

Itinerari ottocenteschi. Tra linguistica storico-comparativa e linguistica generale. By Maria Patrizia Bologna. (= *Lingue, culture e testi*, 18.) Roma: Il Calamo, 2016. 222 pp. ISBN 978-88-98640-11-9. Euro 30,00 (PB).

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This new book by Maria Patrizia Bologna (chair of “Glottologia” at the University of Milan “Statale”) effectively brings together fourteen articles dating from 1981 to 2010 that until now were scattered over specialized journals and collective volumes which were not easily accessible. The papers have been organised into four sections. The first one (“Presupposti teorici e consapevolezze metodologiche”) includes chapters on Franz Bopp’s (1791–1867) “dualism” (pp. 13–30), comparativism and reconstruction (31–67), the use of geological metaphors in 19th-century critical metalanguage (69–79), the return to history (“Rethinking Linguistics Historically”) that characterized different moments of both historical linguistics at the end of the 19th century and diachronic orientations of the late 20th century (81–92). The second section (“Le origini ottocentesche della linguistica americana”) is dedicated to the leading figure of William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) to whom two chapters are devoted; these two chapters focus on the relationship between general linguistics and Sanskrit studies (95–108) and on Whitney’s concept of interference (109–121), respectively. The third section (“Percorsi etimologici e semantici”) delves into the multifaceted connections between the etymological research — a classical cornerstone of comparativism — and the birth of semantics, mainly due to Michel Bréal’s (1832–1915) scientific work resulting in his 1897 *Essai de sémantique*. Under this heading, three main chapters are included and focus, respectively, on etymology and semantics (125–144), Bréal’s 1883 article “Les lois intellectuelles du langage” (145–159) and, in conclusion, etymology and cultural reconstruction (161–183).

Many aspects of the comparative tradition are investigated in this book and many current critical studies are reviewed (and eventually discussed), having a principal goal in mind: that of avoiding the reduction of comparativism to a strictly technical methodology on one hand, and that of establishing a clearer connection between its legacy and Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857–1913) general linguistics on the other. The first point has to do with Antoine Meillet’s (1866–1936) reductive evaluation of Franz Bopp, which according to Bologna has been responsible for a historiographic *cliché* (comparativism as devoid of any theoretical interest) not yet fully overcome even today. The second point refers to a typical move of

the structuralist (and post-structuralist) trend, which exaggerated the novelty of Saussure's (1972 [1916]) pathway to linguistics, to the point of neglecting its roots in the Neogrammarian milieu and underestimating Saussure's interest in concrete tasks of linguistic inquiry (reconstruction included). This is — briefly summarized — the *filum Ariadnae* of Bologna's work, but her essays also provide the reader with a number of 'diversions' that illuminate less studied aspects of scholars and/or trends in research, whose importance the author rightly vindicates. In this regard, three typical points of interest are discussed: Bopp's 'hidden' theory of language, August Friedrich Pott's (1802–1887) attention to genuine semantic matters, and Whitney's place in the development of the study of linguistic interference.

As regarding Bopp, Bologna wonders if the traditional interpretation insisting on a dualism between his historical interests and his 'organicism' faithfully reflects his ultimate lesson. Drawing on important suggestions from Benvenuto Terracini (1949) and Sebastiano Timpanaro (2005, Chapter 2), the author casts Bopp's enterprise into the Humboldtian cultural milieu of the 1820s. His "*new Vergleichende Grammatik* [...]" should be seen in the light of Humboldt's much wider attempt at a cultural history of mankind" (p. 21; here and elsewhere translations are mine, S. G.), according to the guidelines of a concept of *Kulturgeschichte* that was to remain unknown to the Neogrammarian generation. Bopp's reference to the organism of language did not entail — as August Schleicher (1821–1868) was to suggest some decades later — that languages are living beings independent of the speakers' activity. Not only the philosophical importance Bopp ascribed to the origins of grammatical forms as well as his typological concerns, but also, on a genuine methodological field, the attention he paid to the euphonic factors that interfere with language change (the well-known *Wohllautgesetze* principle), would demonstrate that the speaking community played an important role in Bopp's scientific perspective.

