Anna Morpurgo-Davies

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MEILLET, GREEK AND THE APERÇU

Anna MORPURGO DAVIES

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RÉSUMÉ : Meillet n'était pas en premier lieu un philologue classique et son œuvre couvre un grand nombre de domaines inexplorés avant lui. L'un de ses ouvrages qui remportèrent le plus de succès est son *Aperçu d'une histoire de la langue grecque* (1913), bien qu'il traitât d'un sujet déjà ancien et n'ait pu que peu contribuer à présenter de nouveaux matériaux. Il y a là un paradoxe qu'on se doit d'expliquer. En fait, l'*Aperçu* est un ouvrage d'avant-garde : non seulement il s'agit de la première histoire du grec qui ait quelque envergure, mais c'est aussi l'une des toutes premières histoires d'une langue. L'étude des innombrables comptes rendus rédigés par Meillet, comme celle de ses articles plus généraux, montre pareillement que l'*Aperçu* est une sorte de « roman à thèse » où l'on trouve une démonstration concrète des théories générales de Meillet, révélant à la fois leur force et leur faiblesse.

1.   Why Meillet and Greek? Meillet and Armenian, Meillet and general
linguistics – these subjects make sense because of their novelty. But in
Meillet's generation classical languages were taken for granted. Obviously the
comparativist – we should not forget Meillet's statement "mais moi, je suis
comparatiste" (Vendryès 1937: 14) – made large use of Greek and Latin but the
excitement mainly came from the solution of specific problems of a compara-
tive nature, it was not the inevitable by-product of the use of new data as in the
case of e.g. Armenian or Iranian. In analysing Greek or Latin data the primary
aim was Indo-European, not the two languages themselves. A priori it would
then seem that of all Meillet's work that on Greek is the least original and
consequently that which deserves the least attention. And yet in contrast with
this obvious reaction stands Vendryès' statement (1937: 23): "... les plus beaux
livres de Meillet, ceux qui lui ont valu le plus de lecteurs et qui lui assurent la
gloire plus durable, sont peut-être ceux qu'il a consacrés au grec et au latin" (cf.
Vineis 1987). Almost twenty-five years earlier, in reviewing Meillet's *Aperçu
d'une histoire de la langue grecque*, Vendryès (1911-13 a: ccxxv) had written:
"Voici, je crois bien, le chef-d'œuvre de M. Meillet, ce qu'il a écrit à la fois de
plus large et de plus profond, de plus original aussi, et ce que nul autre que lui
n'aurait pu écrire comme il l'a fait". There is here an antinomy which calls for
a solution: on the one hand we have a field of study which has been ploughed
since times immemorial and is unlikely to provide striking new results and on
the other hand we are told that from analysis of this very field Meillet earned
"la gloire plus durable".

2.   We must reconstruct some of the background. The study of Greek starts
at the latest with the Alexandrinian grammarians, that of Latin with the Roman
grammarians. Yet in Meillet's times it was agreed that a systematic and
scholarly approach to the classical languages belonged at the earliest to the
beginning of the nineteenth century. For Greek Wackernagel (1905: 311) gives
the place of honour to Philipp Butmann (1764-1829) and his *Ausführliche
Griechische Sprachlehre* (1819-27); Thumb (1916: 4) emphasizes the impor-
tance of Gottfried Hermann (1772-1848). However, here the emphasis was
textual and descriptive rather than linguistic and historical. Moreover at first
classicists worked in isolation from the work of comparativists; most of them
were strongly opposed to comparison. Hermann spoke against those

> qui ad Brachmanas et Ulphilam confugiunt atque ex paucis non satis cognitarum
> linguarum vestigiis quae Graecorum et Latinorum verborum vis sit explanare
> conantur. (cf. Sandys 1921: 12 note).

This is not a sign of transitory irritation; it is rather the beginning of a distrust
which later found its expression in Ritschl's semi-jocular fifth commandment

for the classicist: "Du sollst nicht Sanskritwurzeln klauben und mein Manna verschmähen" (Ribbeck 1879-81. 2: 450; in general cf. Rocher 1957-58). Yet time brought a rapprochement. In Germany at least the merit for the relenting of hostilities is attributed to a hellenist who was also a linguist, Georg Curtius (1820-85), the Leipzig professor of *Classische Philologie,* who inspired the classical students of Leipzig with interest in language and in comparison, and wrote books on Greek etymology and on the Greek verb which the classicists found acceptable as useful descriptions of facts. Yet well after Curtius linguists kept arguing about the contrast between *Philologie* and *Sprachwissenschaft* and the possibility or necessity to link them. Meillet was well aware of the old animosity; in the first decade of the twentieth century he still oscillates in the assessment of the controversy and describes it either as a thing of the past or as something which was just beginning to quieten down (1908-9 b: xcix; 1909-10 a: cclxxvi) [1]. The result is that the comparativists of the nineteenth century made large use of Greek and Latin evidence, but felt nervous at the thought of classicists ferreting away at their writings in a hostile hunt for errors of fact.

