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A few remarks on Adam Smith's *Dissertation* (1761)

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1. In his 'Account of the life and writings of Adam Smith, LL.D." Dugald Stewart (1853:XXXIV) writes: "The Dissertation on the Origin of Languages, which now forms a part of the same volume with the Theory of Moral Sentiments, was, I believe, first annexed to the second edition of that work". The second edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* appeared in 1761; note that Stewart wrote "I believe", i.e., he appears not to have checked out the facts.

Stewart's remark is repeated in The "Précis de la vie et des écrits d'Adam Smith" (Prevost 1797 I,52). In the volume *Varia linguistica* Charles Porset (1970:305) quotes from this translation as follows: (the Dissertation) "qui forme une partie du même volume où se trouve la *Théorie des sentiments moraux* (1759), n'y fut annexé [...] qu'à la seconde édition de cet ouvrage". Quoting Stewart's remark in this way makes it sound much more certain than it was implied.

In his recent edition of Smith's *Dissertation* Gunter Narr (1970b:9) went further into the matter. He observed that the "sonst sehr zuverlässige Bibliographie 'The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature'" indicates 1759, the year of the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as the year in which the *Dissertation* appeared. To find out which of the two sources, Stewart or the *Cambridge Bibliography,* was right, Narr wrote to the Edinburgh University Library, asking if they owned a copy of the first edition of the *Theory* and if it contained the Dissertation on the Origin of Languages. It turned out, that there was a copy of the first edition in the Library; it did not contain the *Dissertation.* The conclusion Narr (1970b: 10) drew, namely "das Erscheinungsjahr der 'Dissertation' endgültig mit dem Jahre 1761 angeben zu konnen" and that "sich auch nachträglich die vom Dugald Stewart geäusserte Vermutung als richtig erwiesen [hat]", however, did not follow from the information he received. The notice of a reviewer (Zgusta 1973:287) that Narr's introduction proved that "diese Arbeit Smith erst in 1761 als Appendix zur zweiten Auflage seiner 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments', nicht in der ersten Auflage von 1759 erschien" is only partly true, as I shall demonstrate in what follows. Indeed, not only the *Cambridge Bibliography* was mistaken, but Dugald Stewart as well.[1]

When consulting a copy of the second edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* I discovered that the *Dissertation* was missing. That was not surprising, simply because Smith's essay was in fact added to the third edition of 1767 for the first time. This fact had a1ready been known at least among economists for some time (cf. Schumpeter 1972:182; Bonar 1966:24). In the winter of 1766-67 Smith stayed in London "to see the sheets (*sc.* of a new edition of the *Theory)* through the press" (Rae 1965:233). From that time dates the following letter to his printer, William Strahan (quoted in Rae 1965:234):

> *MY DEAR STRAHAN* – I go to the country for a few days this afternoon, so that it will be unnecessary to send me any more sheets till I return. The *Dissertation upon the Origin of Languages* is to be printed at the end of the *Theory.* There are some literal errors in the printed copy of it which I should have been glad to have corrected, but have not the opportunity, as I have no copy by me. They are of no great consequence. In the titles,

> both of the *Theory* and *Dissertation,* call me simply Adam Smith, without any addition either before or behind. – I ever am, etc.,
>
> Friday ADAM SMITH.

It is nevertheless true that the *Dissertation* appeared in 1761, though in another p1ace, namely *The Philological Miscellany,* vol. I, pp. 440-79 (cf. Viner 1965:141).

2. Given the fact that the *Dissertation* was published earlier and elsewhere than some scholars have thought, I may venture to add a few observations concerning the sources Smith used.

In the *Dissertation* Smith makes some remarks on Hebrew. In his library there was a book on Hebrew, of which Bonar(1966:23) assumes that "no doubt" it "was used by our author". The book in question is Abbé Bergier's *Les Elémens primitifs des langues*. It is hardly probable, however, that Smith knew this book while he was working on the *Dissertation,* since Bergier's work appeared only in 1764.

When Diderichsen deals with the ideas to be found in the *Dissertation* he makes a reference to the fact that one may find them already present in the lectures of Adam Smith. Indeed, Smith gave a lecture on Monday, 22 November, 1762, entitled "Of the origin and progress of languages" (Lothian 1963:7). Diderichsen (1966:350 n.) expatiates: "Most of them [[*sc.* the ideas about the typology of language] are taken from *L'Encyclopédie*". By this he was probably referring to Beauzée's *Encyclopédie* article 'Langue'. The volume in which this entry was printed, however, appeared only in 1765, so that Smith could not have drawn from that source, either.

