

# A Brief Reconsideration of Philology and British Philologists<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Purpose

James Turner, the Cavanaugh Professor of Humanities at the University of Notre Dame says that “(p)hilology has fallen on hard times in the English-speaking world,” the reasons for which are that “(m)any college-educated Americans no longer recognize the word” and that “British readers may take it as referring only to technical research into language and language families.”<sup>2</sup> Regarding the study of language in Britain, a Japanese scholar of English, Fumio Nakajima once made the following observation: “The British do not like thinking of language in the abstract, and they study it connecting closely to literature and history with human interests. This is commonly considered to be a part of philology.”<sup>3</sup> What Nakajima points out would be an essential thing which philology should aim at. This paper reconsiders what has been discussed about philology and explores scholarship by some of British philologists focusing especially on medieval English language and literature.

## 2. The original concept of philology in German

Before further discussion, it would be better to give a brief survey of the tradition of philology in Germany, where the conceptual establishment of modern philology was made. Historically speaking, the origin of philology is sought in a critical investigation of Greek literary texts collected in ancient Alexandria, in which grammatical studies also developed in order to establish these texts. Here we could see the philological activities pursued in the original meaning of philology or “love of learning and literature, love of language.”<sup>4</sup>

In the 18th and the 19th centuries Germany produced major philologists, such as F.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the abridged and revised version in English of “Igirusu no Bunkengaku to Bunkengakusha (1)-(3)” (“Philology and Philologists in Britain (1)-(3)”) (*Daito Bunka Review* Nos.32-34, 2001-03).

<sup>2</sup> James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Fumio Nakajima, *Eigogaku Kenkyushitsu*, Kenkyusha Sensho (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956), p.124.

<sup>4</sup> T. F. Hoad (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), s.v. ‘philology.’

August Wolf (1759-1824), August Boeckh (1785-1867), and Hermann Paul (1846-1921). Wolf aimed at ‘a recognition of the ancient humanity’, ‘a study of antiquities’ or ‘a consideration of significant national culture developed systematically’, and Boeckh, developing ideas based on Wolf’s study, gave a wider conception of philology in *Encyclopädie und Methologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* (1886), saying that “...scheint die eigentliche Aufgabe der Philologie das Erkennen des vom menschlichen Geist Produzierten, d.h. des Erkannten zu sein.”<sup>5</sup> His main point, “das Erkennen des Erkannten”, which has been repeatedly quoted, means the comprehensive studies and recognition of the whole human culture. Now let us turn to Herman Paul’s discussion of ideal philological studies. In *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* (1891-93)<sup>6</sup> he tried to perform philological activities as comprehensively as possible, stating that “Nach der weitesten Fassung des Begriffes, wie sie von Boeckh vertreten ist, fällt der Philologie die gesamte menschliche Kultur als Gegenstand zu. Ich schliesse mich dieser Auffassung insofern an, als ich der Überzeugung bin, dass die einzelnen Gebiete, in welche man das Kulturleben eines Volkes zu zerlegen pflegt, in der wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung nicht isoliert werden dürfen.”(p.1)

His proposal was put into practice with the following specific items introduced interactively, though not always systematically discussed: ‘Schriftkunde’, ‘Sprachgeschichte’, ‘Mythologie’, ‘Heldensage’, ‘Literaturgeschichte’, ‘Metrik’, ‘Wirtschaft’, ‘Recht’, ‘Kriegswesen’, ‘Sitte’, and ‘Kunst’. Among these items many pages are devoted to ‘Sprachgeschichte’ and ‘Literaturgeschichte’ than to the others, from which we can deduce that Paul placed more emphasis on the close relationship between both fields. However, the present studies on humanities have a tendency to be too technically or theoretically categorized and subdivided with comprehensive points of view being lost, and as a result the attitude toward extensive humane studies or toward “die gesamte menschliche Kultur als Gegenstand” in Paul’s words has been lost. Even literary and linguistic studies, which should be interactively related from a philological viewpoint, tend to be divorced from each other and academic sectionalism is prevailing. Turner (2014) also points out that “(w)hen linguistics shifted from a historical study to a predominantly synchronic approach, it moved even further from the philological tradition.” (p.252) It would be now necessary to reconsider these tendencies, and better to direct more attention to traditions which British philologists have retained.

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation is from the following: Friedrich Stroh, *Handbuch der germanischen Philologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1952) p.15.

<sup>6</sup> Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner. I Band, 1891; II Band 1, 1893; II Band 2, 1893.

### 3. A survey of definitions of 'philology' in English dictionaries

The word 'philology' first appeared in the following text of 'The Merchant's Tale' of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* :

Hoold thou thy pees, thou poete Marcian,  
That writest us that ilke wedding murie  
Of hire *Philologie* and hym Mercurie,  
And of the songes that the Muses songe! (1732-35, the italics are mine)<sup>7</sup>

Here Chaucer refers to the allegorical prose *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella writing in the 5th century. By the marriage of 'Philologie' and 'Mercurie' is meant the unification of the seven liberal arts in the Middle Ages, and we can understand that Chaucer's idea on 'Philologie' was more wide-ranging than that of the present time.

