in this century; but the years around 1900 happen to have marked an important turning-point in the history of modern linguistics. At very roughly that time independently in Europe and America, linguistics shifted its orientation in such a way that much nineteenth-century work in the subject has become relatively remote from the concerns of the linguist of recent years. Not that twentieth-century linguistics is a wholly new enterprise quite lacking connections with the past; far from it. Noam Chomsky, in some ways the most innovative of contemporary linguists, stresses the relationship between his own work and that of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and of the rationalist philosophers of seventeenth-century France. But, if we want a boundary that will divide the stream of linguistic inquiry into ‘history’ and ‘current affairs’, as it were, then the beginning of our century will do very well.

The re-orientation that occurred about then was a shift from the ‘historical linguistics’, also known as ‘diachronic linguistics’ or ‘philology’, which had dominated nineteenth-century linguistic research – the investigation of the history of languages, the uncovering of their relationships, and the reconstruction of the lost ‘proto-languages’ from which families of extant languages descend – towards what became known as ‘synchronic linguistics’: the analysis of languages as communicative systems as they exist at a given point of time (often the present), ignoring (as their speakers ignore) the route by which they arrived at their present form.1*

It is never easy to appreciate novel ideas without some

*Notes (including definitions of technical terms) are on pages 243–58.
understanding of the climate of opinion existing when those ideas were formed, and against which they constituted a reaction. Accordingly, in this first chapter I shall sketch the intellectual trends which caused linguists of the nineteenth century to be preoccupied with the historical approach, as a prelude to considering in subsequent chapters the alternative views of language which have been advanced since that approach ceased to predominate.

It is easy for a newcomer to linguistics today to dismiss the philologers of the nineteenth century as pedants motivated more by a love of accumulating facts for their own sake than by a feeling for the excitement of scientific theory-construction. Such a judgement would be quite incorrect. It is true that the enormous effort devoted to the historical study of the Indo-European language-family was inspired partly by personal taste, as opposed to considerations of rational scientific research strategy. The change of emphasis from 'classical philology' to the new subject of linguistics occurred first in Germany (indeed, throughout the nineteenth century linguistics was mainly a German pursuit); and the flourishing of Indo-European (in German 'Indo-germanisch') linguistic studies went hand in hand with the general intellectual and artistic movement of late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth-century Germany known as Romanticism, with its rejection of the classical tradition and its emphasis on indigenous ethnic and cultural roots. (The link between linguistics and these wider intellectual and aesthetic currents is particularly clear in the work of such men as J.G. Herder (1744–1803), the leading figure in the Sturm und Drang movement in literature, collector of folk songs and relics of the early culture of the Germanic people, one of whose most influential works was his Treatise on the Origin of Language (1772), and Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), one of the founders of Germanic linguistics, and collector with his brother Wilhelm of a world-famous anthology of traditional German fairy-tales.) Since race, language and culture were assumed to be intimately related, reconstruction of the prehistory of the Germanic and other language-stocks was attractive to the Romantic temperament.

But there was much more to the situation than this: the history-centred outlook of nineteenth-century linguistic scientists was related to the general state of science at the time.
It is commonly the case in the history of science that at any given time there are a few outstandingly successful branches of science which are regarded as models of what a science should be, so that scholars attempting to investigate scientifically some new field of phenomena will almost inevitably imitate the methods and theories of the 'model' sciences. The modern philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) has coined the term 'paradigm' to suggest how, at a given period, thinking about a particular subject is commonly conditioned by some more or less coherent system of ideas which act, not so much as explicit tenets of a scientific theory, but as unspoken assumptions about the range of possible hypotheses which the scientist may entertain. For Kuhn, the most important scientific advances occur on the rare occasions when scholars manage to break out of these mental straitjackets by rejecting assumptions which their predecessors did not even feel the need to defend (as when Einstein responded to problems about the observed speed of light by suggesting that space, time, and mass might be observer-dependent rather than absolute quantities). We may use Kuhn's term 'paradigm' also in a rather wider sense, so that the outlook of practitioners of a particularly successful science constitutes a paradigm not only for that science itself but also for less developed sciences. The nineteenth century contained two outstandingly successful scientific paradigms in this sense.

