XXVII. Language Typology, Language Classification, and the Search for Universals
Sprachtypologie, die Klassifizierung der Sprachen und die Suche nach sprachlichen Universalien
La typologie linguistique, la classification des langues et la recherche des universaux

171. Typology by the end of the 18th century

1. The programme

Typology is a research programme aimed at mapping cross-linguistic diversity and distinguishing what is systematic about it from what is random. Typological research commences by identifying differences among languages, as opposed to traits shared universally. Typology's remit then is to determine whether these individual differences are interrelated or independent of each other, steering clear of such interrelationships as are due to logical necessity, historical contingency (common heritage or joint borrowing), or chance.

Typology, thus, is not so much about the classification of languages as about the distributions of individual traits – units, categories, constructions, rules of all kinds – across the linguistic universe; these distributions, not languages as such, are the primary objects of comparison. (This has been insufficiently appreciated by historians of linguistics, including Robins (1973), Monreal-Wickert (1977), Droixhe (1978), and Qasim (1985), whose otherwise valuable surveys of early comparative efforts thus tend to pass over the very sort of detail that typology thrives on.) Given two logically independent traits, *p* and *q*, it is possible for languages to have both (*p & q*), to have neither (*-p & -q*), or to have only one (*p & -q*, *-p & q*); if one of the last two combinations is unattested or comparatively infrequent, this points to a relationship between the two traits in the form of an implication (*if p then q*, or *if q then p*, categorically or with more than chance frequency). Implications are the laws which typology is out to discover.

Although inevitably theory-driven (as well as theory-driving), typology is an empirical, inductive enterprise, methodically checking possibilities against reality. Unlike curio-collecting, it requires a vision of system. Therefore it was only able to get seriously going as the theorizing about what is universal and particular was beginning to be informed by detailed factual knowledge (or sometimes factually inspired conjectures) about how languages differed, and as some such individual differences were beginning to be perceived as being implicationally related. It was only in the 17th century, as the diversity of languages was turning from a subject of belief into one of inquiry and after much collecting, inventorying, and classifying of specimes, that a tradition of research was gropingly and haltingly inaugurated in Europe whose focus was on the systematic nature of cross-linguistic grammatical variation. Firmly established by the end of the 18th century, though professionally long marginalized by comparative endeavours of far narrower scope, centred upon single families such as Germanic or Indo-European, it has continued unbroken until today.

2. Two themes for variation: The 17th century

A considerable amount of information on the languages of the Old World and the less fa-

miliar idioms of distant civilizations and wildernesses was accumulating during the 16th and 17th centuries. Grammars were published, albeit usually in small editions, on many languages which had hitherto been undescribed or descriptions of which had only been circulated privately (e. g., among missionaries). Good indicators of the extent and depth of knowledge about languages which was becoming generally available were the language thesauri or *trésors* and the encyclopedias which began to proliferate a little later. However, among those who, for one reason or another, compared languages, few would take notice and revise standard preconceptions about their diversity and unity accordingly.

2.1. To inflect or not to inflect

Possessing some knowledge of major ancient and modern literary languages of Europe and perhaps the Near East, and given to generalizing, it is not unreasonable to conclude that, in essence if not in every detail, grammars are variations on no more than two themes. In order to relate words to each other and to anchor utterances in the speech-act (which are the tasks of grammar), either these words themselves will be inflected, obviating the need to press their mere arrangement into grammatical service, or there will be special grammatical words (such as adpositions, auxiliaries, and pronouns) assisting in the combination of lexical words when their rigid linear ordering alone affords insufficient distinctive power. Indeed, in the 17th century, once grammars began to be compared rather than only sounds (or letters) and words, it quickly became a popular conclusion, promulgated in such influential general works as Francis Bacon's *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* (1623) or John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), that languages will either be inflecting and free to invert words or non-inflecting and non-inverting, in ancient and modern style respectively.

First impressions proved long-lasting, although they were evidently rather too sweeping. A closer look at just about any ancient or modern language nearby would have taught moderation to those maintaining the generalization that the business of grammar IN ITS ENTIRETY will be entrusted either to inflectional morphology or jointly to function words and word order, and will never be divided between morphology and syntax.

2.2. Which kinds of words to inflect, and for what

Sometimes the received wisdom was indeed found wanting and perfectible, especially when newly acquired knowledge was brought to bear on it. While his fellow philosophical grammarians were continuing the habit of lifting supposedly general categories, especially those of the parts of speech and their inflections, from the grammars of particular languages, viz. the classical ones, Tommaso Campanella (1568–1629), the author of *La città del sole* who devoted the first part of his *Philosophia rationalis* (1638) to grammar, would only accept as truly general what was compatible with all languages – and his linguistic universe included Hebrew, Chaldean, Arabic, Turkish, Ancient Greek, Latin, the contemporary Romance vernaculars (Italian, French, Spanish), as well as Chinese and Vietnamese.

In this factual light it was wrong to define a noun as that part of speech which inflected for case, for there were languages (the Romance vernaculars, Hebrew, and, erroneously, Arabic were mentioned by Campanella) where nouns, instead of showing morphological case variations, were accompanied by special function words (i. e., were *articulabilis* or *particulabilis*). And, less crucially, there were also languages such as Ancient Greek where nouns were both inflected for case and accompanied by the definite article. Similarly, although verbs frequently were those parts of speech which inflected for tense, person-number, and possibly further categories, this was too specific as a general definition since there were languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese whose verbs were invariable and whose categories of accidence were expressed by separate words, viz. adverbial *notulae* and personal pronouns. Nominal inflection could not be defined as necessarily comprising both case and number, for there were languages such as the Romance vernaculars and Hebrew where nouns inflected only for number.

Campanella's empirically inspired corrections of such traditional views of parts of speech and inflectional systems amounted to a rejection of the idea that languages *in toto* can only be *declinabilis* (inflecting) or *(p)articulabilis* (non-inflecting). He saw that nominal and verbal grammar need not be cast in entirely the same mould: in Romance verbs inflected rather profusely as compared to

nouns, which at most inflected for number (but not for case). Thus, not only were nominal and verbal inflection variables rather than universals, they were also interrelated. As Campanella was unaware of languages with case-inflecting nouns but entirely uninflected verbs, while the three other combinations of case and verbal inflection and non-inflection were attested in languages he was aware of, the pattern he had found, summarized in Table 171.1, consisted in the inflection of verbs (for any category) being implied by the inflection of nouns for case. Likewise, since nouns were observed either to inflect for both case and number, to inflect only for number, or not to inflect at all, but not to inflect only for case, as summarized in Table 171.2, these two nominal inflectional categories were also interrelated, with case being implied by number.

