

HISTORICAL ROMANCE LINGUISTICS: THE FUTURE OF A DISCIPLINE

Franz Lebsanft
Ruhr University Bochum

According to a German saying, in every discussion there comes the moment when “everything has been said, but perhaps not by everyone”. It seems to me that the thought-provoking critical cluster on the presumable death of a discipline (Dworkin 2003) offers an excellent synthesis of the arguments that can be put forward to demonstrate that Historical Romance Linguistics is a “vital” and “evolving” discipline. This vitality, it seems, is impressively represented by the recent, multifaceted *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik* (Holtus, Metzeltin, and Schmitt 1988-2001) and the new *Romanische Sprachgeschichte* (Ernst, Gleßgen, Schmitt, and Schweickard 2003-). So, why continue the debate, if *tout va bien dans le meilleur des mondes*? As I see it, there is a discrepancy between the “vitality” of excellent research represented by the work of distinguished scholars, and the uncertainties that surround the discipline in its epistemological and academic surroundings – not only in the US, but also in Europe. Considerations about the “vitality” of our discipline should include these two aspects.

The 2003 debate forms part of a tradition of *défenses et illustrations* which goes back, at least in Germany, to the 1985 discussions of the *Deutsche Romanistentag* on Romance Philology as an “impossible discipline” (Nies and Grimm 1988). At that moment, even the most enthusiastic defenders of *Romanistik* admitted the “difficult unity” of the discipline; and two of the most distinguished German scholars of Romance Philology, Harald Weinrich and Hans Robert Jauß, described their scientific autobiography as an intellectual way out of the discipline. At the same moment, the *Romanistentag* set up a “section” on the history of Romance studies (Niederehe, and Schlieben-Lange 1988). In 1986, the international congress of the *Société de linguistique romane* held at Trier did the same (Christmann 1989). This now twenty-year

historiographic debate (with antecedents that go back to the very beginning of the twentieth century: see Gröber's ²1904-1906a history of Romance Philology) is, at least in part, the reaction to the increasing methodological and institutional uncertainties about our discipline.

The passionate debate on the “pre-“ or “proto-history” of Romance studies has helped sharpen our deeper understanding of its epistemological principles. The establishment and rise of our discipline is due – as we all know – to the development of “historical thinking” and its application to the study of languages (Schlegel 1808; Christmann 1977). The scientific and even public triumph of the historic paradigm in the nineteenth century is the basis of the extraordinary development of Historical Comparative Linguistics (Foucault 1966, Part II). After a long period of anti- or ahistoric approaches to the humanities during a good part of the last century, we do not witness, at the outset of this new century, the returning of *historical*, but of *evolutionary* thinking.

From an evolutionary point of view, the contingencies of linguistic history do not show “anything new under the sun”, but only “the eternal return of the same”. Therefore, the epistemological answer of Historical Romance Linguistics to the “cognitive turn” must be a reaffirming of genuine historic research. Cognitive “Historic” Semantics should be completed and counter-balanced by authentic diachronic research (Lebsanft and Gleßgen 2004: 23-25).

This can be shown by the following example. From a cognitive point of view, Blank (1997: 386) explains the semantic change of Old French *viande* ‘nourishment for people’ to Middle French ‘meat’ as a semantic restriction caused by prototypical organization. Though meat was certainly not the most usual part of a medieval meal, it was – according to Blank’s conjectural history of the word– the most important element of an “ideal” medieval meal. From a more traditional diachronic perspective and using all the available historic information, Artur Greive (1968) explains the change as an effort to distinguish between ‘flesh’ (*chair*) and ‘meat’ (*viande*), i.e., between the ‘soft substance of an animal body’ and this substance ‘used as food’.

From the perspective of Cognitive Sciences, Historical Romance Linguistics is only an auxiliary discipline (Meisel/Schwarze 2002). To illustrate the cognitive unity and diversity of linguistic developments, the abundance of Romance data may be (and certainly is) helpful. However, it is not strictly necessary and it could be replaced by any other adequate linguistic material (McMahon 1994). Consequently, it would be more useful to consider Cognitive Linguistics from the perspective of our discipline, and to see it as an auxiliary discipline for

the understanding of the history of the Romance languages (Kramer 2004).