The first of these was mechanistic physics, according to which all phenomena could be described by simple, deterministic laws of force and motion – so that all future states of the world could in principle be inferred from a complete knowledge of its present state (the view classically expressed by Laplace in the preface to his Théorie analytique des probabilités (1820), and abandoned in our own century with the adoption of the quantum theory); the second was the biological theory of evolution by natural selection, which emerged from a great upsurge of interest in natural history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and culminated in Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) and the storm of controversy aroused by that book.

From physics, philologists took the notion of describing the history of sound-changes occurring in a language in terms of 'laws' which apply uniformly to whole ranges of examples, rather than discussing individual words in the anecdotal, case-by-case
way in which a historian (in the ordinary sense) treats individual persons or events. One of the first such discoveries, for instance, was the Proto-Germanic consonant-shift commonly called Grimm’s Law (though in fact stated first by the Dane Rasmus Rask in 1814), whereby Proto-Indo-European consonants changed in the Germanic branch in accordance with the following rules:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PIE</th>
<th>Germanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voiceless stops [p t k]</td>
<td>voiceless fricatives [f θ x]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced stops [b d g]</td>
<td>voiceless stops [p t k]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced aspirates [bh dh gh]</td>
<td>voiced stops [b d g]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since in other branches of Indo-European the consonants remained unchanged (or developed differently – thus PIE voiced aspirates become voiceless aspirates [ph th kh] in Classical Greek, which in turn become voiceless fricatives in Modern Greek), the Germanic consonant-shift produces many cases of words alike in meaning but containing distinct consonants in different languages: compare, for example, the initial consonants of Greek _thyra_ and English _door_, Greek _genos_ and English _kin_, Greek _pous_ and English _foot_. ‘Grimm’s Law’ reduces many hundreds of cases like these to three simple formulae.

The term _Lautesetzung_, ‘sound law’, was first used by Franz Bopp in 1824 (Wechssler 1900, p. 400). (Bopp even offered what he called a ‘mechanical’ explanation for the Indo-European phenomenon known as ‘Ablaut’ – the alternation between different vowels in a morphological paradigm, of which we retain traces in the conjugation of English strong verbs such as _sing_–_sang_–_sung_ – by invoking a ‘law of gravity’ in connection with the relative ‘weight’ of different syllables, cf. Delbrück (1880, pp. 68–9). If intended literally, however, this is surely a rather crude attempt to apply the findings of one discipline to the subject-matter of another.) Bopp’s sound laws were only statements of general tendencies, and Bopp did not feel it necessary to provide explanations for cases which failed to follow the general rule; but, as the century grew older, the concept of ‘sound law’ took on more and more the rigorous character of genuine scientific laws such as those of physics: by the last quarter of the nineteenth century apparent counter-examples to a sound law were permissible only if they could be explained by a sub-law of their own.
While mechanistic physics provided one paradigm for linguistics, however, the influence of biology was certainly very much greater. As German scholarship came to distinguish between the Naturwissenschaften and Geisteswissenschaften – between the natural and moral sciences, or in modern terms between the ‘sciences’ and the ‘arts’ or ‘humanities’ – linguists were anxious to align themselves with the former: but, if linguistics is to be a natural science, then a ‘language’ must be some kind of entity which can be described objectively along with the rest of the furniture of the natural world. It will not be adequate to interpret the term ‘language’ as merely a convenient way of referring to various characteristics of the purely subjective intellectual life of a nation, as one adopting the ‘humanities’ rather than ‘science’ approach might be inclined to do. (This is perhaps not a very clear characterization of the ‘humanities’ view of language, and I am not sure that a clearer statement is possible at this point; but the problem of how ‘languages’ can be objects of scientific study remains a real one.)

The solution of many nineteenth-century linguists was to regard languages as an order of natural organisms, on a par with plants and animals. Thus, Bopp (1827, p. 1) writes:

Languages must be regarded as organic bodies [organische Naturkörper], formed in accordance with definite laws; bearing within themselves an internal principle of life, they develop and they gradually die out, after, no longer comprehending themselves, they discard, mutilate or misuse... components or forms which were originally significant but which have gradually become relatively superficial appendages.

