

References and transcript for Episode 11: Interview with Floris Solleveld on disciplinary linguistics in the 19th century

James McElvenny

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Transcript by Luca Dinu

JMc Hi. I'm James McElvenny, and you're listening to the History and Philosophy of the
00:18 Language Sciences Podcast, online at hiphilangsci.net. As always, you can find links and references to all the literature we discuss up on the website. With the last episode, we more or less reached the end of our survey of the main currents in 19th-century disciplinary linguistics. In this episode, we're joined by Floris Solleveld from the Catholic University of Leuven, who's going to give us another perspective on that century by talking to us about his work. Up until now in this podcast series, we've been travelling to exotic locales to meet our experts in their natural habitats. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic has made it impossible to travel to Leuven for this episode. Instead, for this interview, we're fallen back on the internet, or cyberspace, or the information superhighway, as it was known at the time. This is a late 20th-century computer networking technology which allowed instant audiovisual contact between people all over the world. While this sort of video telephony had long been a dream of 20th-century science fiction, it was only with the pandemic of 2020, two decades into the 21st century that people started to embrace this technology rather than just meeting in person. So Floris, what was the character of language scholarship in the humanities more generally in the 19th century? In this series, we have already talked a little bit about how 19th-century language scholars emphasized the novelty of what they were doing, that there were frequent proclamations of a revolution in the language sciences. You've examined this question yourself in quite a bit of detail. Do you think that there was a decisive break in the study of language and the human world in the 19th century, and could it be described as a scientific revolution?

FS Hi, James. Well, thanks for having me here. And well, yes, I mean the question to
02:15 what extent you can speak of a scientific revolution in the humanities is a question that I have pondered on for some six years, and my general, unspectacular answer is: Kind of. A lot of things happened, a lot of things changed, around 1800. There is a lot of revolutionary rhetoric surrounding it, and whether you call it a scientific revolution depends on your theoretical perspective and on your personal preferences, but what happens in linguistics actually is quite drastic. What you really see is a sort of breaking of paper trails, which is a really good indication that something really drastic happens, if people stop using work from a previous period, stop quoting from it, and also stop using material from [without] quoting it. And that is actually what kind of happens in 19th-century linguistics. They're really not much using 18th-century work anymore, and indeed there is a staple of revolutionary rhetoric surrounding it. Friedrich Schlegel is the outstanding example. The man is a serial proclaimer of revolutions. I mean, even as a student, he proclaims a revolution in the study of antiquity. Then he invents the Romantic movement, and then he proclaims an Oriental renaissance in *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*. And most of his proclamations actually get picked up, although not exactly in the way that he intended them. I mean, he is not the guy who founds modern classical philology. His Oriental renaissance actually turns out to become the basis of comparative linguistics rather than the basis of a spiritual rejuvenation of the West, but I mean, to get that instead is not a crass failure either. But then also, if you look at that in retrospect, which is what happens in the 19th century as the discipline develops, you see that people actually look back on it in those terms, but there is a bit of a grey area. For

instance, the first guy to actually speak of a scientific revolution in the study of language is Peter Stephen Du Ponceau. And what does he cite as an example? He doesn't cite Schlegel. He cites Adelung, *Mithridates*, which is the text that people now classically use to contrast the previous paradigm and new historical-comparative linguistics, but Adelung was still used as a source of data, so in that regard, Adelung is basically the only or one of the few and far that actually still are used as source of information.

JMc 05:05 Do you think that even though there are all of these proclamations of revolutions and people are not citing their predecessors, do you think that that really represents a break in continuity between the way people were doing the study of language in the 19th century and their predecessors and also a break in the way that they thought about language, the sort of philosophy of language and the philosophy of science that lies behind the discipline of linguistics?

