

## Otto Jespersen and the Notion of 'Progress' in Language Change

Kenji INOMATA

Most generally, every language can be said to be unique in that its structure at any given point in time and space represents one particular, idiosyncratic solution to the universal problem of creating an efficient, yet transparent system for communicative purposes. Different speech communities may face almost the same problem, but solve it rather differently, i.e., unlike in nature, form, or quality. For example, every language needs to distinguish the two arguments of a two-place predicate in a sentence or similar unit so as to be able to discern who is acting on what in e.g., *My wife bought the bag in Tokyo*. One speech community may solve their problem by overtly marking the noun phrases or arguments with inflectional morphemes (case markers). This could be seen in Russian, '*моя жена купила сумку в Токиою*,' in which the two arguments can easily alter each other according to the difference of thematic structure, i.e., theme-rheme. Other communities resort to a fixed word order by which they can perform the same communicative function that the case markings in an inflectional language like Russian may perform. The latter choice of meeting the communicative demands is diachronically made through some formal devices of structuralization or grammaticalization in the history of English. An agentive argument must precede a thematic or patient argument in the declarative sentence insofar as it is in an active voice. From this perspective, each language has developed its own structural inventory, consisting of highly specific constructions. Consequently, what appears to be clear-cut and familiar linguistic categories in one language need not be present in another. As a matter of fact, no grammatical category can be said to be absolutely universal in one sense or another. But what typological studies try to do is to uncover the diverse range of strategies that languages use to encode particular concepts, and to discern systematic patterns of that variation. After all, human beings are almost the same in terms of the biological make-up they assign to the task of producing and making the effective use of their languages so that they could manage to carry out very similar or common activities in communication. Possible linguistic variation is thus largely limited insofar as some solutions will be opted for frequently so that languages all around the world may look similar in one or the other way, and this is what modern typological linguists mean by universal, i.e. universal statistical tendencies, while other options seem to be so costly or outlandish that they are

hardly ever chosen and thus rarely attested. Despite such similarities, we should always refrain from looking at an unfamiliar language and quickly imposing on the language some categorical distinctions that we know from the well-known European languages such as English, German and French because there might simply not be such grammatical devices or units as subject, preposition, subordinate clause and so on. This comes from a linguistic principle that direct language comparison should not be done between particular languages, whether or not far on or ahead in development or progress, until we have analyzed or integrated almost every piece of grammatical devices in the right perspective. In our time, it is a commonly shared understanding that general or universal language theory is indispensably necessary to achieve a measure of success in comparative, contrastive or typological language studies. Intellectual or philological language history shows that a vast majority of concepts and methods of linguistic research emerging at a given time are a continuation of ideas that appeared in a more or less developed form much earlier. Almost every literary trend can be traced back in time and its elements can be found in the earlier stages. The elements of Renaissance philosophy, for example, are seen very distinctly in medieval poetry. In this article we would like to show some reason why, through all his great works, Otto Jespersen affirmatively answers the following question about language change:

. . . if the old order has thus changed, yielding place to new, the question naturally arises: Which of these two is the better order? Is the sum of those infinitesimal modifications which have led our language so far away from the original state to be termed evolution or dissolution, growth or decay? Are languages as a rule progressive or regressive? And, specially, is modern English superior or inferior? (1894, 3)

This issue of language change may be old but still arguable in modern times. According to Jean Aitchison (2013), for example, there are three possibilities to be considered: The first possibility is slow decay, as is frequently suggested in the nineteenth century, which is proposed by Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), on the basis of the gradual losing the old word endings. The second one is that languages might be slowly evolving to a more efficient state, which is adopted by Jespersen. The third possibility is that language remains in a substantially similar state from the point of view of progress or decay. This is held by Joseph Vendryès (1875-1960), who claims that 'progress' in the absolute sense is impossible, just as it is in morality or politics. It is simply that different states exist, succeeding each other, each dominated by certain general laws imposed by the equilibrium

of the forces with which they are confronted.<sup>1</sup> To the three, we may add one more, E. Coseriu (1921-2002), who says in his book (1958) that it doesn't make sense at all to ask such a question about progress or decay in search for a unique cause-and-effect relation of language change.<sup>2</sup>