Similar views are expressed by August Pott a few years later (1833, p. xxvii):

A language is in a constant state of change throughout its life: like every organic object [organische Naturgegenstand], it has its periods of gestation and maturation, times of accelerated and of slackened growth, its prime, decay and gradual extinction . . . .

It is difficult, now, to see how Bopp’s ‘no longer comprehending themselves’ could ever have been more than a rhetorical flourish (although cf. page 27 below). For the rest, though, these remarks are by no means unreasonable, even though few would agree with them today. Although languages are in some sense a product of men’s minds, they seem to have a life of their
own, rather than being consciously created artefacts like a symphony or an aircraft design. Thus, it was clearly not by any process of conscious decision on the part of its speakers that the Old English of pre-Conquest days developed successively into Chaucer’s English, Shakespeare’s English and now the different varieties of modern English. Furthermore, groups of languages have ‘family trees’ just as groups of biological species do. As we saw above, French, Italian and Rumanian descend from Latin while English, German and Norwegian descend from ‘Proto-Germanic’, and Latin, Proto-Germanic and various other known or postulated ancient languages descend from a still more ancient Proto-Indo-European; this cannot fail to remind us of the situation in biology where, say, Man, chimpanzee and gorilla all descend from an extinct species of ape while cat, lion and tiger descend from an extinct proto-feline, and proto-ape, proto-feline, and others themselves share a common ancestor further back in geological time. Already at the beginning of the century scholars such as Friedrich von Schlegel (1808, p. 28) and Jacob Grimm (1819, p. xii) had suggested that the discipline most closely cognate with the new science of ‘comparative grammar’ was comparative anatomy. The Stammbaum, or ‘family tree’, theory of linguistic evolution was first formally expressed by August Schleicher (in his Compendium, 1861) almost simultaneously with the appearance of Darwin’s Origin of Species (published in England in 1859, in German translation in 1860); Schleicher’s friend Ernst Häckel (an important early evolutionist) drew his attention to Darwin’s book, and Schleicher (who lived from 1821 to 1868) responded in 1863 by publishing a short treatise on Darwin’s Theory and Linguistics, in the form of an open letter to Häckel, arguing strongly that linguistics should be regarded as one of the natural sciences to which Darwin’s theory applies. (Schleicher did not say so, but it can be argued that, historically, Darwinism owed as much to linguistics as vice versa: cf. Hayek 1960, p. 59; Newmeyer 1975.) The linguist’s language-families, languages, dialects, and idiolects correspond to the biologist’s genera, species, varieties, and individuals. Languages and language-families, like species, compete with one another in a ‘struggle for survival’ (consider, in the British Isles for instance, how English has spread at the expense of the Celtic languages: Cornish and Manx are extinct, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic live on but lose ground steadily to
English, Irish is kept alive artificially in a small Gaeltacht like a protected species in a game reserve); and, on a world scale, Schleicher saw the Indo-European language-family as having reached a dominant position linguistically, as Man has become dominant zoologically.

In one respect Schleicher even argued, with justice, that the validity of the evolutionary account can be confirmed more easily for language than with respect to the plant and animal kingdoms. For the biologist it is relatively difficult to establish that the ancestor-species which he postulates in order to explain the relationships between modern species ever really existed, since they have long ago disappeared, leaving only scanty and ambiguous traces in the form of fossils. Because the time-scale of change is so much shorter in the case of language, the relevant facts can often be studied directly rather than merely hypothesized. Thus, we possess plenty of documents not only in the modern Romance languages but in their ancestor-language, Latin, and in many of the intermediate stages; no one could claim that Latin is a figment of the linguist’s imagination, as the notion of a common ancestor for Man and ape was pooh-poohed by opponents of the biological theory of evolution. (Indeed, Sir Charles Lyell (1863, ch. 23) had already used this argument to make evolutionary theory seem more plausible in biology.)