Now let us turn to a brief historical survey of philology. The following are from some representative English dictionaries<sup>8</sup> from the 18th to the present.

1717. Elisha Coles: *An English Dictionary* "the Study of Speech and Discourse : also as Philomathy, Love of Learning."

1753. Nathan Bailey: *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* 15<sup>th</sup> ed.  
"the Study of Humanity, or Skill in the liberal Arts and Sciences."

1755. Samuel Johnson: *A Dictionary of the English Language*  
"Criticism; grammatical learning."

1855. Charles Richardson: *A New Dictionary of the English Language*  
"A love of speech, of language, of grammatical learning; and hence applied—Grammar, grammatical learning, the general principles of language."

1895. Edward Lloyd: *Lloyd's Encyclopaedic Dictionary*  
"1. A love of learning and literature; the study of learning and literature."

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<sup>7</sup> The quotation is from Larry D. Benson's edition: *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> E. Coles, (London, 1717). / N. Bailey, (London, 1753). / S. Johnson, (London, 1755; rpt. Tokyo: Yushodo, 1983). / C. Richardson, (London: Bell and Daldy, 1855). / E. Lloyd, (London: Edward Lloyd, 1895). / W.D. Whitney, (London: The Times, 1904). / *Webster* (2<sup>nd</sup>) (Massachusetts : Merriam Company, 1909; rpt. 1935). / *OED* (3<sup>rd</sup>), (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2017. Web. 31 December).

2. Criticism; grammatical learning.
3. The study of languages, in connection with the whole moral and intellectual action of different peoples. It is sometimes made to include rhetoric, poetry, history, and antiquities.
4. The science of language; linguistic science (in this sense more properly termed Comparative Philology).”

1904. W.D. Whitney: *The Century Dictionary*

“The love or the study of learning and literature, the investigation of a language and its literature, or of languages and literatures, for the light they cast upon men’s character, activity, and history.”

1909: 1935. Webster <sup>(2nd)</sup>: *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*

“1. Orig., love of, or, devotion to, learning or literature; hence the study of literature, in a wide sense, including (nonhistorical, conjectural) etymology, grammar, criticism, literary and linguistic history, etc.; literary, classical, or polite learning.”

“3. Linguistic science; linguistics.”

“4. The study of the cultures of civilized peoples as revealed chiefly in their languages, literatures, and religions; including study of languages as such, grammar, etymology, phonology, morphology, accent, syntax, semantics, textual criticism, mythology, folklore, and many other phases.”

2017. *OED*<sup>(3rd)</sup> Web. 31 Dec.

“1. Love of learning and literature; the branch of knowledge that deals with the historical, linguistic, interpretative, and critical aspects of literature; literary or classical scholarship. Now chiefly *U.S.*

By the late 19th cent. this general sense had become *rare*, but it was revived, principally in the United States, in the early 20th cent.”

“3. The branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of languages or language families; the historical study of the phonology and morphology of languages; historical linguistics.

This sense has never been current in the United States, and is increasingly rare in British use. *Linguistics* is now the more usual term for the study of the structure of language, and (often with qualifying adjective, as *historical*, *comparative*, etc.) has generally replaced *philology*. ”

While Coles gives the etymological meaning ‘Love of Learning’, but shows the only one

specific field for philology, Bailey sees philology as a comprehensive study of 'Humanity' including the liberal Arts. Johnson's attention is on 'criticism and grammar', but it is not clear what is meant by criticism, though possibly it refers to literary or textual criticism. Seen from his reference to 'grammar', it is intended that philology is closely related to language study. Richardson, as Johnson did, also laid down a definition of philology from the standpoint of speech or language. Next, I would like to pay more attention to Edward Lloyd's explanation 3, where the focus is on language study connected with the whole intellectual action of humans. Here the original definition of philological activities is revived, and the references to 'literature' in 1 and 'language' in 3 and 4 should not go unnoticed.