2.1. Thus for a linguist of Meillet's generation to write a book on Greek or Latin was not necessarily an easy option. Yet it is this very period that first produced the comparativist-classicists acceptable to both sides. The names of J. Wackernagel (1853-1938), W. Schulze (1865-1935), A. Thumb (1865-1915), C.D. Buck (1866-1955), H. Collitz (1855-1935), P. Kretschmer (1866-1956), Otto Hoffmann (1865-1940) come to mind [2]. Even so, Meillet remains a special case. The scholars I mentioned, though all comparativists, were more involved in classical work than Meillet. Mostly they were professors of classics, *pro tempore* at least (as Wackernagel), or had extensively worked on the Greek and Italic languages as Buck, Kretschmer, Otto Hoffmann, Thumb and to a certain extent Schulze, or they had done and were doing a great deal of purely philological work (as Collitz). By contrast Meillet's first professional involvement was with Iranian and Armenian. His first scholarly work was concerned with these two languages and with Slavic. By the age of 42 he had written seven technical books meant for specialists; three were comparative (including the *Introduction à l'étude des langues indo-européennes),* two were on Slavic languages and one on Armenian; a short monograph discussed Latin morphology. In 1913, when Meillet was 47, the *Aperçu d'une histoire de la langue grecque* appeared. By the end of that year his bibliography (Benveniste 1937) lists 171 articles; of these only a minority (ca. 20) was exclusively or predominantly about Greek and an even smaller number about Latin. But who is the reader of the *Aperçu* who does not have the impression that this is a book written by a classical scholar totally involved in Greek literature and in Greek philology?

So, here are two further problems. First we wanted to know why of all Meillet's books the ones about the classical languages, i.e. the best known of all languages he studied, should count as his masterpiece. Now we must ask why a comparativist specializing in Armenian, Slavic and Iranian wanted to write on Greek when there was so much work on other languages which needed to be done? Also, how could someone with Meillet's background write as a fully fledged classicist? And what gives its particular flavour to the *Aperçu?*

3.   The *Aperçu,* which is dedicated to Bréal, consists of some 350 pages preceded by a preface and a bibliography but accompanied by no footnotes. The book is meant to be read as a whole and not to be used as a work of reference. Yet it presupposes knowledge of Greek and is also meant for specialists, though not for specialists only. Its success was immediate: four editions appeared in Meillet's lifetime, between 1913 and 1935. A German translation was published at Heidelberg by Winter in 1920. The eighth French edition was published in 1975 and a year later an Italian translation appeared (cf. Lanza 1976). Some 75 years after its publication the book is in no sense obsolete.

The *Aperçu* contains a concise history of ancient Greek divided into three parts. First, prehistory in a broad sense: the IE origins, the structure of Greek and its difference from reconstructed IE, the causes of these differences, the neighbouring and substratum languages, the tendencies recognizable in the development, the differentiation of Greek into dialects and the constant interplay of unifying and differentiating forces. Secondly the Greek literary languages: how they arose; how they were used; what degree of artificiality they had; the language of poetry and that of prose, etc. The third part discusses at length the creation and concept of koine, the common language which eventually replaced in Greek the original dialect diversity; a few final pages trace the development of the language until modern Greece and hint at the contrast between *dimotiki* and *katharevusa.* Constant reference is made to phonetic, morphological, lexical features but there is also frequent mention of historical events and regular comparison of linguistic facts with facts in the history of culture.