Following the model of Classical Philology, Gustav Gröber (²1904-06b: 197) embedded Historical Romance Linguistics in the much wider frame of Romance Philology. Defining the “non-understood text” (German *Rede*) as the object of research, he helped keep linguistics and literary criticism in touch with each other (Stierle 1979; Stempel 1988). The current predominance of Cognitivism unmoors the already loosened ties between the two subdisciplines. On the other side, the still recent debate on the New Philology showed a renewal of interest in the cooperation between linguists and literary critics (e.g. Gleßgen and Lebsanft 1997), so historical linguists should not abandon the field of “cultural studies” to the so-called *Kulturwissenschaftler*, but claim their own rights in this branch of the humanities. Philology, in the meaning that August Boeckh (1785-1867) gave to this concept, includes Historical Linguistics. His “formal” theory of philological science includes “grammatical” hermeneutics and “grammatical” criticism. The history and development of the languages –including sound change, morphological change, syntactic change, and stylistics– form part of the “material” philological disciplines (Boeckh 1877: 724-803). In our days, Böhme, Matussek, and Müller (2000: 26-32) do not hesitate to see Boeckh’s famous “Alterthumslehre” as a forerunner of modern cultural studies.

This last consideration shifts the focus from “inner” to “outer” aspects of the institutional organization of the discipline. During the nineteenth century, the development of Romance Philology from a rather select discipline to a field of study attracting masses of students and scholars, from an *Orchideenfach* to a *Massenfach*, was caused by the professionalization in the formation of teachers: Professionalization meant, in that context, that a teacher of French at a German *Gymnasium* had to transmit to his pupils not only linguistic skills, but a thorough, historically grounded general and literary “culture” as well (Christmann 1985). It was even more important to read the canon of the *belles lettres* than to be able to speak French. On the basis of a good knowledge of Latin, Greek and French, the students of the nineteenth and in part of the twentieth century were well prepared for the university study of Romance Philology. This is no longer the case. Beginning with the acquisition of English, and continuing with French (and sometimes abandoning it as “too difficult”), they end their High School and College studies with rudiments of Spanish. This lack of multilingual preparation, especially in Latin, often cannot be made up at the

University. Consequently, comparative studies are being replaced by studies of the individual Romance languages, the so-called “National Philologies” (French, Italian, Spanish). On the other hand, in the framework of these new and narrower disciplines, the best students certainly acquire a much higher level of linguistic skills in French, Italian or Spanish, etc. and a more specialized knowledge of their discipline than they did in the “old”, comparative paradigm.

The evident changes in the configuration of the dominant *épistémè* and the consequences these changes have on the preparation of our students cannot leave Historical Romance Linguistics unmodified. For the moment, its methodological approach does definitely not represent the epistemological mainstream. In this situation, Historical Comparative Romance Linguistics is only one of several different options for diachronic research. It may also be subsumed under General Diachronic Linguistics or it may be split up into the diachronic study of each and every single Romance language. A closer look at the encyclopedias of “Romance Linguistics” or to the important scientific journals would show that all these different approaches are practiced. Under the present circumstances, the serious study of Historical Romance Linguistics returns to the status of an elitist discipline. But the quality of a scholarly community and its institutions depends on the will to defend elitist disciplines.

Works Cited

- Blank, Andreas. 1997. *Prinzipien des lexikalischen Bedeutungswandels am Beispiel der romanischen Sprachen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Böhme, Hartmut, Matussek, Peter, and Müller, Lothar. 2000. *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft. Was sie kann, was sie will*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Boeckh, August. 1877. *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*. Ed. Ernst Bratuscheck. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Christmann, Hans Helmut, ed. 1989. *Section XIV: Histoire de la linguistique et de la philologie romanes*. In Kremer 1989, Vol. 7: 1-213.
- Christmann, Hans Helmut, ed. 1977. *Sprachwissenschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts. Wege der Forschung 474*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