Table 171.1: Domains of inflection, according to Campanella (1638)

NOMINAL CASE INFLECTION	VERBAL INFLECTION	combination attested in
+	+	Latin, Greek, Turkish
+	−	———
−	+	Italien, French, Spanish, Hebrew
−	−	Chinese, Vietnamese

Table 171.2: Categories of inflection, according to Campanella (1638)

CASE INFLECTION	NUMBER INFLECTION	combination attested in
+	+	Latin, Greek, Turkish
+	−	———
−	+	Italien, French, Spanish, Hebrew
−	−	Chinese, Vietnamese

No offence was caused by these grammatical heresies of Fra Tommaso, however.

2.3. How to order words of various kinds

More explicit in the actual statement of implications than Campanella was François (de) Mesgnien (or, in Polish, Meninski; c. 1623–1698), author of what Campanella would have called *grammaticae civiles* of French, Italian, and Polish, but expert above all on the Orient. After many years in Polish and Austrian diplomatic service at the Ottoman court at Constantinople, Mesgnien published, at his own oriental press at the court of Vienna, his *magnum opus*, the *Thesaurus linguarum orientalium*, which was accompanied by a contrastive grammar, *Linguarum orientalium turcicæ, arabicæ, persicæ institutiones seu Grammatica turcica* (1680, re-edited in 1756). The focus of this grammar indeed was on Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, but further languages, including Greek, Latin, French, Italian, German, Polish, and Hungarian, were also drawn into the comparison.

What emerged from Mesgnien's comparative survey of inflectional morphology (*etymologia*, Parts 2–5) was that languages were much more variable on this count than it had seemed to many a general philosophical grammarian. Among the parts of speech and inflectional categories which were highlighted as not being universal were definite articles, prepositions, personal and possessive pronouns, and genders, most cases, and adjective agreement.

But it was only in Part 6, *De syntaxi*, Section 2, *De ordine constructionis* (1680: 146–148), that Mesgnien actually emphasized interrelations between variables. Here he examined the linear order of constituents in a number of constructions: (i) subject, object, and verb, (ii) nominal attribute and head noun, (iii) adjectival attribute and head noun, (iv) adposition and noun phrase, (v) particle (especially conjunctions and interrogative words) and clause, (vi) subject and verb in interrogative clauses, (vii) indirect object, direct object, and subject, (viii) core and circumstantial actants. As Mesgnien observed, with particular reference to Turkish, Hungarian, and German, on the one hand, and Arabic, on the other, the normal orders did not vary randomly from one construction to another. At least for those constructions involving a constituent governing another, the ordering tended to be harmonious: governors uniformly either followed or preceded their governees in all relevant constructions. Mesgnien in fact gave two general ordering rules, but it is plain that they have a common denominator in the relationship of government.

1. Regens debet semper postponi suo recto, seu casui quem regit, ideoque Verbum, quòd omnia regere videatur, ultimum orationis locum obtinet.

2. Substantivum Adjectivo suo postponitur, ut & alteri Substantivo quod regit in genitivo [...]. Sed horum ferè omnium contrarium evenit in lingua Arabica [...]. (1680: 147)

Admittedly, the mutual implications between linear orders across construction types would not quite hold without all reservations. Thus, Persian seemed to Mesgnien to be less rigid in its arrangements, but the preference still was for governors to precede governees, as in Arabic. Arabic, moreover, admitted subject-verb-object as an alternative to verb-subject-object, and the former was the first choice in Persian as well.

3. Variations on a few themes: The 18th century

The second half of the 18th century saw the typological programme gaining momentum. This was in the wake of a new wave of European expansion, but the exploration of more and more languages of those parts of the globe recently appropriated by the secular and ecclesiastical powers of Europe was an almost negligible factor, at least initially. When comparatists did venture further afield in search of system, they were prone to lose their bearings and to find systems which were only imagination. In fact, most of the less fantastic typological themes had already been introduced earlier; they were now varied and expanded on – or also forgotten and independently rediscovered. Above all, typology was coming to be recognised as a research programme in its own right, typically tied up, though, with the kindred subject of the evolution of language(s).

3.1. Inflection or order

The choices languages had in expressing overtly how the words being combined were to be related to each other – rigid linear order, special grammatical words, inflections – continued to be regarded as interpedendent, often in global schemes less subtle than that of Campanella. The explanatory reasoning was that, lest there be unnecessary confusion in communication, it was advisable to use some kind of overt grammatical marking, but to use several kinds in concert would be unnecessarily uneconomical; it tended to find empirical confirmation, depending on what languages one was looking at and how closely.

The Abbé Gabriel Girard's (c. 1677–1748) practical intention in his *Les vrais principes de la langue françoise: ou La parole réduite en méthode, conformément aux loix de l'usage* (1747) was to provide a genuine grammar of French, contrasting it to Latin in order to emphasize how different the two languages are. It was only *en passant* that mention was also made of Italian, Spanish, (Muscovite) Russian, Polish, Church Slavonic, Croat, Ancient Greek, "Teutonic" (presumably comprising German and its relatives and predecessors), and Hebrew – none very exotic even by contemporary standards, but that sufficed to add a typological dimension to a contrastive pedagogical grammar.

Concerning the expression of grammatical relations expecially of nominals by rigid order, case inflection, and prepositions, Girard found only two of eight possible combinations attested, as shown in Table 171.3. This pointed to these mutual implications: if constituent order is rigid, then cases are absent, and vice versa; if cases are absent, then the use of prepositions, especially for nominals in circumstantial relations, is extensive, and vice versa; if order is rigid, then the use of prepositions is extensive, and vice versa; if, on the other hand, constituent order is flexible, then cases are present, and vice versa; if cases are present, then the use of prepositions is sparse, and vice versa; if order is flexible, then the use of prepositions is sparse, and vice versa.

Table 171.3: Means of expressing grammatical relations, according to Girard (1747)

ORDER	CASES	PREPOSITIONS	combination attested in
rigid	absent	extensive	French, Italian, Spanish
rigid	absent	sparse	———
rigid	present	extensive	———
rigid	present	sparse	———
flexible	absent	extensive	———
flexible	absent	sparse	———
flexible	present	extensive	———
flexible	present	sparse	Latin, Russian, Church Slavonic, Ancient Greek, Germanic

The presence or absence of agreement between nouns and adjectives, especially in case, was assumed to be a trait correlating with the use or non-use of inflection on nouns. So was the mode of adjective comparison, by inflections or grammatical words, al-

though this trait seemed less conspicuous to Girard, whose emphasis was on the marking of grammatical relations.