3.1. Plan and subject do not strike us as original but they were at the time. The *Aperçu* is the first history of Greek longer than a brief summary. The end of the nineteenth century had produced a wealth of historical grammars mainly, though not exclusively, concerned with phonology and morphology (the famous or infamous *Laut- und Formenlehre).* The classical languages had not been ignored. For Greek the very good and very scholarly *Griechische Grammatik* by Karl Brugmann had reached its third edition in 1900; a fourth

edition revised by Albert Thumb appeared in the same year as the *Aperçu* (Brugmann-Thumb 1913). It was historical grammar and made no attempt at tracing the history of the language; this was left to other books. Wackernagel had contributed in 1905 a 26 pages account to *Die Kultur der Gegenwart;* it was impressive but it was too short to say much. Kretschmer in 1909 had written a section on *Sprache* for the *Einleitung in die Altertumswissenschaft* edited by Gercke and Norden; most of the 100 pages contained an account of the general principles of linguistics; some 30 pages were left for the history of Greek and much less space for that of Latin. Finally in 1911 there appeared a very short (159 pp. in 16°) history of preclassical and classical Greek written by Otto Hoffmann. It was praised by Meillet (1910-11 a) but it cannot have had much influence on the *Aperçu*. In other words, before the *Aperçu* no reasonable history of Greek existed; the plan was Meillet's own creation and a novelty.

3.2. There is more: Meillet's *Aperçu* belongs with the very first histories of European languages, that is to say with the very first histories of any language. In France the first volume of Brunot's monumental *Histoire de la langue fran-çaise* only appeared in 1905; the other volumes kept appearing both before and after the *Aperçu* but the two works are hardly comparable. Brunot's work is too large, his material too different. Karl Vossler's *Frankreichs Kultur im Spiegel seiner Sprachentwicklung. Geschichte der französischen Schriftsprache* (Heidelberg 1913) appeared in the same year as the *Aperçu* and received a very interesting review by Meillet (1911-13 c), who, while praising some of its features, did not hesitate to disagree with Vossler's most outré views about the importance of aesthetic factors. German and English have been the favourite of linguists. Yet, in German too, we must ignore Grimm's *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1848) and Scherer's *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, which, in spite of their titles, have different aims or belong in a different intellectual atmosphere. We could try to find the model for the *Aperçu* in Otto Behaghel's *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, published in 1890 and in a new version in 1911, but it is sufficient to read the review by Vendryes (1911-13 a), Meillet's pupil and admirer, to see how this manual too moves in a different world:

> Sa méthode consiste à émietter sa matière pour en remplir de petites cases, préparées d'avance en grand nombre. C'est un travail comparable à celui du naturaliste qui range des coléoptères dans une boîte ou des plantes dans un herbier. [...] il y a des cas où cette méthode ne suffit pas, où l'on doit aller au-delà des résultats qu'elle fournit, et particulièrement dans un ouvrage d'ensemble, où le lecteur cherche des idées et non de la poussière de faits.

The book is in fact a historical grammar and not a history of German. English was slightly better provided but short volumes like Jespersen's *Growth and*

Structure of the English Language (1905, 1912 [2]), which was awarded the Prix Volney, were again too brief and too limited (cf. Meillet 1911-13 b) [3].

4.   Is this then the achievement of the *Aperçu*, to be the first history of ancient Greek and one of the first histories of any language? Obviously there is more to it. *Pace* Kretschmer (1916: 322) one of the remarkable features of the *Aperçu* is that it is neither an internal history, i.e. a historical grammar, nor a purely external history; it is both. Brunot (1905-6: I, v) in the preface to the first volume of the *Histoire de la langue française* had drawn a clear distinction:

> L'histoire du français, ce sera donc d'une part l'histoire du développement qui, de la langue du légionnaire, du colon ou de l'esclave romain, a fait la langue parlée aujourd'hui par un faubourien, un "banlieusard", ou écrite par un académicien. [...] ce sera d'autre part l'histoire de tous les succès et de tous les revers de cette langue, de son extension en dehors de ses limites originelles...

Meillet does not repeat this statement and indeed the distinction, though obviously available (Varvaro 1972-3: 29), is almost deliberately flaunted in the structure of the *Aperçu*. In the middle of the second section about literary languages the discussion of Homeric language and the influence of Homer (a point of external history) is immediatly followed by a chapter on the development of the article, a point of internal history, and then again by a description of the diffusion of lyric poetry and the formation of its language.

4.1. The comparison between Meillet's *Aperçu* and Brunot's *Histoire* is perhaps worth pursuing. When the second volume of Brunot's magnum opus appeared, in the midst of the general chorus of approval there was at least one dissenting voice. In his review E. Bourciez (1907) praised the book but also noted with some dismay that

> c'est encore et toujours une sorte de "grammaire historique", disposée sur le plan traditionnel et connu d'avance, procédant par accumulation de faits au milieu desquels les idées générales se trouvent éparses et comme noyées.