Even the standard objection to Schleicher’s family-tree theory does not seem to me to have the force often ascribed to it. In 1872, Johannes Schmidt argued that the family-tree model failed to fit the facts of Indo-European for which Schleicher designed it. There were many cases where some trait was common to two language-groups, say A and B, lying relatively far apart on Schleicher’s tree diagram, while being absent from other groups descending from the postulated common ancestor of A and B; but this situation could not be rectified simply by redesigning the tree diagram so as to make A and B adjacent, since in addition B shared some trait missing in A with group C, say. According to Schmidt, such findings could be explained only by abandoning the family-tree theory and seeing the process of linguistic change instead in terms of innovations originating at different geographical points and spreading outwards over arbitrary areas of territory, so that the resulting languages show a pattern of overlapping rather than
hierarchically organized relationships. Certainly if we confine our attention to the most recent stages of the process, the diversification of modern languages into regional dialects, it is well known that dialect maps show many cases of isoglosses crossing one another – contrary to what the family-tree theory might appear to predict (Bloomfield 1933, pp. 325 ff.). If Schmidt's 'wave theory' is incompatible with Schleicher's Stammbaum theory, then the analogy with biological speciation evaporates. But crossing isoglosses within the territory of one language do not damage Schleicher's theory: they are the analogue of various mutations which arose in individual members of a species being inherited by partially overlapping sets of descendants of those individuals, a situation which is perfectly normal and compatible with Darwinism. In 1876 August Leskien examined Schleicher's and Schmidt's theories and declared there to be no contradiction between them.⁷

Some readers may feel that to claim, as Schleicher did, that linguistics is literally a branch of biology alongside botany and zoology is self-evidently unreasonable. Languages are obviously not material objects: one can infer the existence and nature of languages, or even idiolects, only via the behaviour of speakers, not by direct observation as in the case of plants or animals. This might seem to rule out a priori the possibility of treating Darwin's theory as anything more than, at best, a suggestive metaphor for linguistics. But such a judgement would be quite wrong. What distinguishes life from non-life is still a deeply mysterious question; given that languages are describable entities at all, and given that, at a superficial level at least, they share a number of traits with living organisms of the standard classes, we have no right to deny the status of living organism to languages a priori: rather, we must look to see whether or not deeper study does indeed show languages to obey the same biological laws that operate in the animal and vegetable kingdoms. When it had come to seem clear that, after all, the laws of biology fail to apply to language – so that the only entities to fall within their domain are material plants and animals – some scholars (e.g Lane 1959, p. 315) ‘charitably’ reinterpreted Schleicher's equation of linguistics with biology as having been intended only metaphorically rather than literally, while others poured scorn on views like Schleicher's as if they embodied an obvious contradiction; thus Giuliano Bonfante
(1946, p. 295): 'Languages are historical creations, not vegetables.' But Schleicher and his contemporaries were not fools: they did not suppose that languages were tangible objects like carrots, even though it is true that they had not yet discovered the respects in which the laws governing the development of languages differ from those governing the evolution of vegetables.

Until 100 years ago, then, the historical approach was the natural one for the study of language, and historical linguistics looked like one of the frontiers on which exciting new scientific advances could confidently be expected. As the nineteenth century neared its end, for a number of reasons this expectation came to seem less likely to be fulfilled.

The first problem had to do with the directionality of change. It is central to the evolutionary view of biology that the replacement of old species by new is not merely a process of random changes (even if the individual mutations on which evolution depends are random), but rather is a movement from lower to higher - mutations which succeed in spreading are those which give their possessor an advantage in the struggle for survival, while disadvantageous traits are eliminated. This notion that different forms of life occupy different points on a scale of degrees of development is by no means an original feature of Darwin's theory of descent with modification, of course; it had been familiar since Aristotle as the philosophical and theological doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, a concept which became particularly influential in the eighteenth century (Lovejoy 1936).

Nineteenth-century historical linguists in many cases took it for granted that linguistic change was similarly 'directional'. Thus, according to Rask (1818, pp. 35-6), languages became steadily simpler over time:

The language which has the most sophisticated grammar is the purest, most original, oldest, nearest to the source, because grammatical inflexions and endings are eroded in the development of new languages, and they require a very long time, and a certain mingling with other peoples, to evolve and organize themselves again. Thus Danish is simpler than Icelandic, English than Anglo-Saxon; and Modern Greek bears the same relation to Classical Greek, Italian to Latin, German to Gothic, and similarly in all cases known to us.