Although Girard's scheme can be seen as but continuing the old motif of the global two-way contrast between languages favouring and disfavouring inflections, his names for his types (or *génies*) were inspired by the two corresponding modes of ordering. For him, languages such as French, Italian, and Spanish, lacking nominal case marking, represented the *génie analogue*, with the linear order of major clause constituents mirroring the 'natural' progression of ideas expressed in the clause, with the agent (subject) coming first, followed by the action (verb), followed in turn by whatever is acted on or aimed at or otherwise involved in the action (objects, adverbial phrases). Latin, Russian, and Church Slavonic, all inflecting for case, were Girard's type specimens of the *génie transpositif*, where constituent order is arbitrary and flexible, unrestrained by the natural order of ideas and instead following the speaker's momentary imagination.

It was arguably Girard's familiarity with Slavonic which suggested to him the potential significance of the definite article. There was none in any of his transpositive languages, while all his analogous languages had one. But he also knew that Ancient Greek and Germanic had a definite article too, sharing this separate part of speech with the analogous languages, while with regard to inflections and givenness to word-order inversions they were of a more transpositive bent. These, then, were representatives of a *génie mixte* or *amphilogique*. Theoretically there was yet another possibility of such a mixture: no definite article and rigidly natural order plus lack of (case) inflection; but there was no such language known to Girard. Translating Table 171.4 into an implication, what Girard had induced was that if languages had rigid order and no cases, they also had a definite article, both not vice versa. Incidentally, Campanella, in whose scheme articles had also played a role, owing to their involvement in relational marking and their occasional fusion with prepositions, had known two relevant languages whose word order was rigid and which lacked cases: Vietnamese and Chinese; it might have disappointed Girard that both also lacked a definite article, thus filling the empty line in Table 171.4 and disproving his categorical implication.

Table 171.4: Expression of relations and of definiteness, according to Girard (1747)

CASES & FREE ORDER	DEFINITE ARTICLE	combination attested in
+	+	Ancient Greek, Germanic
+	–	Latin, Russian, Church Slavonic
–	+	French, Italian, Spanish
–	–	———

3.2. Word orders in harmony

The notions of an *ordo artificialis* and an *ordo naturalis* are of Scholastic provenience, and it was in a Scholastic spirit, rather than in that of Mesgnien (who was only remembered by William Jones and a few fellow orientalists, and not for his typological merits), that Girard and those adopting his distinction between transpositive and analogous languages continued to determine what was natural/analogous when word order was rigid rather than artificial/inverted. One of Mesgnien's lessons had not been learnt when Girard and others, relying on cognitive speculation rather than the cross-linguistic evidence by then available, took for granted that subject-verb-object, as in French, was the only natural order of these constituents.

However, Mesgnien's other lesson, that orders in different kinds of constructions are not independent, though lost on Girard himself, was relearnt by his most effective propagator, Nicolas Beauzée (1717–1789), the chief linguistic contributor to what has rightly been called the central document of the Enlightenment, Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. The expression of grammatical relations by word order, as opposed to inflections, was a leading topic in several of Beauzée's articles in the *Encyclopédie* (especially that on *Langue*), re-appearing much revised and expanded in the three grammatical and literary volumes of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (1782–1786) which Beauzée co-edited, as well as in his textbook (for unlike the typologizing philosophers, diplomats, abbés, and judges, he actually taught this subject at the new École Royale Militaire at Paris), *Grammaire générale, ou Exposition raisonnée des éléments nécessaires du langage* (1767).

While Girard had only been concerned with the clause-level ordering of subject, verb, and object or other verbal complements, Beauzée looked at a wider range of

constructions at clause- and phrase-level, namely all those involving the relationship of *détermination*. These were at least six:

DETERMINED	DETERMINING
subject	predicate
verb	complement (objects, prepositional phrases)
preposition	complement (noun phrase)
head noun	attributive adjective
head noun	relative clause
head noun	complement (prepositional phrase)

In transpositive languages all potentially declinable kinds of nominal words of determining constituents – nouns, pronouns, adjectives (including articles) – had to be declined at least for case, the cardinal relational category; and since there were inflections guaranteeing clarity, order everywhere admitted of inversions. In analogous languages, on the other hand, linear order in all these constructions was (relatively) rigid, and the determined constituents uniformly preceded the determining ones in all of them. Thus, for Beauzée, there were mutual implications between verb-object and preposition-NP, noun-adjective, etc. Had he been more open-minded about how the succession of ideas is expressed by none-too-inverted constituent order in analogous languages other than French, he might have re-discovered that determined constituents (Mesgnien's governors) could in equally uniform manner follow determining ones (governees) instead.

But then, this was not really what would have been suggested to Beauzée, as unmistakably as it had been to Mesgnien, by the languages he was comparing – staple fare such as French, Italian, Spanish, English, German, Latin, Ancient Greek, and Hebrew, blended with extras such as Portugese, Swedish, Breton, Irish, Polish, Basque, Lapp, Arabic, Aramaic, Chinese, and (Peruvian) Quechua. Also, Beauzée's second- or third-hand knowledge especially about these latter, less commonly compared languages was slight. Among the many things he seems to have been unaware of in such languages were basic word orders other than subject-verb-object. Often he would only ascertain from published grammars whether one or the other morphological category (such as the dual or cases) was present or lacking. And he was not very systematic either in extracting cross-linguistic generalizations, despite his programmatic conviction that even the differences among languages, far from being random anomalies, are "limitées, fondées en raison, réductibles à des points fixes" (1767: I, xvii). Defective though his sources often were, they could have been exploited more fully in Beauzée's quest for *points fixes* to which all variety could be reduced.

What indeed was suggested to Beauzée by his evidence was that the distinction between the analogous and transpositive modes of ordering was only gradual. Among analogous languages some appeared to him to be more liberal than others in admitting deviations from the rigid natural order (the notorious 'inversions'), and these he distinguished as *libre* and *uniforme*. Likewise, among transpositive languages some appeared to him to be more prone than others to adopt, in certain constructions, the rigid linear order mirroring the order of ideas, hence could also be distinguished as 'uniform' and 'free'. Thus, as shown in Table 171.5, while the uniform analogous class and the free transpositive one remained diametrically opposed to one another, differing on all relevant counts, the free analogous class and the uniform transpositive one were primarily distinguishable only on the criterion of nominal inflection.