Coseriu (1970:15) has described Adam Smith as a "bemerkenswerter Wegbereiter der Sprachtypologie". This picture of Smith as an innovator contrasts with the view the economist Schumpeter had of Smith. After concluding that "the Wealth of Nations does not contain a single analytic idea, principle, or method that was entirely new in 1776", he goes on to state: "His mental stature was up to mastering the unwieldy material that flowed from many sources and subjecting it, with a strong hand, to the rule of a small number of coherent principles" (Schumpeter 1972: 185).

The question then, is whether Smith in his other fields of interest had been a more original thinker. To be sure, the distinction between 'uncompounded' and 'compounded' types of languages, "die durch die Sprachtypologie geläufig gewordenen Ausdrücke SYNTHETISCH und ANALYTISCH" (Coseriu 1970: 15) is by no means an independent invention of Smith's. It is interesting to note that his ideas about the typology of language are rather similar to the views a Frenchman had put forward some years earlier. It is my belief that Smith made use of the same source as Beauzée did for his *Encyclopédie* article*,* namely Abbé Girard's *Les Vrais principes de la langue françoise* (1747).

In this book Gabriel Girard puts forward that every language has his own 'génie':

> Chaque Langue a le sien; ils peuvent néanmoins être réduits a trois sortes & par ce moyen les Langues se trouvent distingués en trois classes.

The first class is characterized by:

> l'ordre naturel & la gradation des idées: le sujet agissant y marche le premier, ensuite l'action accompagnée de ses modifications, apres cela ce qui en fait l'objet & le terme. (Girard 1747:13)[2]

He calls those languages 'analogues', because they follow the 'ordo naturalis'. These languages do not need inflexion; it is sufficient to indicate number and gender of the substantives by an article.

They "n'admettent point des cas", for example, French, Italian and Spanish. The second class of languages, called 'Transpositives', follows "le feu de l'imagination, faisant précéder tantot l'objet, tantot l'action & tantot la modification ou la circonstance" (Girard 1747: 14). No ambiguity is possible because of "des cas & de la variété des terminaisons qu'elles admettent": the functions are indicated by inflexion. The 'Transpositives' have no article. To this group belong "le Latin, l'Esclavon[3], et le Moscovite". A third group Girard called 'mixtes'; these languages "tiennent des autres": they have both an article and cases. Languages with these characteristics are Greek and 'Teutonique'. It is true that Girard distinguished three classes, but as Chevalier (1968:678) already observed:

> Et encore ces trois ne sont-ils trois que par la faiblesse d'une science post-aristotélienne, dont les dichotomies s'étaient resignées a la politique des restes; il y en a fondalement deux.

It was Beauzée (1765, 1767), who – with reference to Girard 1747 – adopted the bipartition in 'langues analogues' and 'langues transpositives', albeit with certain modifications. And when we compare Girard's ideas with Smith's distinction between 'compounded' and 'uncompounded' types of languages, we must conclude, with Monreal-Wickert 1976, that their views are rather similar. (For details see Monreal-Wickert 1976.) Anyway, it is Girard who claims priority for himself when he writes:

> je ne pense que je sois le seul qui l'aie faite [*sc.* this observationJ: mais si quelqu'un avant moi en a été touché; je suis au moins le premier qui entreprens de la mettre en euvre dans la méthode grammaticale. (Girard 1747:14)

Not only, however, "ist [es] mit grosser Wahrscheinlichkeit anzunehmen, dass Smith die franzosische Typologie kannte" (Monreal-Wickert 1976:207), but it can be established that Girard's book was an important source for Smith; compare the letter he wrote ('Glasgow, 7th February 1763') to his friend George Baird, who had sent him an abstract of William Ward's *Essay on Grammar,* from which I quote the following passage:

> Mr. Ward, when he mentions the definitions which different authors have given of nouns substantive, takes no notice of that of the Abbé Girard, the author of the book called *Les Vrais Principes de La Langue Françoise,* which made me think it might be possible that he had not seen it. It is the book which first set me a thinking upon these subjects, and I have received more instruction from it than from any other I have yet seen upon them. If Mr . Ward has not seen it, I have it at his service. (Rae 1965: 160)[4]

3. Narr (1970:14) has observed, "dass die sprachtypologische Arbeiten von Smith und Friedrich Schlegel [1808] schon im Jahre 1809 in franzosischer Übersetzung erschienen", thereby referring to Manget 1809. This Swiss scholar, however, stated in the preface of his book: "Cette dissertation [of Smith] avait déja été traduite en Francais" (Manget 1809:XVII). The question then would be, which translation did Manget have in mind?