Rask's claim seems to be a statement of a purely empirical generalization about observed facts: it is certainly correct for the
cases he cites (except that German is not now held to be a
direct descendant of the extinct language called Gothic), and it
is not clear whether Rask intended it as a strong hypothesis
about all possible cases of language change – the clause about
‘evolving and organizing themselves again’ seems to allow for
some cases of languages moving in the direction of greater
complexity. As the biological analogy became increasingly
persuasive, however, so the directional view of language-change
came to play a more central role in linguists’ theorizing. One
strand in the directional view was the notion that languages could
be classified into a small number of types, usually three:
isolating languages, in which each word consisted of a single
unchanging root (Chinese and Vietnamese being frequently
cited examples); agglutinating languages, in which words include
affixes as well as root, but the division of the word into root and
affixes is clear (e.g. Turkish, where sevişdirilmek means ‘to be
made to love one another’, and the word divides into sev- ‘love’,
‘infinitive’); and inflecting languages (e.g. Sanskrit, Classical
Greek, Latin, and the other languages cited by Rask as
relatively complex), where a single word includes a number of
‘units of meaning’ but one cannot assign these meaning-units to
distinct portions of the entire word: thus, in Latin, sim is the
first person singular present subjunctive of the verb ‘to be’, but
one can hardly divide the word up into separate portions
meaning ‘be’, ‘subjunctive’, ‘present’ or the like. (This last
example is an extreme one – one often can split at least the root
from the inflectional ending fairly unambiguously in Latin; but
the three classes are intended as ‘ideal types’ of language, and it
is recognized that real languages fall between the extremes
provided by the scheme.) Otto Jespersen suggests that the
three-way classification originated with Friedrich von Schlegel’s
brother August, who treated the inflecting type as the highest.9
August Schlegel divided inflecting languages into two subclasses,
synthetic and analytic languages – the former being inflecting
languages in the fullest sense, the latter including some
characteristics of the isolating type (prepositions in place of
case-endings, subject pronouns in verb conjugations); and he
treated the history of the Romance family of languages as a
process of decay from synthetic Latin to analytic modern
languages such as French.
August von Schlegel does not seem to have felt that the series isolating–agglutinating–inflecting represented a historical progression (the reason why he invents the notion ‘analytic’ rather than saying that the Romance languages are moving away from the inflecting towards the isolating type is presumably that he takes it as axiomatic that membership of one of his three principal types is part of the unchanging essence of a language-stock, so that no descendant of Latin could be isolating); and not everyone who discussed typology agreed that inflecting languages were ipso facto ‘better’ or ‘higher’ than isolating – Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836, section 24) suggests that both types have their advantages. By the mid-century, though, we find Schleicher (1848) claiming that the prehistory of languages involves a regular development from isolation through agglutination to inflexion, and that this is an evolution from less to more perfect.

There is a problem here: Rask claimed that the direction of language change was towards greater simplicity – i.e. from inflexion to isolation – while for Schleicher linguistic evolution proceeds from isolation to inflexion. But Schleicher solves the apparent contradiction by an argument which for him was inspired by Hegelian philosophy, but which also has a close parallel in (subsequent) biological theories.

According to this argument, we must distinguish in the evolution of Man between the period of prehistory, when Man is controlled by the same laws as the rest of animate and inanimate nature, and the historical period, when Man’s intellect reaches the point at which he develops free will and thus rises above the blind laws of nature. Now, Schleicher argues (following Hegel 1837, pp. 62–3), the evolution of language presumably went hand in hand with the evolution of intellect, so that the perfection of language and of intellect would have occurred together: literature begins only when Man’s intellect has fully evolved, so that the earliest forms of the classical languages are highly inflexional languages – we can infer that they were preceded by agglutinating and isolating stages only by a priori reasoning, and by comparison with the languages of tribes who are still pre-literate today. Once the historical stage is reached, intellect becomes autonomous and ceases to depend on the superficial form of language, and language is therefore free to regress to ‘lower’ forms: hence Rask’s observation.