Table 171.5: Rapprochement of types owing to the rigid-to-free order continuum, according to Beauzée (1765, 1767)

	ANALOGOUS		TRANSPOSITIVE	
	UNIFORM	FREE	UNIFORM	FREE
ORDER	rigid	rigid, but inversions	free within limits	free
DECLENSION	absent	absent	present	present

As a result of these subclassifications Girard's correlations between rigid/flexible order and the absence/presence of inflectional morphology were effectively replaced by these one-way implications: if constituent order is free without limits, then nominal words

will be inflected, but not vice versa (because of the uniform transpositive type); if constituent order is rigid without inversions, then there will be no nominal inflection, but again not vice versa (because of the free analogous type). The remaining ordering possibility (or possibilities) – neither entirely rigid or entirely free – was found both in the absence and the presence of nominal inflection, hence could not be implicationally related to either. In this sense the regulation of constituent order, in all relevant constructions alike, was more fundamental than the presence or absence of nominal inflection in Beauzée's scheme, for it had implications and was not merely an *implicatum*.

Girard's *génie mixte* was tacitly abandoned. When Beauzée disregarded the use or non-use of a definite article as a trait potentially interrelated with others, it does not, however, seem to have been on the evidence of one of his languages, Chinese – which was impeccably analogous, except that it was lacking a definite article, an obligatory equipment of this type according to Girard.

3.3. The division of expressive labour between lexicon, parts of speech, and inflections

Although there had always been differences of opinion about which parts of speech there were and how best to define them, even for vernaculars not diverging too widely from the classical mould, there was initially no question that all languages had essentially the same. Even the more recent view of universal grammar as a fund from which particular grammars make their choices (rather than as the largest common denominator of all particular grammars) did not perforce entail the idea that adopting or spurning some part of speech might be contingent on, or be of any consequence for, anything else.

The recognition that variability here might not be an independent variable began with minor parts of speech. Special grammatical words such as adpositions, auxiliaries, personal and also possessive pronouns, and certain adverbs were seen as functional analogues of inflections for categories such as case, tense, mood, voice, person and number, and comparative and superlative. For reasons of economy they would therefore be dispensable to the extent that a language had inflections for essentially the same categories of accidence at its disposal (and rich inflection would in turn give word order free rein), and vice versa. By the time of Girard and Beauzée it was beyond question that inflections and the corresponding kinds of grammatical words were essentially in complementary distribution across languages.

When Girard highlighted the definite article as another part of speech that could be missing, the novelty was that it was not an inflection specifically for definiteness but word order and inflection as such, especially for marking grammatical relations of noun phrases, that the article's obligatoriness or optionality (in the analogous and transpositive types, respectively) was claimed to depend on.

Eventually doubts arose whether even the major lexical parts of speech of noun, verb, and adjective were compulsory. But no matter how radical the permissible differences among languages as to their parts of speech, they were assumed to be regular rather than random, following from the division of expressive labour not only between inflection and syntax but also, and more fundamentally, between grammar and lexicon.

The most influential typological scheme along such lines was that of Adam Smith (1723–1790). In a short essay on the most popular of contemporary topics, *Considerations concerning the first formation of languages, and the different genius of original and compounded languages* (first published in 1761, but frequently reprinted and translated), the moral philosopher and economic theorist sketched a scenario for the origin and progress of language where parts of speech and the form of inflections played key roles in characterizing developmental stages (cf. Plank 1992).

Although the genre of the *Considerations* was that of 'conjectural history', Smith's aim as an actual historian was to confirm the ancient ancestry of modern languages. This might seem a self-evident supposition, but it had been questioned, notably by Girard's insistence on the immutability of types (precluding analogous French from having developed from transpositive Latin, for example), and also by all those who took the dearth or even absence of inflections (as in Chinese) for conclusive proof of the originality of such a language. Still, in his demonstration that the structural mechanisms of the ancient languages could be traced further back in time than those of modern languages, and that

there were plausible ways and means how ancient structures could have been transformed into modern ones, especially into those of 'compounded' (i.e., mixed) languages, no great effort was made by Smith to compare in any detail the few languages mentioned in passing and often rather vaguely – Ancient and Modern Greek, Etruscan, Latin, Gothic, the older Germanic tongues of the Lombards, Franks, and Saxons, French, Italian, (Old) Armenian, Hebrew, the languages of some savage nations Smith had read of, and above all English. It was through stringent deduction from assumptions about cognitive capacities and limitations that Smith was lead to postulate, not only elements of a diachronic theory, but also richer and subtler systemic interrelations than could be found in his sources (including Girard's *Vrais principes*).

The primordial mode of denotation in Smith's conjectural history was holistic: originally, complete events were denoted by atomic expressions without any internal grammatical structure. Although such event denotations were reminiscent of impersonal verbs such as *pluit* "it rains" or *turbatur* "there is a confusion" in Latin, there was no unit of a 'sentence' as separate from that of a 'word' at this early stage of language formation. And with a language only consisting of a (growing) lexicon of event denotations and of no grammar, there could be no differentiation of parts of speech either.

It was the mental operation of abstraction that was credited with adding a grammar to the lexicon. With the power of abstraction improving, events would be analysed into their elements, viz. substances and attributes, and these would be denoted by nouns substantive and personal verbs respectively. Subjects would only be the first substances to be divided from attributes, with objects coming next, yielding doubly unsaturated, or bivalent or transitive, personal verbs. The two new parts of speech, each in its own way semantically less comprehensive than the original event denotations, could be freely combined with each other, whereas the earlier, purely lexical mode of denotation had been so uneconomical as to call for separate expressions regardless of whether events were wholly distinct or shared the substances or attributes with one another.

Subsequently, upon the transformation, by the mental operations of comparison and generalization, of the original proper names of particular substances into common nouns substantive denoting multitudes of substances of the same kind (as in *another Thames* or *a Newton*, with former proper names now applying to any big river or any philosopher), there would be the necessity to distinguish substances from others of the same kind, now sharing the same general denotation; this would be accomplished by the recognition of qualities peculiar to them. Once events had been analysed into their constituent parts, substances would also be distinguished as to their syntagmatic relations to attributes or other substances (such as agent, patient, recipient, instrument, or subject, object, adverbial). A third sort of difference, suggested by comparison and discrimination, would consist in the quantities in which substances occur. Reflecting gradations in cognitive complexity, quality distinctions would be attained before relational ones, which in turn would precede quantity distinctions. Likewise, distinctions such as those of animacy, sex, size, or colour would be attained before other quality distinctions; distinctions such as local ones would appear before other relational distinctions; and distinctions such as those between individuals, pairs, and larger groups would be the first quantity distinctions.