Bologna's claim for a better historical evaluation of Bopp has important bearings on Saussure's controversial position as well, wavering between his undeniable participation to the Neogrammarian (and more widely comparative) research plan (along with his 1879 *Mémoire* his precious notes on comparative topics of the 1890s are also noteworthy) and his acknowledged role as 'true beginner' of synchronic linguistics in the 20th century. Bologna raises a number of questions that would deserve a detailed discussion. I will confine myself to two points of general relevance. Firstly, her ideas parallel with those of scholars that do not interpret Saussure's official "silence" of the Geneva years as a dismissal of comparative interests (see, e.g., Cristina Vallini's 2013 collection of essays on this point). To some degree, the editorial structure of the *Cours de linguistique générale* decided by Charles Bally (1865–1947) and Albert Sechehaye (1870–1946) was also responsible, among other distortions, of a kind of concealment of Saussure's remarks

on such topics. Secondly, Bologna utilizes new arguments to discuss the classical question about Saussure's opposition between the synchronic and diachronic study of language, referring to an embryonic 'historical standpoint' ("point de vue historique", quoted on p. 51) that would allow the researcher to avoid an overly rigid distinction between the two perspectives. Many scholars in the field of historical linguistics have criticised Saussure for what seemed an untenable paradox: How can we separate dimensions that co-exist in any phase of language functioning, due to its deeply temporal nature? Even the first structuralist school, the Prague school, raised similar objections in its 1929 *Theses*. (However, Bologna does not comment on this meaningful coincidence.) An answer to this dilemma has been suggested by Tullio De Mauro (1932–2017) in his 1967 comment to the *Cours*, where he remarks that the opposition does not exist *in re* (to the extent that languages are obviously historical deeds, where past, present and future are strictly connected with each other), but is *methodological* in nature. Owing to the law of linguistic 'valeur', which operates synchronically, the distinction appears unavoidable: it is a necessary consequence of the systematicity of language. Therefore, to the aim of arriving at a 'diachronic identity', two (or more) 'photographs' of synchronic states, duly distant in time, are needed in order to ascertain possible changes in the functional role of the linguistic entities.

This interpretation may not be fully satisfying for "glottologists" that are used to focusing on concrete historical data and are sometimes suspicious of 'abstract' methodologies which are perhaps more familiar to general linguists. It is not by chance that, on the premise that synchrony and diachrony coexist, Bologna insists that Saussure's conundrum ('enigma') has to do with the impossibility of fully capturing "language in its process" ("una processualità della lingua mai completamente descrivibile", p. 53). Her answer draws on the recently discovered manuscript *De l'essence double du langage* (published in Saussure 2002; commented on by De Mauro in Saussure 2005: 12–17), where Saussure distinguishes four perspectives or 'points de vue' for the study of language, focusing respectively on: (1) the state of "langue en lui-même"; (2) language cross-identities ("identités transversales"); (3) diachrony, including language retrospection (instead of "diachronique", Saussure used here, tentatively, "anachronique", a term which he later abandoned); (4) the setting of two (or more) subsequent synchronic states, each seen in itself, and not subordinate to the other ("point de vue historique").

On this premise, Bologna argues, the different and somewhat contrasting inputs of Saussure's linguistics result in epistemological coherence. Undoubtedly, Saussure should be redeemed from the "achronic" picture of language encouraged by some leading figures of the structuralist (and I would like to add, semiotic) school of linguistics. From the comparative tradition, and from Bopp in particular, he inherited both a profound sense of the historicity of language and the

‘reconstructive’ tasks that had inspired all his efforts, from morphology to the historical phonetics, including “ce qu’on appelle ordinairement l’étymologie” (quoted on p. 51). Bologna’s conclusion is, in my opinion, well-balanced and plausible, and so is her use of the passage in *De l’essence double du langage*. However, it is worth noting that Saussure’s conciliation of perspectives was already explicit in a famous passage (in the *Cours*, p. 20) where the three different tasks of linguistics are listed: as the first of them included the *description* as well as the *history* of all available languages, Saussure overtly ascribed to the historical study a position complementary (and by no means subordinate) to the synchronic one. At the same time, the panchronic standpoint (a ‘second’ task that had no antecedent in *De l’essence double*) paved the way for a consideration of language in general terms: i.e., it legitimated a theoretical approach focusing on features that represented its permanent properties, all categories of general linguistics — starting from the principles of the arbitrariness of sign — would fall within the scope of panchrony.