Diderichsen (1966:350) mentioned that Smith's essay was translated into French "as a supplement to Beauzée's article *Langue* in the 2nd edition of the great *Encyclopédie* (1784)". He probably meant to refer to the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* of Panckoucke; there it was printed in the second of the three-volume *Grammaire et littérature* (1784:422-33). Panckoucke noted:

> Ce morceau qui n'a jamais été traduit dans notre *Langue,* nous a paru un des plus ingénieux & des plus philosophes qu'on ait écrit sur l'origine des *Langues.* (Panckoucke 1784:422n)

Besides the translations by Panckoucke (1784) and by Manget (1809), there are at least two other translations into French which can be mentioned here: one by Boulard (1796), the other by Mme. De Grouchy, which first appeared in 1798. (The latter was reprinted in 1830 and in 1860; the 1830-reprint can now be found in Porset 1970:307-44.)

4. Recently it was Renzi (1976:645), who averred:

> on doit reconnaitre que le premier qui ait parlé des langues dans des termes typologiques n'a pas été Schlegel, mais Adam Smith dans sa *Dissertation on the origin of languages* (qui est une appendice de la deuxieme édition de sa *Theory of moral sentiments,* Londres 1761).

Hereby he simply referred in a footnote to Coseriu 1970.

I think we may conclude from these short remarks that, in writing the history of linguistics, when questions of influence and priority are under discussion, inspection of the original editions can sometimes give a clue for their solution.

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Notes

1) Narr's conclusion that the *Cambridge Hibliography* was wrong and that *therefore* Stewart must be right, could rather easily have been disproven, had someone in Edinburgh taken a quick look into the second edition of the *Theory,* a copy of which appears to have been available in the library there, at least according to the *Catalogue of the Printed Books in the library of the University of Edinburgh.* Vol. III, p.665 (Edinburgh 1923). Note that *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature.* Vol.2, col. 1880 (Cambridge 1971) supplies the correct information.

2) Quotations are from the Amsterdam edition.

3) In his lecture Smith mentions the 'Slavonic' (Lothian 1963: 10).

4) Smith owned a copy of both editions of Girard 1747 (Bonar 1966:75).

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Summary

In 1761 Adam Smith (1723-90) published his *Dissertation on the Origin of Languages.* Erroneously scholars have thought that this essay appeared as a supplement to the second edition of Smith's book The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of the same year; in fact it was only added to the third edition of that work (1767). Against Coseriu's opinion that Adam Smith must be considered as a pioneer of the typology of language, one can put forward that Smith's ideas on the typology of language are very similar to those of the French Abbé Gabriel Girard (1677-1748), whose influence is admitted by Smith himself. On another point, it turns out that before 1809, the year in which J. Manget published a French translation of Smith's *Dissertation,* already three other translations into French of the same work had appeared. First-hand inspection of texts appears desirable in the writing of the history of linguistics.

Résumé

En 1761 Adam Smith (1723-1790) publia sa *Dissertation on the Origin of Languages.* C'est a tort que quelques savants ont cru que cet essai parut comme supplément de la deuxieme édition du livre *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* publiée en 1761; en réalité, il a été ajouté a la troisieme édition de cet ouvrage de Smith (1767). Contrairement a l'opinion de Coseriu selon laquelle on doit considérer Adam Smith comme le précurseur par excellence de la typologie de langues, on peut démontrer que les idées de Smith a propos de la typologie de langues se rapprochent beaucoup de celles de l'abbé français Gabriel Girard (1677-1748), dont Smith lui-même a reconnu l'influence. A la fin, il s'est révélé qu'avant 1809, l'année ou J. Manget publia une traduction française de La *Dissertation* de Smith, on avait publié déja trois traductions françaises de ce même ouvrage. L'auteur conclut que, dans le traitement de l'histoire de la linguistique, l'inspection directe des textes originaux semble indispensable.