In order to be able to express all such cognitive distinctions, a multitude of distinct expressions of the class of nouns substantive could be coined, each holistically denoting a particular substance or kind of substance together with the respective quality, relation, and quantity. This, however, would soon overburden the speakers' memory, and would also run counter their "love of analogy" (§§ 16, 25), aiming at relationships between *denotata* to be diagrammatically mirrored in the form of their denotations. On both grounds a grammatical, combinatory solution would again be preferable to a lexical one. By means of distributing the expressive labour between basic lexical units and grammatical elements with a distinguishing functional, novel composite expressions could be produced for the different qualities, relations, and quantities of one and the same substance as well as for the same qualities, relations, and quantities of different substances, which would partially resemble one another in form corresponding to the partial identities between their *denotata*.

Smith now envisaged two variants of the grammatical solution. One consisted in the innovation of new classes of basic expressions for the newly distinguished classes of denotata, viz. of nouns adjective for qualities, prepositions for relations, and quantifiers (including numerals) for quantities, syntactically recombinable to yield complex substance expressions. The other was to create morphological complexity, consisting in the formal variation of the inherited nouns substantive themselves. It was the morphological variant which seemed to him more congenial to language formers not yet at the height of their comparing and especially abstracting powers.

Smith's contention that it required less comparative and abstractive effort to express categories of accidence by formal variations of nouns substantive than by separate words predisposed him to ascribe peculiar formal properties to inflections; these will be the subject of the next section. At any rate, with abstraction and comparison maturing even further, and with syntax being found more economical than even regularized inflection especially by adult learners in the ubiquitous circumstances of languages in contact, language reformers would eventually switch from the morphological to the syntactic mode of composite denotation: they would abandon (i.e., give up learning) inflections and instead employ special parts of speech.

Considering that sex and animacy are only two of a huge number of qualities potentially qualifying kinds of substances, the creation of a special word class, noun adjective, would virtually be inevitable for economical reasons alone. Certain kinds of qualities, in particular sex or animacy, representing the "most extensive species of qualifications" (§ 8), might nevertheless continue to be distinguished inflectionally. When nouns adjective then accompany nouns substantive in syntactic construction, speakers, out of "love of similarity of sound" and "delight in the returns of the same syllables" (§ 10), would make them agree in the inflectional variations exhibited by the substance denotations; owing to such overt indication of their connectedness, substantives and adjectives would not need to be placed next to each other. Among relations it would be the least abstract and general ones, especially those to do with spatial qualifications, which would first find expression in a word class of their own, viz. as prepositions; the more abstract and general ones (such as those denoted by *to*, *from*, *by*, *for*, *with*, and especially *of* in English) would continue longer to be expressed by case inflections or also by rigid constituent order. Quantity, the most abstract and general category of all, would continue longest in the inflectional mode, minimally in the form of a two-way opposition between singular and plural, notwithstanding the availability of separate quantity words in a class of their own.

The elaboration of attributes would proceed along the same lines. In particular, like nouns substantive, personal verbs would need to be further diversified, owing to the multiplication of their *denotata* by comparison and abstraction. Abstract though the idea of three speech-act roles is, it would sooner or later be grasped that attributes can hold of the speaker, the addressee, or a nonparticipant in the speech act, or of any combinations of these. It would likewise be recognized that attributes may be ascribed to substances involved in the event in different capacities such as agent or patient; that events may be localized in time as anterior, simultaneous, or posterior to the speech act; and that attributions may be affirmed or denied or put forward as a request, wish, or mere possibility. At first separate personal verbs would be coined, and individually memorized, to express all such distinctions (such as those between "the lion comes", "the bear comes", "the wolf comes", "I came", "you came", "he came", "it came", "we came", "ye came", "I should have come", etc.). But eventually the lexical mode of denotation would be superseded by the inflectional one, where, more economically as well as diagrammatically, the terminations of personal verbs would be varied to express distinctions of speech-act roles and of number of the substance and of voice, tense, and mood of the attribution. Verbal inflections could be expected to have the same formal properties as their nominal counterparts, and to be to some extent regulated by successive generations of improvers. Eventually, although probably later than in the nominal domain, they would seize on the syntactic mode of combination, giving up on verbal inflections especially when having to learn a new language and instead availing themselves of entirely new classes of words specifically to denote person and number (personal pronouns) and voice, tense, and mood (auxiliaries).

In Smith's scheme implications between structural traits, rather than constraining

change, fell out from assumptions about gradual developments, as determined by gradations of cognitive complexity. Also, his developmental perspective was conducive to seeing continua rather than stark across-the-board contrasts.

In line with the traditional position that languages were either inflecting or uninflecting – effectively claiming that either all or none of the WORDS of a class of words potentially susceptible to inflection (i.e., nouns, adjectives, verbs) had to be inflected, and that either all or none of the CLASSES of potentially inflectable words had to be inflected – nominal and verbal inflection was to be expected to flourish or to wilt in unison on Smith's principles. (That this was in fact not what they always did, with verbal inflections often being richer and more robust than nominal ones, had been an insight of Campanella's, by now forgotten.)

Where Smith instead saw gradual differences between older and younger original (i.e., non-compounded) languages and also between original and even multiply mixed languages, was in their more plentiful or more meagre supply of inflectional categories and categorial differentiations. Since, in accordance with their increasing abstractness and generality, quality inflections (gender) would appear first, followed by relational inflections (case), followed in turn by quantity inflections (number), there should be original languages with the category combinations shown in Table 171.6 – interpreted implicationally: number implies case, which in turn implies gender. However, this would only hold for phases of inflectional expansion; during the gradual take-over of function words, gender would be destined to go first, followed by case, with number as the longest-lasting inflectional survivor. The permissible and impermissible combinations in phases of inflectional reduction are set out in Table 171.7, reversing the expansional implications: gender implies case, which in turn implies number. And for this phase of inflectional reduction and concomitant expansion of the fund of function words, there would be a corresponding chain of implications between different classes of such innovated words: numerals/quantifiers imply prepositions, which in turn imply adjectives – which in turn imply the presence of nouns substantive, and these only exist by virtue of being in contrast to the other class of principal words, (personal) verbs.

Table 171.6: Combinations of categories during inflectional expansion, according to Smith (1761)

GENDER	CASE	NUMBER	combination assumed to be
–	–	–	possible
+	–	–	possible
+	+	–	possible
+	+	+	possible
–	+	+	impossible
–	–	+	impossible
–	+	–	impossible
+	–	+	impossible

Table 171.7: Combinations of categories during inflectional reduction, according to Smith (1761)

GENDER	CASE	NUMBER	combination assumed to be
+	+	+	possible
–	+	+	possible
–	–	+	possible
–	–	–	possible
+	–	+	impossible
+	+	–	impossible
–	+	–	impossible
+	–	–	impossible

Implications between the terms realizing individual inflectional categories would be equally phase-specific. For instance, during inflectional expansion subject, object, and attributive cases would imply local and other adverbial cases, being more abstract, hence later, than these; while during inflectional reduction this implication would again be reversed, with the more abstract relations retaining inflectional marking longest. By the same logic, the dual inflection would appear, and then disappear again, before the plural inflection, the dual being the less general of these two numbers; thus, plural implies dual during expansion, while dual implies plural during reduction.