This reference to the long-lasting interest in etymological topics brings us to another protagonist of Bologna’s book, namely August Friedrich Pott, whose immense work as an etymologist is extensively discussed in the chapters 2 and 7. Aiming for a re-evaluation of the theoretical side of Pott’s studies, Bologna reviews and quotes at large from the *Einleitungen* to the two parts (1833 and 1836) of his *Etymologische Forschungen* (2nd ed., 1867–1873) as well as from the important “Einleitung in die Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft” (1884) published in the first issue of Friedrich Techmer’s (1843–1891) journal, the *Internationale Zeitschrift für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*. Etymology was a field in which a prevalent (and sometimes merely) speculative approach, devoted to the search for the ‘true’ meaning of words, had deposited a good deal of fanciful hypotheses. As Bologna persuasively shows, Pott’s insistence on the linguistic forms as the basic — factual — ingredient of such a study meant an emancipation of the etymological inquiry from its prescientific stages. Likewise, other scholars such as Walter Belardi (1923–2008, see pp. 137–138) upheld that a privileged attention to the linguistic forms (instead of their supposedly ‘original’ meaning) was the necessary step towards a professionalization of etymological research. However, the adoption of this method, Bologna argues, did not entail, for Pott, a dismissal of semantic concerns, which took the form of a *Bedeutungslehre* integrating the *Formenlehre*. The combination of the two elements corresponded to the co-existence of both physical and mental components in the realm of language (Pott’s “Doppelprincip des Leiblichen und Geistigen” [1833: xii]). Distancing himself from the excesses that characterized not only the traditional practice of etymology but also early comparativism, Pott relegates the ultimate roots of language (“Wurzeln”) to the virtual reign of imagination and takes ‘words and word-forms’, concretely documented in

texts, as the true object of his study. In the last analysis, he writes, “[d]ie Wurzel fällt unter keine Sprachkategorie” (Pott 1836: 398).

Pott goes further with his distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ factors in the evolution of word-meanings. The first factor is permanent in nature and is revealed by etymological investigation, the latter depends on the way single languages refer to the external reality and is subject to change. The combination of the two factors results in a complex ‘Bezeichnungssystem’, which forms the semantic horizon of the languages (see pp. 129–132). Bologna devotes a number of intriguing quotations and relative comments to illustrate Pott’s pioneering ‘Bedeutungslehre’. On the one hand, she stresses the link between Pott and the far-reaching philosophical-linguistic perspective of Humboldt, whose posthumous masterpiece *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues* Pott re-edited in 1876.¹ On the other hand, she regards Pott’s theory as a kind of bridge leading us to the direction of research inaugurated by Émile Littré’s (1801–1881) *Comment les mots changent de sens* (1888) and creatively developed by Michel Bréal (1832–1915) into a new branch of linguistics which he baptized ‘semantics’.

This possible connection between Pott and Bréal is extremely suggestive, for many reasons. Firstly, the reader is invited to focusing on the attention that prominent scholars in the comparative tradition such as Pott paid to philosophical topics, which according to a consolidated historiographical prejudice would have been overcome by merely empirical interests. I venture to remark, *en passant*, that Jacob Grimm’s (1775–1863) interest in the origins of language, testified by his famous conference held in Berlin in 1851, is another convincing case in point to underpin Bologna’s hypothesis. Responding to another authoritative contribution to the topic, Friedrich Schelling’s (1775–1854) 1850 conference, Grimm strove to fill the gap that Schelling, albeit in rather confused terms, noticed between philosophy and empirical research, and did so by means of a detailed account of the ‘natural’ origins of language that resorted to both empirical and theoretical arguments. Secondly, Bréal’s investigation in the realm of meaning takes a new flavour if considered in the light of his connections with the comparative tradition (cf. Bréal 1897). Pott’s genuine ‘Humboldtian’ tenet that language “shapes the way humans have access to both physical and mental reality” (p. 129) and his subtle analysis of linguistic phenomena, such as polysemy, synonymy etc., are important steps towards Bréal’s enterprise. Furthermore, Bréal’s effort to introduce Bopp’s lesson into French linguistics — with his meritorious translation of Bopp’s *Vergleichende*

1. However, Pott’s interpretation of Humboldt’s theory as well as his concept of “root” were repeatedly criticized by Heyman Steinthal (1823–1899). Steinthal’s “Offenes Sendschreiben an Herrn Prof. Pott” (1877) is particularly relevant in this connection.

Grammatik, in 5 volumes (1866–1874) — as well as his insistence on grammaticalization strategies in terms of coefficients of the change of meaning, reveal how deeply his thought, even his semantic thought, was rooted in the comparative tradition. This does not mean, Bologna rightly remarks, underestimating the novelty of his approach. Its originality is evident in the way Bréal's "lois intellectuelles du langage [...] shift from a rationalistic to a psychologicistic dimension" and describe "psychological evolutionary mechanisms anchored to the role of human will [...] and to the historical nature of languages" (p. 150).

This book is a welcoming invitation to rethink delicate passages of the history of linguistics between the 19th and the early 20th centuries. For linguists it is an occasion to reconsider some 'classics' of the historical studies in the framework of a rich intellectual context, where the technicization of the discipline was often integrated by means of theoretical insights that have frequently been underestimated. For the philosophers of language, it is a stimulus to re-appraise, in a more realistic way, the narrative concerning the divorce between theory and empirical research that characterized much of the comparative heritage. It is to be expected that both categories of scholars will find, in this book, useful inputs to collaborate in a fertile cross-disciplinary perspective.

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