Otto Harry Jespersen (1860-1943) was born on 16 July in 1860 at Randers in Jutland. After the death of his father in 1870 the family moved to Hillerod in Northern Zealand, and he was sent to the Frederiksborg grammar school, where he took the university entrance examination in 1877. He chose the language side in school by which he was allowed to be involved in Latin and Greek. As a youth, Jespersen became inspired by the great linguist Rasmus Rask, and using his works on grammar, taught himself Spanish, Icelandic, and Italian. He initially studied law at Copenhagen University, before returning his interest once again to languages, completing his master degree in French, and secondarily in English and Latin in 1887. During his studies he also worked as a private tutor and then as a shorthand reporter in the Rigsdag (Danish parliament). Between 1887 and 1888, Jespersen travelled around Europe meeting several famous linguists or grammarians and attending lectures at various universities and returned to Denmark to submit his doctoral dissertation *Studier over Engelske Kasus, med en Indledning: Fremskridt i Sproget* to the University of Copenhagen in February in 1891.

Among the seminal works of the 1980s is Jespersen's *Progress in Language* (1894), a translated book of his dissertation with some alternations or modifications in chapters and still now ranked as a genuine classic in linguistics. Like several other language studies from the same era, such as Michel Bréal's *Essai de sémantique* in 1897 and Frederik van Eeden's publié dans la *Derde Reeks de ses Studies*, Amsterdam, 1897, un essai, fort digne d'attention, sous le titre; *Redekunstige grondslag van verstandhouding*,<sup>3</sup> Jespersen's book deals in part with human communication and language criticism. Bréal's work on semantics is based on the idea concerning general linguistics and language usage he propounds from the 1860s onwards, and van Eeden's book is an anti-rationalistic essay which can be regarded as an early study in semiotics that would go ahead of his day.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the western society, it still stands to reason that languages have a life cycle like animals and plants in which they progress to a mature stage; then gradually

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Aitchison, *Language Change, Progress or Decay?* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2013. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) pp.7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Eugenia Coseriu, *Sincronía, diacronía e historia. El problema del cambio lingüística.* Montevideo, 1958. The Japanese translation by K. Tanaka. *Gengo Henka toiu Mondai*, (Iwanamishoten, Tokyo, 2014) pp.259-306.

<sup>3</sup> See Jac. Van Ginneken, *Prinices de linguistique psychologique.* (E. Van der Vecht, Amsterdam, 1907) p.239.

decay.<sup>4</sup> An inflected language such as classical Latin and Greek would be esteemed to be a favored example of matured full-fledged glorious languages, but on the other English is thought by some grammarians to be totally at the opposite end of evolution or development in a state of disintegration because the language has been losing its inflectional endings. Such an argument has been going on and on for centuries, and tells us that languages move from better to worse states, by which may be meant a story of language decay.

The real unfolding of the blossoming buds of the comparative study of language is made possible, as is often indicated in the introductory linguistic books or other sources referred to therein, by the introduction of Sanskrit into Western intellectual circles. Though he is not the first person or best informed scholar to introduce it, Jespersen, in common with so many others, makes a brief comment about the ancient language of India with a wide knowledge that results from the survey of the preceding scholars, such as Friedrich van Schlegel, Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm. (1922, 32-112). Among of them, Fr. Schlegel has the farthest reaching effect with his little book *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (Heidelberg, 1808).<sup>5</sup> In any case the book plays a decisive role for the determination of direction that the contemporary comparative study is to follow with immense enthusiasm in rational pursuit of language origin. This 'brilliant ouverture' looks upon Indian as the pure original model of language development. According to Schlegel's literal statement, "Im Indischen, jede Wurzel ist wahrhaft das, was der Name sagt, und wie ein lebendiger Keim, denn weil die Verhältnissbegriffe durch innere Veränderung bezeichnet warden, so ist der Entfaltung freier Spieraum gegeben, . . ."<sup>6</sup> Sanskrit is a truly organic language and this is its glory. With reference to the life cycle theory, Jespersen states that:

The view that the modern languages of Europe, Persia and India are far inferior to the old languages, or the one old language, from which they descend, we have already encountered in the historical part of this work, in Bopp, Humboldt, Grimm and their followers. It dooms very large in Schleicher, according to whom the history of language is all a Decline and Fall, and in Max Müller, who says that "on the whole, this history of all the Aryan languages is nothing but a gradual process of decay." (1922, 321)

---

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Schmitter, *Le savoir romantique*. In Sylvain Auroux, *Histoire des idées linguistiques* Tome 3, *L'hégémonie du comparatisme*. (Pierre Mardaga, Hayen, 2000) pp.63-78.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (Mohr & Zimmer, Heidelberg, 1808)

<sup>6</sup> The quotation is from P. Schmitter (2000).

And then, he disagrees over the merit of the life cycle or downhill theory with keeping his progress of language in mind, mentioning some scholars at that time, such as Humboldt, Kräuter, Osthoff, and Whitney, who all manage to hold their own against the decay of language not in the same way but in the conceptually different way. As pointed out by Hans Frede Nielsen (1989), Jespersen's view on linguistic evolution should be seen as a reaction against especially Schleicher's theory of language development, which reads as follows<sup>7</sup>:

. . . unsere Worte nehmen sich gotischen gegenüber aus, wie etwas eine Statue, die durch langes Rollen in eigem Fussbette um ihre Glieder gekommen und von der nicht viel mehr als seine abgeschliffene Steinwalze mit schwachen Andeutungen des einst vorhandenen geblieben ist; ein gotisches habaidêdeima lautet jetzt hätten, English gar nur had . . . (Schleicher 1869, 34)

At the any point of historiography of linguistics, we could see almost the same conflict or struggle between the ideas of decay or progress with regard to language change. For example, the Stoics of ancient Greece takes the view that languages decay, whereas, under the spell of Darwinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, languages are said to improve as they evolve from their ancestral one or ones. Against this background of theoretically disintegrated views in his age, what Jespersen insists on is an inductive approach to language evolution, i.e. diachronic change of language, by which he intends to offer his view of linguistic positivism in that he refuses to accept theories which are not compatible with observable phenomena in especially present-day languages. There's no doubt that Jespersen doesn't align himself with romantic grammarians.

Jespersen's *Progress in language with special reference to English*, as the title shows, covers a various aspect of a historical development of English, devoting more than half the book to the history of English. Throughout the whole of his book he not infrequently speaks of 'progress' as a universal law of linguistic development, saying as follows:

I shall try to show that we are justified in going still further than these two eminent men, i.e., Rasmus Ch. Rask and John N. Madvig, and saying the fewer and shorter the forms, the better; the analytic structure of modern European languages is so far from being a drawback to them that it gives them an unimpeachable superiority over the earlier stages of the same languages. The so-called full and rich forms of the ancient languages are not a beauty but a deformity. (1894, 14)

---

<sup>7</sup> Han Frede Nielsen (1989), "On Otto Jespersen's view of language evolution." In Arune Juul and Han F. Nielsen (eds.) *Otto Jespersen: Facets of his Life and Work*. (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1989) pp. 61-78.

As a good instance of progress in the historical change upon careful investigation, he mentions the tendencies to further the simplification of the case system in *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles prt VII*, chaps. VI-VII, (which is written by Niels Haislund at Jespersen's directions on the basis of his *Progress in Language* and is afterwards revised by Jespersen).<sup>8</sup> In particular, "the pronouns of the second person are simplified from *thou, ye, thee, you* to *you*, which is rather taken as natural reactions against the imperfections of traditional language which can be conducive to progress in language when viewed in their historical connexion." (1974, 271-281) Furthermore, he briskly adds on yet unsparing remarks on the ordinary grammars. The remarks read as follows:

But ordinary grammars are not always trustworthy; in laying down their rules they are too apt to forget that the English language is one thing, common-sense or logic another thing, and Latin grammar a third, and that these three things have really in many cases very little to do with one another.(1894, 185).