Further interrelations between the inflections of different parts of speech follow from Smith's explanation of the analogical creation of agreement through rhyme. Thus, there would be no dual number with personal verbs unless there was also one with nouns substantive, the only source from which the respective inflections could originate. And there would be no inflections of nouns adjective which were not also found on nouns substantive, the only source from which they could be copied.

As the threshold was crossed from a pure lexicon-language to a grammar-language, the differentiation of attribute and substance de-

notations (or verbs and nouns) as the first parts of speech had been due to holistic event denotations being analysed into a subject part and a rest; only subsequently would the rest in turn be divided up into an object part and a rest. Thus, bivalent (or transitive) verbs, this ultimate rest, imply monovalent (or intransitive) verbs. When it was recognized a little later, by Peter Stephen Duponceau (1766–1844) and other Americanists, that event denotations in languages with sentence-words were not really atomic but had internal structure, if perhaps of a morphological rather than syntactic kind, this analytic asymmetry was seen to correspond to a synthetic one: the incorporation of subjects implies that of objects. In acknowledgment of Adam Smith's conjectural inspiration, though strongly disapproving of the cognitive-linguistic history he had conjectured, such languages going to extremes in practising the opposite of analysis were named 'polysynthetic'.

3.4. Four allied properties of inflections

In grammars of languages such as Turkish (including the comparative one of Mesgnien) it had long been noted that inflections were not always exactly like those of Latin or Greek, insofar as categories were kept apart whose exponents could not be separated in endings in the classical languages, such as number and case of nouns. Occasionally, especially with languages like Turkish serving as a foil, the classical inflectional languages had further been found deficient insofar as meanings were not always related to forms in inflections in an orderly one-to-one-fashion: one form could express more than one meaning, resulting in inflectional homonymy (or syncretism), and one meaning could be expressed by more than one form, with such synonymy giving rise to inflection classes.

But it was only Adam Smith who, through conjecture rather than induction, envisaged such perfections or imperfections of inflectional systems as being interrelated. The origin and progress of inflectional variations accounted for what exactly was meant when Smith characterized them, seemingly impressionistically, as "thoroughly mixed and blended" (§ 14) with the words they were varying.

Smith's contention was that inflections involved less metaphysical analysis and correspondingly less formal separation than function words, hence would come first in language formation. By way of what was later dubbed 'excrescence' in contradistinction to 'coalescence', inflectional variations would actually grow out of invariable words. Varying parts of the original words, especially their terminations, in themselves meaningless, language formers would thereby create paradigmatic contrasts and imbue the variable parts with meaning. For example (using Latin forms in lieu of the irrecoverably lost ones from linguistic prehistory), by altering the two final sounds of an originally invariable, basic noun substantive such as *lupus* "wolf" a pair of words could be produced, *lupus* and, say, *lupa*, containing an invariable core, *lup-*, and variable terminations, *-us* and *-a*; and this paradigmatic contrast could be used to express distinctions such as the qualitative one between wolves of male and female sex. Originating in this manner, the cohesion between inflections and invariable word-parts would naturally be tight.

Given a stock of basic words differing randomly in their shape, formal variations thus semanticized would differ a great deal from one word to the other, at least initially, prior to the attainment of general notions and corresponding formal generalizations. For example, given two nouns substantive such as *lupus* "he-wolf" and *arbor* "tree", when their terminations were varied to express relational contrasts, the sets of their inflections would naturally be different, consisting, say, of *-us/-il-o/-um/-o/-e* with *lup-* and of *-Ø/-is/-il-em/-e/-Ø* with *arbor-*.

When basic words needed to be simultaneously varied for more than one category, the necessary changes could be made in different places. Smith tacitly assumed, however, that all distinctions would be expressed cumulatively in the termination. For example, in association with *lup-* "wolf" a single final sound *-o*, contrasting with *-ae*, on the one hand, with *-us/-il-um/-e*, on the other, and finally with *-is*, could thus be made to differentiate gender (masculine, with *-ae* expressing the corresponding feminine), case (dative, with *-us/-il-um/-e* expressing the corresponding nominative/genitive/accusative/vocative), and number (singular, with *-is* expressing the corresponding plural). Consequently, with the qualities, relations, and quantities proliferating, the variations of the terminations of nouns substantive needed to express them would multiply; and mutatis mutandis for verbs and nouns adjective. If there were as few as three genders (which was the maximum Smith had encountered), ten cases (as supposedly in Old Armenian), and

three numbers (as in Greek, Gothic, and Hebrew, possessing a dual in addition to singular and plural), a word would need as many as ninety variants to distinguish them all cumulatively by contrasts in its termination. And the non-uniformity of these terminal inflections across different words further increased the formal variations that needed to be memorized at this stage of linguistic evolution.

Owing to the haphazard manner of their creation, such inflectional systems would be liable to grow unwieldy, unless regularized. From love of analogy, the near-random variety of the set of inflections associated with words of the same class would be made more uniform, presumably by the transference of one inflectional set to words which had previously been inflected differently or not been inflected at all. Cumulatively expressed inflectional categories would eventually be divided up between separate variable parts of words, with one portion of the termination of nouns substantive, for example, denoting number and another denoting case. If there were two numbers and six cases, eight forms would then suffice to make all distinctions (since the singular suffix could now be combined with the nominative, accusative, genitive, and other case suffixes, and likewise the plural suffix), as opposed to the twelve forms needed as long as number expression was not disentangled from case expression. This transition from chaos to order and from profusion to economy would be effectuated "insensibly, and by slow degrees" (§ 33) and "without any intention or foresight in those who first set the example, and who never meant to establish any generale rule" (§ 16) – as if led by an invisible hand.

One might have expected the invisible hand also to lead to the tight links between the invariable part of words and their inflections being loosened and eventually severed in the wake of improving abstraction. Thus, morphological constituents of words, i. e., inflections, would ultimately be transformed into syntactic constituents of nominal and verbal phrases, i. e., into words of their own: quality words (adjectives), relation words (prepositions) quantity words (quantifiers, numerals), person-number words (personal pronouns) and voice, tense, and mood words (auxiliaries, perhaps adverbs). However, in the absence of any evidence for such an origin of function words from inflections, Smith invoked language mixture to account for the major discontinuity in his story: at the hands of adult learners of languages in contact, inflections would not be further regularized but simply be abandoned. The function words replacing them, in concert with rigid order (in itself not a prominent parameter in Smith's scheme), would be less tightly bound and, like improved inflections, uniform and non-cumulative.