There followed the obvious question: "Est-ce, vraiment, dans toute la force du terme, ce qu'on peut appeler une 'histoire de la langue'?". Bourciez's own concept of such history was of a work

> dont les divers chapitres seraient fondus harmonieusement; où, quitte à négliger des détails après tout secondaires, on se préoccuperait de dégager du reste l'essentiel, et de faire ressortir à chaque époque les grands courants dominants; une étude enfin qui serait, ou du moins tenterait d'être une contribution à la psychologie du peuple français.

And Bourciez revealed that he had been haunted all through his readings by a sentence by Taine:

> Quand on a établi la transformation des idiomes, on n'a fait que déblayer le terrain; la véritable histoire s'élève seulement quand l'historien commence à démêler, à travers la distance des temps, l'homme vivant, agissant, doué de passions, muni d'habitudes, avec sa voix et sa physionomie.

Bourciez's concluding words are predictable: "et vraiment ne serait-il pas temps qu'on essayât quelque chose dans ce sens?"

Meillet does not refer to Bourciez, or for that matter to Taine, and his reviews of Brunot, though by no means uncritical (cf. e.g. Meillet 1906-7), are infinitely respectful. Yet, if we ignore for the moment at least the problem posed by the "psychologie du peuple français", we may wonder whether *mutatis mutandis* Bourciez's wish was not fulfilled by the *Aperçu*.

5.   A pioneering work creates some expectations: its plan and theoretical foundations should be explained and justified; we also expect it to be based on a number of preparatory shorter pieces. Neither expectation is fulfilled. The *Aperçu* contains no account of the methodology required to study the history of a language in general or of Greek in particular, no explanation of how Meillet saw the contrast between historical grammar and history of a language. We are all the more aware of this lack because a quarter of a century later Giacomo Devoto in his *Storia della Lingua di Roma* (1939: 371-81), which was written very much under the influence of Meillet's *Esquisse d' une histoire de la langue latine* (1928), felt the need to discuss at length this very problem. If Devoto did so, why not Meillet?

The question is not trivial because it highlights the gap between the beginning of the century and our own period. There is a difference in style which is important. In spite of his general articles Meillet saw himself as a comparativist, not as a theoretician. He shared with a few Indo-Europeanists of his generation (above all Jacob Wackernagel, whom he greatly admired) the feeling that both the justification and the explanation of one's own method was implicit in the concrete work. There is an element of conservatism in this – the great classicists had not discussed questions of method and Ritschl had pronounced: "Du sollst den Namen Methode nicht unnütz im Munde führen" (Ribbeck 1879-81, 2: 450) – there is some snobbishness, there may be a delayed reaction against the neogrammarians who had repeatedly and vociferously spoken of methodology. Whatever the reason, for Meillet and for some of his contemporaries the work defined the method; no further account was required.

5.1. What about the preparatory work for the *Aperçu?* Does it explain the genesis of the work? The answer is negative if we limit our inquiry to Meillet's earlier articles about Greek. His bibliography lists some twenty of them published before 1913; of these no more than one or two deal with subjects which play a prominent role in the *Aperçu;* the vast majority concerns etymological or phonological or morphological problems. The novelty is in the realization that the new results of experimental phonetics could throw a different complexion on older problems, in the strong desire to introduce a new rigour into analogical explanation and in the close attention on the one hand to philological accuracy and on the other to structural considerations. This would have been good preparatory work for a historical grammar of Greek; it is not directly related to the *Aperçu*. From this point of view it looks as if the *Aperçu* suddenly sprang from the head of its author like an armed Athena with little or no warning.

5.2. Yet we can obtain the background we need from other sources. First, Meillet's innumerable reviews. Secondly, the general articles which Meillet wrote for various periodicals (mostly non linguistic) and which eventually were in part collected in the first volume of *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale* (1921).

This choice of material is again determined by Meillet's scholarly style. His technical work, we have seen it, avoids explicit discussion of theory or methodology. General articles and reviews are different. In the introduction to *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale* he is at pains to point out that the articles collected there have been written either for a general audience, or for philosophers or sociologists: "presque aucun n'a été destiné proprement à des savants dont la linguistique est la spécialité" (1921: i). Similarly for the reviews. In 1900-01 Meillet took responsibility for the new section on language introduced by Durkheim into the *Analyses* of his *Année Sociologique;* he then had to choose for comment books which were of interest to the readers of the periodical and had to explain in non technical terms the main achievement of contemporary linguistics (cf. Bolelli 1979; Normand-Puech 1987: 29). After 1906 the *Bulletin de la Société de linguistique* also started publishing reviews; Meillet was the main reviewer: 25 books reviewed in 1907-08; 40 or more books in 1908-09. From the tone it is clear that Meillet saw the *Bulletin* as offering to professional linguists something similar to what the *Année Sociologique* provided for sociologists with its *Analyses*. Yet here too the reviews were meant for specialists of different languages or aspects of linguistics; hence the need for explanation and for general statements.