Lloyd's thought is also reflected in Whitney's Dictionary, which states that philology should investigate both a language and its literature in order to reveal aspects of human activities. I would like to emphasize that philological studies should be profoundly concerned with the investigation of human activities. In Lloyd 4 there appears an explanation "linguistic science", the conception of which developed under the establishment of Comparative Philology or Comparative linguistics, in other words 'New Philology'. Webster<sup>(2nd)</sup>, after giving an original sense of philology in 1, shows a variety of specific branches of philological studies in 4. However, as seen in sense 3, "linguistics" as a philological branch came to occupy an independent position separated from the whole frame of philology. Finally especial attention must be directed to an additional remark made in the definition 3 in *OED*<sup>(3rd)</sup>. A clear line has been drawn between philology and linguistics. Now linguistics sometimes has a tendency to be antagonistic to philology. However, even when John M. Kemble (1807-57) introduced 'New Philology' into England from Germany under the influence of Jacob Grimm's scholarship, his interest still covered literature and history as well as language from a philological point of view. This tradition has been retained in the works of W.W. Skeat (1835-1912), R.W. Chambers (1874-1942), C.L. Wrenn (1895-1969), J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), N. Davis (1913-1989), P. Clemoes (1920-1996), B. Mitchell (1920-2010), E.G. Stanley (1923-), N.F. Blake (1934-2012), M. Godden (1945-) and many other medievalists in Britain.

#### **4. The discussions of philology in the past**

Some criticism has been directed at the methodology of philology. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) once criticized philology noting that philology ignores the living language due to sticking to the literary language, and that it is practically only to Greek and

Latin works that it devotes much interest.<sup>9</sup> However, since the basic purpose of philology is to examine the linguistic state of written texts focusing on historical viewpoints, Saussure's criticism is difficult to accept completely. Furthermore, other disapproval has been expressed from the field of theoretical linguistics: it is not clear what philology aims at and how the systematical methods are established. Regarding this, Hiroshi Ogawa<sup>10</sup> and Matsuji Tajima<sup>11</sup> propose the following discussions respectively. Ogawa points out that philology not only describes but also interprets linguistic facts in written texts, and that it studies how and why a language changed. And he says that the theory-centered methodologies introduced into historical studies of English are not in the line of those of traditional philology. Likewise, Tajima states that in recent Japan, activities of reading texts attentively are somewhat neglected because of priority given to developing of linguistic and literary theories, and that since the development of these theories is made in the frame of traditional studies of language and literature, naturally both studies have separated from each other. And he proposes that we should reconsider the philological studies in Britain with language and literature interrelated. Needless to say, the primary object of philology based on historical studies is "das Erkennen des Erkannten", which leads us into the reconstruction of past human cultures through close and extensive reading of written texts.

In 1990 *On Philology*<sup>12</sup> was published, which is a collection of twelve papers based on the conference titled "What is Philology?" held at Harvard University in 1988. In this Jan Ziolkowski ('What is Philology?') gives the following point as one aspect of philological constituents:

What is it to constitute a text? Despite occasional reminders . . . , the difficulty and importance of establishing texts is sometimes forgotten by modernists. But scholars of earlier languages and literatures must confront the special demands of dealing with cuneiform tablets, papyri, and parchment, and the challenges of differentiating between scribal and authorial texts. Such scholars must employ methods such as paleography, codicology, and textual criticism. These methods seem to me constituents of philology, when it is broadly conceived.

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<sup>9</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). Hideo Kobayashi (tr.) *Ippan Gengogaku Kougi* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1983), pp.9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Hiroshi Ogawa, 'Eigogaku to Gengogaku no Hazama—Philology no Tachiba kara' in *Eigo Seinen* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 2001 April), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Matsuji Tajima, 'Eigogaku Bunken Shoshi wo Hensan shite Omou koto' in *Eigo Seinen* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 2001, November), 30-32.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Ziolkowski (ed.), *On Philology* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).

(p.6)

In addition to this, he discusses the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in reading texts correctly:

To read the written records of bygone civilizations correctly requires knowledge of cultural history in a broad sense: of folklore, legends, laws, and customs. (p.7)

This shows an ideal attitude of philological activities.

Next, further developing Ziolkowski's statements above, Margaret Alexiou ('Greek Philology: Diversity and Difference') expresses the following opinion:

Philology must broaden its horizons by going back to its most ancient sense, "love of argument and reasoning," "love of learning and literature," to include oral as well as written texts, to re-unite the practitioners and theorists of literature, to re-impose the integrity of poetry and music..., and to admit the beauty and diversity of human cultural interaction. (p.60)

From these statements we can recognize the need to return to classical philology. In order to do this, we have to reconsider "the correct establishment and comprehension of the text (Alexiou, p.54)" before applying theory-centered methods to studies of language and literature.

## 5. Philologists in Britain from earlier times to the present

Britain has produced many philologists who studied languages with much literary, historical, and cultural interest, relating them closely to humanistic aspects. According to Helmut Gneuss<sup>13</sup> the first English philologists in Britain were "Æthelwold and his circle in Winchester" writing in the Old English period, and the most important one was the prolific writer Ælfric, whose works dealing with extensive themes can be exactly considered as philological. The period ranging from the 16th to the 19th century saw the appearance of three great philological scholars who laid the basis for medieval studies: Lawrence Norwell (1530-ca.1570), George Hickes (1642-1715), and Humphrey Wanley (1672-1726). They collected medieval English manuscripts, catalogued them making a detailed description of

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<sup>13</sup> Helmut Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English and Æthelwold's School at Winchester' in *Anglo-Saxon England 1*, ed. by Peter Clemoes (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1972), 83.

their contents, and offered future textual critics the opportunity to publish texts. Thomas Warton (1728-90) brought out *The History of English Poetry*<sup>14</sup>, in which he revealed what the nature of the change of the English language was, producing diverse late Middle English and early Modern English poems as evidence.