Blending Smith's scheme with Beauzée's, though with the evaluation of ancient and modern European languages rather than their evolution as his main concern, the anonymous author of the article *Language* in the first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1771) – presumably the editor himself, William Smellie (1740–1795) – derived a further systemic correlate from a supposedly inbuilt deficiency of inflectional systems.

On the criteria of variety of expression and accuracy in the distinction of meanings the transpositive type was deemed inferior to the analogous one, like on that of simplicity. Equipped with not too many personal pronouns, auxiliaries, and prepositions, analogous languages should have no difficulty varying their expressions to distinguish all kinds of even subtle nuances of meaning. Their function words were separately stressable and could in principle be inverted, if only in violation of the rules of natural order. Thus, the permutations and stress variations of as few as three words – *I, do*, and *write* – enabled analogous English to distinguish as many as fifteen semantic nuances (evidently Anonymous was not troubled by petty normative regulations): *I write, I do write, Write I do, Write do I*, and with contrastive stress, *Í write, I write, Í do write, I dó write, I do write, Write I do, Write Í do, Write I dó, Write do I, Write dó I, Write do Í*. In transpositive languages inflectional endings were bound to their stems, hence were not invertable and hardly individually stressable at will. Thus, the Latin translation of *I (do) write, scribo*, though less prolix, was also much more limited in its expressive potential, even if an independent pronoun was added for emphasis. A multitude of distinct forms would have been needed to express all corresponding nuances inflectionally. And there already was a profusion of forms taxing the speakers' memories, owing to inflections cumulating categories and coming in several declensions and conjugations (as had been observed by Smith).

Ensnared in this dilemma, transpositive languages would typically sacrifice accuracy

in the distinction of meanings. They would cut down on the number of inflections by making "the same word serve a double, treble, or even quadruple office" (1771: 867) – i. e., by neutralizing or syncretizing distinctions in inflectional paradigms. For example, in the cumulative inflection for case and number, virtually all declensions of Latin nouns and adjectives were seen to economize by neutralizing one or the other paradigmatic distinction. Thus, the single word form *domini* took the office of genitive singular, nominative and vocative plural, and *puellae* even of genitive, dative, and ablative singular and nominative and vocative plural.

Thanks to Adam Smith and Anonymous of the *Encyclopædia* (most likely William Smellie), there were now four parameters on record along which the expressions of categories of accidence could vary: the cohesion of primary word and accidence expression could be tight (morphological) or loose (syntactic); the expression of different categories could be cumulative or separate; one category (or category bundle) could be expressed by alternative, synonymous exponents with different primary words or by only a single uniform exponent; and the exponents of different categories (or category bundles) could be homonymous or distinct. Although the logically possible combinations of values for these parameters were numerous (to be precise, sixteen, as seen in Table 171.8), only two were considered real, following from general explanatory principles of evolution or evaluation.

Table 171.8: Parameters of accidence, according to Smith (1761) and Anonymous (1771)

COHESION	CUMULATION	SYNONYMY	HOMONYMY	assumed to be real
+	+	+	+	yes
+	+	+	–	no
+	+	–	–	no
+	–	–	–	no
–	–	–	+	no
–	–	+	+	no
–	+	+	+	no
+	+	–	+	no
+	–	+	+	no
+	–	–	+	no
+	–	+	–	no
–	+	–	+	no
–	+	+	–	no
–	+	–	–	no
–	–	+	–	no
–	–	–	–	yes

Thus, four traits of systems of accidence expression were assumed mutually to imply one another, by "moral" rather than "physical necessity" (as Anonymous emphasized). Smith's and Anonymous's perception of these traits was certainly inspired by the classical languages, and on the strength of their principles they took their interrelatedness for granted. If their acquaintance with Turkish, one of the languages that at least Smith mentioned in passing, had been closer, they would have noticed that the declensions and conjugations there were more or less uniform, that there was very little homonymy among its inflections, that there was virtually no inflectional cumulation, and that its inflections were far less thoroughly mixed and blended with stems. On these parameters the inflections of languages such as Turkish, thus, resembled function words – except that they were still part of morphological rather than syntactic constructions, if less close-knit ones. This type of morphology *alla turca* later came to be known as agglutinative. Unlike fourteen other moral possibilities it would have had a natural place in the scheme of Smith and Anonymous, requiring only the recognition of the parameter of cohesion as admitting of gradual variation within the domain of morphology itself.

3.5. *Tout se tient*, owing to parallel articulation

The late 18th and early 19th century witnessed a new wave of world-wide language compiling, alongside ever more systematic

genetic and areal comparisons. Often, what out-of-the-way languages were like could still only be gleaned from short haphazard word-lists and perhaps translations of the Lord's Prayer; therefore, some large-scale collaborative collecting was now undertaken to give comparisons a more solid footing. The items collected en masse used to be words (as in the project initiated by Catherine the Great), but some were equally curious about grammars, notably Hartwich Ludwig Christian Bacmeister (1730–1806, also of St. Petersburg), whose multilingual, Russian-French-Latin-German questionnaire – requesting a translation of 23 everyday sentences, properly glossed, phonologically described, and grammatically annotated – was filled in by his obliging correspondents for no less than about a hundred languages.

Prone to merely reiterate the classifications of old or to rest content with such gross master distinctions as that between monosyllabic and polysyllabic languages, the collectors themselves – including Lorenzo Hervás (1735–1809), Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811), Johann Christoph Adelung (1732–1806) and Johann Severin Vater (1772–1826), and Adriano Balbi (1781–1841) (Bacmeister wearied of his questionnaires and shelved them forever [Adelung 1815: 23–32]) – were rarely able to exploit their riches to good typological advantage. Still, this was a climate where observation increasingly superseded conjecture in comparative grammar, with the realm of the variable expanding at the expense of what used to be taken for granted as universally invariant. As if not to be overwhelmed by diversity, the faith deepened that ALL variation had system.

The apogee of 18th-century system-seeking were arguably the six volumes each of *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773–92) and *Antient Metaphysics* (1779–99), published anonymously by a judge at the High Court of Scotland, James Burnett, better known as Lord Monboddo (1714–1799). Burnett's ambition was comprehensiveness. Confident that some familiarity with all ancient and modern languages presently known was not beyond his grasp, he managed to make reference to some fifty and to deal in some detail with Greenlandic Eskimo, Huron, Albinaqu(o)is, Galibi, Island Carib (of the Arawakan family, unrelated to Carib), Guaraní, Tahitian, Chinese, Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Gothic, Icelandic, and English.