Jespersen intends to show that the rules proper to English and something like inferential judgment or whatsoever in favor of common-sense or logic and on the basis of Latin grammar are so different from each other that it is necessary to check up the points that the best literary authors deviate from the rules laid down in the contemporary school grammars. After checking up real use by the authors and offering an explanation of some phenomena, he understands that the simplification of the second person pronouns has been shifting toward more progressive and better one upon the whole.

In *MEG* prt.VII, another affirmative answer to the question of progressive tendencies of language change also comes from uncertainties in the choice of grammatical case in English. For the solution of the uncertainties of case choice, he designates a want of correspondence between notional and grammatical categories, which runs as follows:

The rule which is entirely incompatible with the old state of things, that the word immediately preceding the vb is notionally and grammatically the subject of the sentence, has been carried through on the whole with great consistency. And in the great facility which the English have now acquired of making the real psychological subject grammatically the subject of a passive sentence, the language has gained a decided advantage over the kindred languages.(1961, 281).

In complete contrast to the sentence '*МОЯ ЖЕНА КУПИЛА СУМКУ В ТОКИОЮ*,' in which the two arguments can easily change each other's positions without grammaticality, the argument 'a bag' in the counterpart 'My wife bought a bag in Tokyo.' cannot move to the

---

<sup>8</sup> See Preface of *MEG* prt. VII. (George Allen & Unwin LTD., London, 1961) pp. v-viii.

front position of the sentence. But now through historical progressive syntactic facility that English have acquired of making the psychological subject grammatically the subject of a passive sentence, English has filled the long-felt want of correspondence between notional and grammatical categories. The flexible reactions against the imperfection of the traditional language give us amazing progress in the language, although they would be considered as more or less gross blunders or "bad grammar" by grammarians of the old school. Now English have got a device of fixed word order hand in hand with a relatively free choice of the active or passive voice. It is absolutely certain that he would like to say that this is really of progress in language.

Jespersen also claims that modern English is superior to classical languages, Hottentot, or the oldest English, because its privileged analytical structure renders the task of speaking easier, and involves less effort on the part of the listener. When insisting on the superiority of modern English, he perspicaciously appeals to the communicative function of language, saying that:

What is to be taken into account is of course the interests of the speaking community, and if we consistently consider language as a set of human actions with a definite end in view, namely, the communication of thoughts and feelings, then it becomes easy to find tests by which to measure linguistic values, for from that point of view it is evident that that language ranks highest which goes farthest in the art of accomplishing much with little means, or, in other words, which is able to express the greatest amount of meaning with the simplest mechanism. (1922, 324)

As the result of investigation in Chapter 'Ancient and Modern Languages,' he sums up as follows:

The grammatical system of Modern English is preferable to that of our remote ancestors, in that  
its forms are generally shorter;  
there are not so many of them to burden the memory;  
their formation and use present fewer irregularities;  
their more abstract character assists materially in facilitating expression, and makes it possible to do away with the repetitions of languages which demand "concord".(1894, 39)

All in all, these grammatical features in Modern English lead him to answer in the

affirmative to the question about the language change.<sup>9</sup>

The linguist, like every other worker in the scientific field, is perfectly entitled to restrict his efforts to collecting and arranging the fact. Jespersen performs the efforts in his major works from *Progress in Language* to *Analytic Syntax*, making a large contribution toward linguistic positivism without placing himself under the influence of Latin grammars at the times. It is not the case to presume that he performs this task of collecting and arranging without having any pre-suppositions, without any heuristic principle, the validity of which can only be demonstrated after the completion of his research in more than half a century.<sup>10</sup> It is of much interest to point out that Jespersen may be under the influence of his contemporary thought because we see his arguments full of a passing reference to Ch. Darwin and Herbert Spencer, who are representative of the intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, he says in the foot note to page 357-358 of *Progress in language*, “As I feel utterly incompetent to decide when two such eminent doctors disagree, I have tried to combine their views; perhaps the difference between them is not so great as would appear from Mr. Spencer’s words.” In his essay on Progress, Spencer states as follows<sup>11</sup>:

Being that which determines Progress of every kind – astronomic, geologic, organic, ethnologic, social, economic, artistic, etc. – it must be concerned with some fundamental attribute possessed in common by these; and must be expressible in terms of this fundamental attribute. The only obvious respect in which all kinds of Progress are alike, is, that they are modes of change; and hence, in some characteristic of changes in general, the desired solution will probably be found. We may suspect *à priori* that in some law of change lies the explanation of this universal transformation of the homogeneous into heterogeneous.

The last page of *Progress in Language* sees the similar conclusion that sounds the same as the above statement by Herbert Spencer: from the beginning the tendency has been one of progress, slow and fitful progress, but still progress towards greater and greater clearness, regularity, ease and pliancy. No one language has arrived at perfection; an ideal language would always express the same thing by the same, and similar things by similar means; . . .

---

<sup>9</sup> For the same argument of the concept of progress and perfection of Otto Jespersen, see Maurice Leroy, *The Main Trends in Modern Linguistics*. (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967) pp.43-47.

<sup>10</sup> Anton Reichling, *Het Woord*. (N.V.Uitgeverij. W.E.J.Tjeenk Willink, Zwolle, 1967) pp.4-10.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Essays on Education*. (Dent, London, 1966) p.176. See also Michel Henry, « Herbert Spencer et Charles Renouvier. » 1903.



## References

- Aitchison, Jean, *Language Change, Progress or Decay?* Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2013. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.
- Auroux, Sylvain (ed.), *Histoire des idées linguistiques*. Tome 3. Pierre Mardaga, Hayen, 2000.
- Coseriu, Eugenia, *Sincronía, diacronía e historia. El problema del cambio lingüística*. Montevideo, 1958. The Japanese translation by K. Tanaka. *Gengo Henka toiu Mondai*. Iwanamishoten, Tokyo, 2014.
- Van Ginneken, Jac., *Princes de linguistique psychologique*. E. Van der Vecht, Amsterdam, 1907.
- Jespersen, Otto, *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*. Read Book Ltd. 2011.
- Jespersen, Otto, *Progress in Language with Special Reference to English*. Routledge, London, 1894.
- Jespersen, Otto, *Language, its Nature Development and Origin*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1922.
- Jespersen, Otto, *The Philosophy of Grammar*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1924.
- Jespersen, Otto, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, Part VII. Syntax*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1961.
- Juul, Arune and Han F. Nielsen (eds.) *Otto Jespersen: Facets of his Life*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1989
- Leroy, Maurice, *The Main Trends in Modern Linguistics*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967.
- Michel, Henry, Herbert Spencer et Charles Renouvier. *L'année psychologique*. 1903. 10.142-160.
- Nielsen, Han Frede (1989), "On Otto Jespersen's view of language evolution." In Arune Juul and Han F. Nielsen (eds.) *Otto Jespersen: Facets of his Life and Work*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1989.
- Reichling, Anton, *Het woord*. W. E. J. Tjeenk Willink, Zwolle, 1967.
- Schmitter, Peter, Le savoir romantique. In Sylvain Auroux (ed.), *Histoire des idées linguistiques* Tome 3. Pierre Mardaga, Hayen, 2000
- Schlegel, Friedrich, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*. Mohr & Zimmer, Heidelberg, 1808.
- Spencer, Herbert, *Essays on Education*. Dent, London, 1966.
- Vendryes, Joseph, *Le Langage, Introduction linguistique à l'histoire*. La Renaissance du Livre, Paris, 1921.