FS 05:33 Yes, I do think so. I mean, and not just in having this sort of historical-comparative perspective, which of course is very preeminent in 19th-century linguistics, but also, for instance, in the realization that there are these different language families, each with their own character, or with the idea that you can actually analyze language structures in different ways, because these different language families really have different organizational principles. Or also what you see as a result of that is, for instance, the mapping of sound systems or the analysis of different ways of ordering particles. I mean, you actually already see Humboldt splitting up Polynesian languages morphologically in *Über die Kawi-Sprache*. You already see Richard Lepsius drawing up diagrams of sound systems in the presentation of his phonetic alphabet, and that is the sort of analysis of language which really doesn't happen in the 18th century. So yes, I do think that there is this sort of drastic discontinuity, and you also see that the term "linguistics" actually comes up in this period. Actually, the fun thing again is that the first people to actually use the term "linguistics" are late 18th-century German compilers who very much work within an early modern compilatory style of working, so in that regard, okay, you know, you never really have a clean break, but then scientific revolutions aren't like political revolutions where you storm the Bastille or you storm the Winter Palace and you chop off the king's head and you say it's a revolution and nobody doubts it. With scientific revolutions, you always have this sort of unclarity like, okay, what is the measure of a complete conceptual break? And this is one reason why there has been a lot of scepticism about the notion of scientific revolutions in the history of science, mainly. In the history of scholarship, the question has been addressed far less, and why some people want to get rid of the phrase. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park talked about getting rid of that "ringing three-word phrase." Steven Shapin said that "There was no such thing as the Scientific Revolution, and this is a book about it." And that sort of sums up the *communis opinio* among historians of science. So within the humanities, I think the history of linguistics stands out for this sort of really radical conceptual break and break in ways in which material is organized and knowledge is being produced. So for the humanities at large, my answer is more like kind of, maybe a qualified yes, but linguistics really is one of the strongest arguments in favour of that.

JMc 08:23 Okay. So would you say that accompanying the scientific revolution in linguistics, that there was a fundamental change in the sociological constitution of the field, and in scholarship more generally, in the 19th century? So for the scholarly community up

until the end of the 18th century, it's usual to talk about the Republic of Letters. Do you think that this was superseded in the 19th century by clear-cut university-based disciplines, or do you think that there was continuity from this earlier idea of the Republic of Letters?

FS So the Republic of Letters is a container notion for the learned world, which perceives itself as an independent commonwealth, hence republic, *res publica*, of letters. And "letters" here is an early modern container term for learning at large; "letters" really means what it means in the name-shield of the Faculty of Letters. And three things actually hold that community together, which is (a) a correspondence network reinforced by learned journalism, (b) a symbolic economy, and (c) the sense of an academic community. Now, these things, these three aspects, they actually persist. We still perceive ourselves as part of an imagined community. We still correspond with each other. We still trade in information and prestige, and we don't get rich, generally. So to that extent, that sort of infrastructure persists. Now, still, the notion of Republic of Letters pretty much fades out from use in the early 19th century. I've traced that, and it is pretty much a sad story of how the term goes out of use. Some people try to reinvent it — doesn't work. And there are very clear explanations for that. First of all, the notion of "republic" is appropriated by the French Revolution, gets different connotations. The notion of "letters" changes, or "literature" becomes a term for literature as an art form instead for learning at large. We still speak of the literature, you know, in our field, and that is sort of a remnant of that early modern use. And also, people now address their peers, or they address the nation, if they address a wider public, and they don't address the learned community in that sense anymore. So it didn't make that much sense for 19th-century scholars anymore to appeal to the Republic of Letters, and it did make, for instance, for late 17th-century Huguenot journalists who reinvented the notion, it did make sense for the *parti philosophique*, who appropriated (or rather, violently took over) the Republic of Letters in the mid-18th-century. It did make sense also for German academics who were trying to position themselves in the 18th century. But then this model of an amateur community being superseded by professionalism, that story has to be seriously qualified, because scholarship already is concentrated at universities in the German lands in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. And that is actually what gives the German-speaking countries an edge in the 19th century, because then it turns out that universities are a much more effective model for concentrating learning than they seem to be in the late early modern period, whereas what you see happening in the French- and English-speaking world is that this concentration of scholarship at universities goes a lot slower. It's actually only in the second half of the 19th century, and especially after 1870, that this model really becomes so predominant that amateur or independent scholarship becomes the great exception. 1870, of course, in France, it means the end of the Second Empire because they lose the Franco-Prussian War, and then they reshape it into the Second Republic. In Britain, 1870 is not such a big break, but you see from the 1860s onward that there is a huge wave of new university foundations, so-called red brick universities, and that really leads to a change in the academic landscape. There had been new university foundations before, King's College, London University College, Durham University, but those were more like additions to the Oxbridge duopoly and the Scottish big four or big five. And now what happens with red brick universities is, you really see an intensification of academic research. If you look at the number of university staff and

students from 1700 to 1850, it's pretty constant. There are some serious interruptions when the Jesuit Order is banished or when the French Revolution closes all the universities or when half the German universities die in the period between 1795 and 1818, but on the whole, it's pretty constant. From the second half of the 19th century onward, it expands exponentially. So yes, the notion of Republic of Letters goes out of use in the early 19th century, but no, it's not as if there is this clean break from an amateur learned community to institutional professional scholarship within well-delineated disciplines. But I do want to add a footnote to that, because Ian McNeely recently wrote an article about Humboldt's *Über die Kawi-Sprache* as the last project of the Republic of Letters.