Burnett's preoccupation was with origins, progress, and decay, not only of languages, and he sought to reduce the infinite variety which existed, or was reliably reported to have existed, to order from an evolutionary perspective. As in the scheme of his Edinburgh contemporary, Adam Smith, typological co-variation of structural traits was the result of their co-evolution. In Burnett's scenario of the evolution of languages, mainly elaborated in the first two volumes of the *Origin and Progress* series (1773/74) and in the fourth volume of *Antient Metaphysics* (1795), and in many respects reminiscent of Smith's, five major stages are discernible: (i) natural communication, (ii) more or less barbarous languages, (iii) mixed barbarous-artificial languages, (iv) overartificial languages, and (v) languages of less or more art. The criteria defining these stages, ultimately only partitions of a developmental and diffusional continuum, were to do with both 'matter' (i.e., sound structure) and 'form' ('sounds considered as significant'): linguistic evolution consisted essentially in the 'articulation' of matter and form, in the imposing of structure upon the unstructured, in the analysis of wholes into recombinable parts.

Crucially, as befitted true systems, material and formal articulation were assumed to proceed in tandem. And there were few structural traits which Burnett did not see implicated in articulation. To name only his major clusters of parameters, material articulation consisted in (i) the elaboration of sound inventories, (ii) the complexity of syllable structures, (iii) word length, and (iv) accentual differentiation (as opposed to not-so-articulated tonal modulation), and formal articulation in (i) the differentiation of parts of speech, (ii) the elaboration of inflectional and derivational morphology, and (iii) analytic syntax (as opposed to synthesis and even more so to polysynthesis). Burnett would feel reassured in his vision of parallel double articulation when encountering languages (such as Huron, of Outer Iroquoian affiliation) which were so defective on the formal side as not to articulate their sentences into words (which meant they practised incorporation), while at the same time they were so lacking in material articulation as not to have labial consonants. (For Burnett, labial consonants implied velar and guttural ones, rather than the other way round, as later phonological typologists would have it.)

Inevitably, the indefatigable Burnett found the sort of languages that his theory predisposed him to look for – and indeed a few rather less expected ones, causing honest confusion. Patching up the theory in light of such contrary evidence, material and formal articulation as such were not observed by Burnett ever to be so wildly out of step as to question whether matter and form really were to be expected to be articulated in parallel to begin with. But then the web of structural interdepencies woven by double articulation was so intricate that flaws in the weaving could easily remain undetected.

4. Eclipse of the Enlightenment

By the end of the 18th century there were landmarks and leading lights in the search for system in the realm of language which were hard not to notice in the intellectual landscape of enlightened Europe. As the Enlightenment was shading off into Romanticism, the typological programme was paramount among the unfinished business guaranteeing continuity. The search for a hopefully limited number of groundplans upon which languages can be constructed was indeed being continued with essentially the same leitmotifs and in exactly the same somewhat free style. It was only that the new protagonists, chief among them Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, were ideological antagonists of the *literati* and *lumières* who had gathered around the great encyclopedias, where linguistic typology had found its most prominent platform. They were understandably reluctant to present themselves as their heirs and debtors, or indeed reincarnations.

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Frans Plank, Konstanz (Germany)

172. La classification des langues au début du XIX^e siècle

1. Typologie et grammaire comparée

Depuis le début du XIX^e siècle se pratique un mode de classification des langues d'après les seuls traits de structure grammaticale (Koerner 1995a, Robins 1973). Cette approche, baptisée 'typologie', a deux caractéristiques essentielles: elle se propose d'entrer dans l'analyse interne des langues pour traiter de leur fonctionnement morpologique; elle refuse de prendre en compte l'éventuelle parenté historique des langues ainsi comparées. Aussi fallait-il que la grammaire comparée soit déjà constituée pour qu'une classification des langues par types grammaticaux devienne possible. Sans un mode d'analyse des langues inconnu jusque là – celui que pratiquent communément Franz Bopp (1791–1867) et Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) et qui manipule les morphèmes des langues étudiées – et sans l'ouverture temporelle sur le passé de celles-ci qui rend souvent difficile pour un groupe de langues d'articuler un héritage commun ou une évolution continue avec l'existence – ou l'absence – de similitudes structurelles, une perspective strictement typologique, c'est-à-dire affranchie de toute référence historique, n'aurait pu émerger et s'autonomiser.

Pour les mêmes raisons, les ébauches de répartition du XVIII^e siècle, celle de l'abbé Gabriel Girard (1677–1748) de 1747, fondée sur la morphologie et l'ordre de mots, entre langues analogues, transpositives et amphilogiques, ou celle plus historique proposée par Adam Smith (1723–1790) en 1761 entre langues simples et composées – ou langues mélangées – parce qu'elles ne dissocient nullement les approches historique et typologique, ne relèvent pas à proprement parler de cette dernière. L'histoire des tentatives de classification et leurs composantes idéologiques a été souvent retracée (Koerner 1995b). Mais comme c'est l'essor de la comparaison génétique menée sur des bases morphologiques qui a vu naître la dimension typologique proprement dite, ce sont les premiers acteurs de la grammaire comparée qui seront ici privilégiés: les frères Schlegel et surtout Humboldt.

Ce dernier affectionnait deux métaphores pour évoquer la difficulté à entrer dans l'individualité d'une langue – indéniable de loin, mais inassignable de plus près à des détails précis – celle du nuage (Humboldt 1903–1936 *GS* III 167 [1806]; III 318, 330 [1812a]; IV 36 [1821c]; VII/2 623 [1810–1811]; VII/2 634 [1812–1814]; VIII 129 [1816]), puis du visage (VI/1 246 [1827–1829a]; VII/2 388 [1827–1829b]; VII/1 48 [1830–1835]). Mais justement, la génération qui avait déjà classé les nuages en 1803 avec Luke Howard (1772–1864) et célébrait la physiognomonie de Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) ne pouvait manquer de classer aussi les langues. Humboldt s'y est employé, après Friedrich et August Wilhelm von Schlegel, et souvent contre eux. Car il émet cette réserve, paradoxale, mais fondamentale: selon lui, plus on analyse une langue en détail et plus on perd l'impression d'ensemble de son caractère (V 372 [1824–1826]), plus s'éloignent son individualité (V 472 [1824–1826]; VII/1 278 [1830–1835]), son principe vital (VI/2 388, 394, 397 [1827–1829b]), bref, ce qui seul importe et doit fonder