- Christmann, Hans Helmut. 1985. *Romanistik und Anglistik an der deutschen Universität im 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Herausbildung als Fächer und ihr Verhältnis zu Germanistik und klassischer Philologie*. Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse 1985, 1.
- Dworkin, Steven N., ed. 2003. "Historical Romance Linguistics: the Death of a Discipline?" *La corónica* 31: 7-134.
- Ernst, Gerhard, Gleßgen, Martin-Dietrich, Schmitt, Christian, and Schweickard, Wolfgang, eds. 2003-. *Romanische Sprachgeschichte. Ein internationales Handbuch zur Geschichte der romanischen Sprachen*. Vol. 1. Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Flashar, Hellmut, Gründer, Karlfried, and Horstmann Axel, eds. 1979. *Philologie und Hermeneutik im 19. Jahrhundert. Zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Geisteswissenschaften*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Foucault, Michel. 1966. *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard. Bibliothèque des sciences humaines.
- Gleßgen, Martin-Dietrich, and Lebsanft, Franz, eds. 1997. *Alte und neue Philologie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Beihefte zur editio 8.
- Greive, Artur. 1968. "Die lexikalische Differenzierung des Begriffes 'Fleisch' im Französischen". *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 204: 426-29.
- Gröber, Gustav. ²1904-1906a. "Geschichte der romanischen Philologie". *Grundriß der romanischen Philologie*. Vol. 1. Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner 1904-1906. 1-185.
- Gröber, Gustav. ²1904-1906b. "Aufgabe und Gliederung der romanischen Philologie". *Grundriß der romanischen Philologie*. Vol. 1. Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner 1904-1906. 186-202.
- Holtus, Günter, Metzeltin, Michael, and Schmitt, Christian, eds. 1988-2001. *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik*. 7 vols. (in 11). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Kramer, Johannes. 2004. "Linguistische Romanistik heute. Plädoyer für die Bevorzugung des Besonderen vor dem Allgemeinen". *Romanische Forschungen* 116: 66-73.
- Kremer, Dieter, ed. 1989. *Actes du XVIII^e Congrès International de Linguistique et de Philologie Romanes*. Vol. 7. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Lebsanft, Franz, and Gleßgen, Martin-Dietrich, eds. 2004. "Historische Semantik in den romanischen Sprachen. Kognition, Pragmatik, Geschichte". In: Lebsanft and Gleßgen 2004. 1-28.

- Lebsanft, Franz, and Gleßgen, Martin-Dietrich, eds. 2004. *Historische Semantik in den romanischen Sprachen*. Linguistische Arbeiten 483. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- McMahon, April M.S. 1994. *Understanding Language Change*. Cambridge: UP.
- Meisel, Jürgen M., and Schwarze, Christoph. 2002. "Romanistische Linguistik heute. Das Besondere und das Allgemeine". *Romanische Forschungen* 114: 423-44.
- Niederehe, Hans-Josef, and Schlieben-Lange, Brigitte, eds. 1987. *Die Frühgeschichte der romanischen Philologie: von Dante bis Diez. Beiträge zum deutschen Romanistentag in Siegen, 30.9.-3.10. 1985*. Beiträge zur Linguistik 303. Tübingen: Gunter Narr. Tübingen.
- Nies, Fritz and Grimm, Reinhold R., eds. 1988. *Ein "unmögliches Fach": Bilanz und Perspektiven der Romanistik*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- Schlegel, Friedrich. 1808. *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier. Ein Beitrag zur Begründung der Alterthumskunde, nebst metrischen Übersetzungen indischer Gedichte*. Heidelberg: Mohr and Zimmer.
- Stempel, Wolf-Dieter. 1988. "Die schwierige Einheit der romanischen Philologie". In: Nies and Grimm 1988. 41-58.
- Stierle, Karl-Heinz. 1979. "Altertumswissenschaftliche Hermeneutik und die Entstehung der Neuphilologie". In: Flashar, Gründer, and Horstmann 1979. 260-88.