JMc Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

13:43

FS 13:44 Because he says that Humboldt then pieced his information together from all kind of previous language gathering exercises like Adelung, like Hervás y Panduro, like the British colonial administrators in Southeast Asia, particularly Marsden, who then fed all that information into Humboldt's coffers and then Humboldt, as a retired statesman and independent scholar, writes this big compendium which really still radiates the ghost of this imagined learned community. Now, that is not untrue, but again, this is McNeely's schematism that he thinks of the Republic of Letters as a sort of reified scholarly community rather than as a notion that you use strategically to present your own situation. And if you look at how the languages of the world are mapped throughout the long nineteenth century, then quite a lot of these people actually are not university-based scholars, so there is a process of institutionalization around historical-comparative linguistics. A small part of that is about linguistics proper and about Sanskrit, but a much larger part is about German studies, French studies, Slavonic studies a bit later, English studies, so *Germanistik*, *Romanistik*, which is then informed by Indo-European comparative linguistics. But if you look at people who mapped the languages of India, the languages of Australia, the languages of Oceania, or the languages of the Americas, those are to a large part colonial administrators, people coordinating missionary networks. And those people do not operate anymore within what they would describe as a Republic of Letters. George Grey in Cape Town and Auckland did not think of himself as a citizen of the Republic of Letters. George Grierson mapping the languages of India did not think of himself as a citizen of the Republic of Letters. Well, maybe Peter Stephen Du Ponceau in Philadelphia (who, after all, was born in the 18th century and who still basically thrives on this correspondence network), maybe he thought of himself as a citizen of the Republic of Letters. I don't know, but...

JMc 15:56 But how did they think of themselves, and how were they seen by the newly emerging caste of professional linguists in universities? Was their work received in the centre of disciplinary linguistics, you know, in Indo-European comparative linguistics? Did it feed into that, or were they doing just something separate that was still considered to be an amateur project?

FS 16:18 Well, no, what you see is that they do take on board professional expertise. So George Grey, again, is the outstanding example, because what does he do when he becomes Governor of South Africa and sets forth his language-gathering project which he already had been doing in Adelaide and Auckland? He hires a German philologist with a PhD (actually the first guy to actually get his PhD on African

languages) to organize his library and to put the stamp of scientific approval on what George Grey had been doing.

JMc And that was Wilhelm Bleek.

16:51

FS And you see... Yeah, Wilhelm Bleek, that was.

16:53

JMc Yeah.

16:54

FS You also see it with George Grierson, who writes this – or coordinates – *The Linguistic Survey of India* and who himself tries to avoid some sort of strong institutional foothold, although he has affiliations, so as to retain some sort of independence, but he hires an assistant, Sten Konow, who is university-based. He gets honorary doctorates, he goes to orientalist congresses, and several of these people mapping the languages of the world, they get the Prix Volney. Peter Stephen Du Ponceau wins the Prix Volney. Did Sigismund Koelle win the Prix Volney? No, he didn't. Oh, yes, he did. So there is this sort of interaction between this broader ethnolinguistic project and the more narrow discipline formation within linguistics, and you also see that some tools, especially phonetic alphabets, get developed within this broader network rather than within this narrow academic sphere. And of course, I mean institutionally, Indo-European historical-comparative linguistics is predominant because they have institutional firepower. If you look at who holds the chairs in Germany (where indeed there are chairs in these fields much earlier onward), it's largely Sanskritists and Germanists, and if you look at the number of people who are actually engaged in this mapping of the languages of the world, so the number of people involved in a secondary sense that they supply information for it runs in thousands, but the number of people who actually put together these collections and make comparative grammars and language atlases — that's a dozen, two dozen. It's really not such a big community.

JMc Okay. Was this community of language scholars, did they work largely in isolation from other fields that were developing at the time, or are there interactions between linguistics and other sciences such as, I don't know, ethnography, psychology, history even?