6.   What has this to do with the *Aperçu?* A great deal, because if we exploit the general articles and the reviews to establish Meillet's main tenets, we then

come to realize that the *Aperçu* is in a sense a *roman à thèse*. It is meant to illustrate some principles but these are not spelled out in the text; the reader must extrapolate them from the narrative. The introduction to the *Aperçu* contains some of the book's rare declarations of faith and puts us on the right track:

> A lire les manuels de linguistique historique, on a encore trop souvent l'illusion que tout se passe comme si la langue se transmettait purement et simplement de génération en génération, et comme si tous les changements résultaient de cette transmission constamment renouvelée. (1913: vii)

And later on (viii)

> ... on ne peut se rendre compte de l'évolution d'une langue qu'en tenant compte des situations historiques et des conditions sociales où cette langue s'est développée. Comme l'a toujours indiqué M. Bréal, le langage n'a pas son principe de développement en lui-même. Son évolution est commandée en grande partie par des faits qui lui sont extérieurs.

Finally:

> L'objet du présent ouvrage est tout d'abord de montrer, par un exemple illustre, quelle a été la complexité du développement des langues indo-européennes, et comment des actions extérieures interviennent dans l'évolution du langage. (*ibid.* ix)

Thus the *Aperçu* has been written in support of the view that languages do not develop only through internal causation but their evolution is determined by historical and social reasons. Two questions arise. First how does the *Aperçu* make its point? Secondly how clear are we about the meaning of the statements just quoted?

6.1. Historical and political events certainly played a part in the development of ancient Greek. Meillet relentlessly lists the facts and explains their consequences. The contacts with Mediterranean culture explain the disappearance of the old religious culture of the Indo-Europeans, and consequently of one of the most conservative forces in language; colonization leads both to dialect separation and to a mixture of different populations in the newly founded cities; the creation of a Persian Empire moves the centre of Greek life from Ionia to Attica thus contributing to the political and cultural importance of Attic; Attica's political power and its cultural importance lead to the supremacy of Attic over other dialects, etc. Even a small part of this evidence would make the point that the history of the languages cannot be separated from that of political and social events.

But does Meillet want to argue that *all* language change is historically or externally determined? And what are the *conditions sociales* he mentions; how do they differ from political and historical events?

6.2. Anyone who reads the book as a whole is struck by two recurrent motifs. The first is "the creation of the common language". There is of course the creation of the *koine* in Hellenistic times, but Meillet also speaks of an Ionic-Attic common language which arose during the classical period, and of a common language formed in prehistoric times as the result of cultural unification after the earlier splitting of Indo-European. Finally there is mention of the North-West Greek *koina* and of a Sicilian *koina*. The history of Greek is seen as determined by constant "spontaneous" splitting of the language and constant recreation of new common languages over a more or less extended area.

It is not by chance that Meillet emphasizes the constant process of differentiation followed by reunification. The creation of a common language is for him the prize example – and one which he constantly used well before he wrote or thought of writing the *Aperçu* – of the importance of social facts in language development. Phonetic and morphological change is to a large extent determined by the process of transmission from generation to generation; linguistic differentiation also naturally arises in the normal process of language transmission. Reunification, which depends on the need which different communities have to communicate beyond the limits of the small group, is fundamentally a social process which must be defined in terms of the social conditions in which it operates. In a review Meillet (1909-10b: ccclxii) had already made clear how much was at stake in this analysis:

> Au cours du xixe siècle, et particulièrement depuis 1870 environ, on s'est surtout efforcé de suivre le développement "naturel" du langage, et la linguistique est apparue à beaucoup d'égards comme une science naturelle; M. Bréal a été presque le seul à protester contre cette tendance exclusive. Ce qu'on a surtout mis en évidence, ce sont les innovations spontanées qui ont lieu du fait de la transmission du langage de génération en génération; ces innovations ont lieu en général sans que les sujets en aient conscience, sans intervention de leur volonté, et même malgré leur volonté. Mais on n'explique pas par là la formation des langues communes qui sont le produit des situations sociales données et dont on ne peut rendre compte qu'en déterminant les conditions historiques où elles se sont fixées.