There are many other important philologists to be noted, but as representative ones maintaining traditional attitudes toward philology, I would like to take notice of the literary and linguistic accomplishments of two scholars: J.R.R. Tolkien and R.W. Chambers. Firstly, in order to know what Tolkien thought about the union of linguistic and literary studies, it would be better to look at his 'Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford'<sup>15</sup> delivered in Trinity term 1959.

The right and natural sense of Language includes Literature, just as Literature includes the study of the language of literary works. *Litteratura*, proceeding from the elementary sense "a collection of letters; an alphabet", was used as an equivalent of Greek *grammatike* and *philologia*: that is, the study of grammar and idiom, and the critical study of authors (largely of linguistic kind). Those things it should always still include. But even if some now wish to use the word "literature" more narrowly, to mean the study of writings that have artistic purpose or form, with as little reference as possible to *grammatike* or *philologia*, this "literature" remains an operation of Language. Literature is, maybe, the highest operation or function of Language, but it is nonetheless Language. (pp.25-6)

And the following statement explicitly expresses his idea of philology: "the *central* ... business of Philology in the Oxford School is the study of the language of *literary* texts, or of those that illuminate the history of the English literary language". (p.26) What counts here in his words is that he always had a historical perspective in discussing philology with reference to language and literature. Tolkien's way of thinking of philology leads us to a direction through which humane aspects would be opened up. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that *The Lord of the Rings* is the work embodying the unified studies of language and literature. In addition, we must refer to his *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*

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<sup>14</sup> London: 1774, 1778, 1781.

<sup>15</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford, 5 June 1959' in *Scholar and Storyteller*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrel (Ithaca and London, 1979), pp.16-32.



(2014)<sup>16</sup>, which was originally unpublished papers which his son Christopher Tolkien edited later. This work is based on textual criticism as well as literary interpretation of *Beowulf*. Especially as far as Tolkien's textual criticism is concerned, "(it) rests upon the argument over *linguistic and cultural changes* (the italics are mine) which took place during the three centuries of the poem's transmission."<sup>17</sup> These works show the typically traditional philology in Britain.

Secondly, a British philologist to be noted is R.W. Chambers. His works include literary criticism, a biography, editing *Beowulf*, the British history and so on. Chambers grasps philology in *Man's Unconquerable Mind*<sup>18</sup> as follows:

In English, the word Philology is ambiguous: it was once used, in its widest sense, for a love of all polite literature; it included 'all humane liberal studies'. Even when used in a narrower sense, Philology was wont to cover the study of literature, just as much as of grammar. But nowadays Philology is often limited to comparative grammar, and to the science of linguistics which is based upon it.

Now, in speaking of Philology at University College, I wish to use the word in the older, broader, and more correct sense, including the study of literature as well as the study of language. (p.342)

In this statement his philology shows that the study of language should not be divorced from that of literature, and paying attention to historical facts, he tried to cast light upon words, thought, and attitudes of humans. In his work *Thomas More* (1935)<sup>19</sup>, Chambers depicts the faith of More's life in, as it were, a linguistically elaborate way, and in *Man's Unconquerable Mind* (pp.88-171), he points out that *Piers Plowman* retains the tradition handed down from the Anglo-Saxon heroic ages to later ages saying that "the poet, in his spirit, as in his metre and vocabulary, is the successor of the Old English heroic poets." (p.15) Speaking of a careful reading of texts and a faithful tracing of linguistic facts, his philological approach is typically British. Chamber's attitude embodies "all humane liberal studies" in originally philological studies.

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Tolkien, ed. *J.R.R. Tolkien, Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (London: Harper Collins, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Neidorf, *The Transmission of Beowulf* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017), p.165.

<sup>18</sup> London: Jonathan Cape, 1939.

<sup>19</sup> London: Jonathan Cape, 1935: rpt. 1945.

## 6. Conclusion

Philology is, in a sense, *Altertumswissenschaft* 'the science of antiquity'. In other words, philologists historically trace language facts, through which they make a careful reading of texts chronologically. Therefore, naturally their attention turns to language and literature as a unified expression of human thought. Nowadays the study of language tends to be divorced from that of literature, and academic sectionalism to prevail. It is required that we should return to the original meaning of 'philology', and cast our eyes once more on the traditional British attitude towards philological studies, especially such as seen in studies by British scholars of medieval English language and literature.