FS Yeah. Well, one of the greatest interactions that you haven't mentioned yet actually is with geography. One way of literally mapping the languages of the world is through language atlases, and the people who actually invent the language atlas are geographers. It's Adriano Balbi working in Paris who also makes a *Atlas ethnographique du monde* (An ethnographic atlas of the world), which is actually an overview of the languages of the world, and it's Julius Klaproth, who is a self-taught Sinologist, who then turns to studying the languages of Asia and who also is a geographer, literally a map maker. So the Bibliothèque Mazarine — or is it the Bibliothèque Nationale? Anyway, they have hundreds or even thousands of Julius Klaproth's map designs. For Julius Klaproth, there really is this strong intersection between linguistics and geography, but indeed ethnology is the most direct sister of linguistics within this project of what I call the mapping of the world, because, indeed, language is one of the clearest denominators of ethnic boundaries on a non-political level. So everyone who studied languages in the 19th century was aware that, okay, you can also learn a language if you are not part of that people, but

generally, a people and the language community are overlapping unities. Well, of course, this notion of “people” was involved with all kind of projections of their own, especially in German, *Volk*, but if you want to make distinctions between different peoples, so really if you want to know, okay, there are a lot of people in this region, in this continent, and we want to know what the main differences between them are and how we should relate to them, then language really is the most [common] denominator. What you also see is that, indeed — and this, of course, is one of the dark heritages of the 19th-century colonial project — is that that classification is then reinforced or formulated in terms of physical anthropology, in terms of theories of race. But then one of the remarkable things here is that, again, these people are aware that there are such things as miscegenation, both on a linguistic and on a racial level, and there also is actually far less consensus about racial classification than there is about linguistic classification. This is surprising, but people nowadays tend to talk about racial theory in the 19th century as if it is this one big dark thing, and it is pretty dark — I wouldn’t want to deny that — but it’s not one thing. There is actually like half a dozen conflicting racial theories, and they are aware that they are leaking on all sides, so there are theories that simply say, okay, we divide these people into different colours. Black, white, red, yellow, and maybe also brown. Or we divide them into different facial forms. Or we divide them into hair growth. That’s actually the most comical one, so that’s actually Ernst Haeckel who comes up with that who says like, okay, well, colour is an arbitrary standard because it actually changes depending on the climate. Well, physical proportions are a continuum, but actually the different hair types are discrete sets, so we divide people into people with sleek hair, and people with curly hair, and people with woolly hair.

JMc And I believe that’s the basis of the classification that Friedrich Müller...

22:35

FS Yes, so then you really have these *wollhaarigen Sprachen*, which really doesn’t pass the giggle test in some regards.

JMc I guess also, too, that by the end of the 19th century, people who were trying to come up with sort of rigorous scientific definitions for racial theory found that it didn’t stack up and abandoned it.

FS What you see indeed is that there is a growing awareness, at least within the scientific community, that these distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, but then still the practice continues. Physical anthropology continues indeed until after World War II. What you see is that racial theory, because it is “natural science” (quotation marks) actually has this sort of appeal as a sort of more rigid quantitative approach, and even after Franz Boas actually starts actively not just noticing that the categories leak, but gathering lots of anthropometric data with the express aim of showing that anthropometry is not the right way to quantify people, even after that it continues. I mean, another interesting example is Pater Wilhelm Schmidt, the guy who basically represents Catholic ethnolinguistics, who writes an atlas of the world’s languages, does the classification of Australian Aboriginal languages that still kind of holds, and reorganizes the collections of the Propaganda Fide into the Vatican Museum of, Missionary-Ethnological Museum. So he’s firmly convinced you should look at culture, not race, but he says you should do that because ethnology is a separate scientific discipline. But he also keeps treating racial theory as a fully bona fide scientific approach. So there is this very funny – or, funny, well, it depends on your

sense of humour – there is this very paradoxical outcome that he actually writes a tract *Rasse und Volk* in the 1920s, and then after the Nazis take over, he reformulates it into a tract: *Rasse und Volk. Ihre allgemeine Bedeutung, ihre Geltung im deutschen Raum*. That's "Race and People: Their General Meaning and Their Significance in the German Area." This book gets banned by the Nazis because he says, yes, we have racial theories, but no, they are irrelevant for understanding what a people is and what a language is. So, I mean, Pater Wilhelm Schmidt is not my hero – let's be clear about that – but he does show a parting of the ways in this program.

JMc Thanks very much, Floris, for hooking up with us by Zoom to talk about linguistic
25:17 scholarship in the long nineteenth century.

FS Yeah. Thank you very much, James. I mean, this is really a wonderful contribution
25:24 that you're making to the linguistic community, keeping us together over a distance
in these dark times and reminding us of the past, of course, as an imagined
community we're also imagining ourselves to be part of.