The same thoughts are expressed at length together with a detailed analysis of the Greek facts in a 1911 article (1921: 110-129). Meillet explains that the creation of new common languages is a regular event. The survival or

otherwise of these languages will depend on their use, on their cultural and social importance. In Greece a number of common languages were created in the fourth century or ealier: the North-West-Greek *koina*, the Sicilian *koina*, etc.; all these collapsed and the only language which survived was the one which had already become a *langue de civilisation* with a literature of its own, the real *koine* (1921 (but 1911): 124).

6.3.   The second motif is the importance of literary languages and of their origin. Here and only here Meillet is openly polemic – in the *Aperçu* and elsewhere. He starts with an attack against the contempt or neglect in which literary languages have been held by linguists:

> La linguistique moderne se défie des langues littéraires. Durant tout le xixe siècle, les linguistes se sont proposé avant tout d'étudier le développement spontané du langage, et ils ont été conduits par là, soit à négliger autant qu'ils le pouvaient les langues littéraires, soit... à essayer de deviner les langues populaires à travers les textes... (1913: 119)

And even more firmly he adds in the third edition (1929: 115): "Il y a de l'hypocrisie dans le dédain des linguistes pour les langues littéraires". Here too, the general articles and reviews stress exactly the same point, and not always with reference to Greek. The literary languages represent a conscious norm which offers a well delimited field of inquiry (this is explained in the *Aperçu* too) but above all are typical examples of *langues spéciales*. It is well known how much Meillet relied in his famous article about *Comment les mots changent de sens*, written for the *Année Sociologique* in 1905-6 (1921: 230-271), on the concept of *langue particulière* or *langue spéciale* to explain change of meaning in language. The data, he argued, show that the crucial moment in semantic change occurs when a word shifts from the standard language to a *langue particulière* or viceversa. Semantic change has as main condition "la différenciation des éléments qui constituent la société" (ibid.: 271). When in the *Aperçu* Meillet emphasizes the importance of literary languages he is in fact using the limited evidence we have to establish the existence and the influence of *langues spéciales* in ancient Greek too and consequently to draw again attention to the importance of the social fact in language. This had been made explicit in an earlier review:

> ... la considération des langues spéciales a sûrement une importance de premier ordre ; et elle servira aussi beaucoup à interpréter la formation des langues littéraires, dont la linguistique historique est obligée de tirer parti, qu'elle le veuille ou non; la singularité de bien des formes littéraires, celle de la grande lyrique grecque par exemple, tient sans doute à ce que ces formes reposent sur des langues religieuses spéciales. (1908-9a: lxxxiii)

Thus the second of the two current motifs in the *Aperçu* is, like the first, aimed at exemplifying and emphasizing the social nature of language and the importance of social factors in language development.

7.   At the end of his chapter about the "les bases dialectales de la κοινή" Meillet (1913: 344) adds:

> Il faut tenir compte enfin et surtout que quelques-uns des principaux changements qu'on observe dans la κοινή sont dus à de grandes tendances, les unes communes à toutes les langues indo-européennes, les autres propres au grec, et de ce que, par rapport à ces grandes tendances qui dominent tout le développement de la langue, les petits détails propres à l'attique ne sont en somme que des accidents sans importance.

This is a brief reference to a principle which underlies all Meillet's work, but is too often ignored. Each language is a system *sui generis* and the specific nature of that system joint to the general characteristics of language as such may determine the way in which the language develops independently for once of socially and historically determined features. The reader must extrapolate all this from observations such as that found at the beginning of the book:

> ... le système phonétique du grec commun, bien équilibré, composé d'éléments clairs et bien opposés les uns aux autres, était solide et durable. Il n'a pas subi des modifications profondes durant la période ancienne du développement de la langue. (1913: 33-4)

Meillet was at all stages conscious of the importance of the linguistic system and was also more of a neogrammarian than is often allowed (the two points are *not* in contradiction). His neogramarian views emerge from his insistence in the *Aperçu* on the establishment of regular sound correspondences and from his wish to distinguish clearly between borrowings and straught developments from an earlier phase. The reviews offer an attack against Gauchat who had studied a phenomenon of change reversal due to language mixture: a lost *[l]* had been reintroduced in those forms of a dialect which were influenced by the language of another valley. Meillet (1910-11b: cxviii) comments:

> L'amuissement de *l* a été un phénomène nouveau sur le développement duquel on ne sait rien, et qu'on constate simplement. La restauration de *l* est un phénomène d'*emprunt;* jamais aucun 'néogrammairien' n'a contesté l'importance de l'emprunt. [...] ce serait un recul très grave et un obscurcissement de toutes les idées si l'on venait à emmêler, comme l'a fait très malheureusement M. Gauchat, les innovations dites "spontanées" avec les phénomènes d'emprunt.

In an earlier review of Bréal Meillet (1903-4: 641), after much praise, had reproached his teacher for his insufficient attention to the regular changes in language:

... comme d'ailleurs un langage forme un système très délicat et très compliqué où tout se tient rigoureusement et qui n'admet pas de modifications arbitraires et capricieuses, il n'est sujet à se transformer qu'en vertu de lois générales, essentiellement inconscientes.

Finally, at the time in which he was thinking about the *Aperçu*, Meillet (1911-13a: xvi) observes à propos of an article by Gamillscheg:

Il n'est pas douteux que le mélange de gens parlant des langues distinctes et les rapports entre gens formant des groupes sociaux distincts à l'intérieur d'une même langue sont des facteurs capitaux du changement linguistique. Mais il est téméraire d'affirmer que ce sont les seuls.

We have here an implicit dichotomy. In the evolution of language there are changes which are unconscious, "spontaneous", may be perhaps determined by physiological or psychological factors and must be looked at in terms of the whole structure of the linguistic system. These are changes in phonology and morphology which have most often been studied and are sometimes stated in terms of laws. There are also, and have been less studied, changes which are determined by historical and social factors; it is necessary to find concrete evidence for the study of these phenomena. It would be interesting to establish how much importance Meillet attributes to the quality of "awareness" which he often associates with the latter type; it is clear in any case that his definition of language and dialect, of linguistic continuity etc. is heavily based on this feature; we are told that the speakers are aware of aiming at a specific form of language, that they are consciously imitating special forms of speech, etc.

8. I have previously argued that the *Aperçu* is a sort of *roman à thèse*. The *thèse*, I now add, is not only that of the social nature of language (though this is of course the novelty) but also that of existence of "spontaneous" change in language and of tendencies which are not socially determined: the very existence of change and the splitting of languages into dialects is largely the result of the process of transmission.

For the Meillet of the *Aperçu* the socially determined changes are best identified in the creation of common languages and in the changes determined by the interplay of common languages and *langues spéciales;* the spontaneous changes determine the division into dialects. With this dichotomy in mind we may now turn to the plan of the book. We soon see that the first section *(La préhistoire du grec)* is largely, though not entirely, concerned with "spontaneous" development and with the splitting into dialects. On the other hand the second and third sections are dedicated to the literary languages and to the formation of a common language, i.e. to the evidence for the importance of social factors in the development of Greek. We may wonder whether this is deliberate.

The question remains unanswered, but we are induced to read again, with greater awareness, Vendryes' words of praise (1911-13b: ccxxx):

> Que d'aperçus profonds ! Que d'avenues largement ouvertes ! Et pourtant le livre n'apporte guère de faits nouveaux ni même dans le détail, d'interprétations nouvelles. Pris isolément, les exemples qu'il contient sont bien connus et figurent dans tous les manuels de grammaire grecque [...]. Ce qui en fait toute la nouveauté, c'est la disposition, où les faits ont chacun une valeur démonstrative et sont groupés pour concourir à l'établissement de la thèse.

What are then the achievements of the *Aperçu?* The first is that of having created a new model for the history of a language. The second is certainly the *concrete* demonstration of the importance of historical and social factors in the evolution of language. Nevertheless a number of points remains obscure. I can only list some of them here. First, what is the connection between the "spontaneous" change and the structure of a language? How important is a well balanced structure to guarantee the preservation of the system? Should we assume that such a structure will survive unless outside events occur? Secondly, what is the "awareness" which seem to accompany those linguistic phenomena which are socially determined? Is Meillet in fact thinking of what we would now call ethnolinguistic considerations?

The list continues. How are we to take the somewhat daring links which Meillet instituted between linguistic phenomena and psychological or cultural events without much discussion of the evidence? On what basis can Meillet (1929: 71) argue in the third edition of the *Aperçu* that the fundamental autonomy of the Greek word in the phrase reflects the individualism which the Greek aristocracy inherited from the Indo-European chieftains:

> L'aristocratie qui a apporté la langue grecque est restée fidèle à l'essentiel du type indo-européen, à l'autonomie de chacun des mots principaux de la phrase : cette autonomie, qui concorde avec l'individualisme du chef indo-européen, s'exprime par le traitement particulier des fins de mots et par la flexion... ?

Why should we assume that in losing the concrete cases, the causative, the iteratives etc. Greek has taken a firm step towards abstraction? How can it be stated (ibid.) that there is a general tidiness in Greek grammar and that this reflects the "netteté des lignes" which characterises Mediterranean civilisation? These remain moot points; they may make us smile, but we should try to understand. Yet this calls for another sort of inquiry.

10. What determined the success of the *Aperçu?* An answer is implicit in all that has been said. The novelty of the schema and the obvious interest and validity of the points made are important. But for the classicists – those

classicists who were reluctant to accept anything from the linguists – other features were also important. On the one hand there was firm philological knowledge: no blunders. On the other hand there was a concentration on the importance of the literary languages which was bound to warm the heart of those who had been treated to a diet of *Laut- und Formenlehre*. There was also a remarkable absence of technicalities; the book was written with the classicist in mind and the classicist could read it without having to puzzle out what *schwa* or *Rektionskompositum* meant. More important, as all good *romans à thèse*, the *Aperçu* concealed its *thèse;* the elegance of the style and the interest of the tale prevailed. It was left to the old Bréal (1913: 311) to compare the author of the *Aperçu* with Ernest Renan, the man who deserved a place both in the tradition of French *belles lettres* and in that of French linguistics.

There remains one questions to answer. Why did Meillet choose to write a history of Greek when most of his previous work had concerned other languages? Obviously there may have been accidental reasons, but, if I am right in arguing that the *Aperçu* is a *roman à thèse,* this is the reason. Among the ancient languages which Meillet could discuss, Greek with its literary languages, its well attested evidence, and its new common language could better than anything else prove the thesis Meillet wanted to demonstrate. But this is not the whole truth. All through the book it is easy to recognize a warmth, an enthusiasm, a devotion for the Greek language and its beauty which is difficult to justify theoretically and which may irritate the linguist but can only encourage the classicist. No linguist or classicist would like to develop a logical argument to support one of the statements that Meillet (1920: 175) added to the second edition of the *Aperçu* and rewrote for the third, but no classicist can help being deeply moved by it. It is rhetorics but rhetorics we warm to:

> Ce qui donne au grec une part de son charme, c'est que c'est une langue de type indo-européen archaïque et que, en même temps, les ressources des langues abstraites de la civilisation moderne s'y constituent [...]. A trouver rapprochées la richesse de flexion, la force expressive d'une vieille langue indo-européenne et la précision, la netteté d'une pensée abstraite, à sentir se dégager dans son évidence le caractère intellectuel qui est essentiel à toute langue, mais qui est souvent dissimulé, à voir les procédés actuels se créer au milieu des complications d'un type archaïque, sans modèle étranger, en pleine spontanéité du développement, à trouver les thèmes universels de la pensée humaine sous une forme rationnelle maniée par des hommes qui se fabriquent à chaque moment leur outil linguistique en même temps qu'ils posent des idées, on éprouve une jouissance dont aucune langue contemporaine ne donne l'équivalent. (1929: 236)

NOTES

1.   I cannot agree with one of the statements made by D. Lanza (1976: xxi) in his very
interesting introduction to the *Aperçu:* "la linguistica e la filologia si sono ormai
completamente separate". The situation was of course different in Italy where linguistics
had had a leading function in the second part of the nineteenth century (cf. Timpanaro
1972 and 1979) but elsewhere – and above all in Germany – the 1910's and 1920's saw
a rapprochement (which admittedly did not last very long because of the arrival of the new
general linguistics); cf. also note 2. In France thanks partly to Bréal (but one may also
think of Gaston Paris and perhaps Renan) linguistics and philology were relatively close.
2.   It is worth quoting what a great classicist, Eduard Fraenkel (1935: 218), had to say
about Wilhelm Schulze, both because it is very close to what one could say about the
Meillet of the *Aperçu* and because it partly supports with the words of a quasi-
contemporary witness my statements in note 1.: "With Schulze and with few of his
contemporaries the so-called Comparative Philology became a thing entirely different
from what it had been before. He more and more shifted the ground from the nebulous
spaces of prehistory to the solid soil of historical development and thus, without
disparaging the inherited methods, turned 'Sprachvergleichung' into 'Sprachgeschichte'."
Put it more bluntly, what the classicist Fraenkel wants to say about the comparativist
Schulze is simply: "he was one of us".
3.   An important and pioneering account of how and when scholars started to write about
"the history of a language" can be found in Varvaro (1972-73) to whom I must refer for
more data. I probably attribute more importance to Meillet than Varvaro does.

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