***Section Three:*****Comparative Philology**

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**Comparative Philology**

1. **‘Scientific’ Language and the Evolutionary Point of View**

It is claimed that the 19th century saw the birth of the scientific study of language in the western world. And this statement is true, if we give to the term ‘scientific’ the sense it generally bears today; it was in the course of the 19th century that facts of language came to be carefully and objectively investigated and the, explained in terms of inductive hypotheses. In different words, when we say that a linguist aims to be scientific, we mean that he attempts to study language in much the same way as a scientist studies physics or chemistry, that is systematically, and as far as possible without prejudice. It means observing language use, forming hypotheses about it, testing these hypotheses and then refining them on the basis of the evidence collected. By the end of the 19th century, there had developed a general dissatisfaction with a priori and so-called ‘logical’ explanations and a preference for historical reasoning. It was observed that all human institutions – laws, customs, religious practices, economic and social groups, and languages – were continually changing, and it was no longer felt to be satisfactory to explain their state at a particular time in terms of abstract principles, but rather in terms of their development.

1. **A Wider Range of Languages**

The Renaissance had already brought about a wider great interest in the contemporary languages of Europe, in addition to promoting the more intensive study of Greek, Latin and Hebrew. From the 16th century onwards, dictionaries and collections of sample texts came to be published exemplifying more and more languages.

1. **Romanticism**

Of particular significance in the study of language was the new spirit of romanticism which developed at the end of the 18th century, particularly in Germany, as a reaction against classicism. The leaders of the romantic movement rejected the view that the canons of literary excellence had been fixed for all time by the classical tradition. Herder (1744-1803) maintained that there was an intimate connexion between language and national character. Following him, the statesman and polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) gave more definite form to this thesis, saying that each language ha dits own distinctive structure, which reflected and conditioned the ways of thought and expression of the people using it.

1. **Discovery of Sanskrit**

At the end of the 18th century it was discovered that Sanskrit, the ancient and sacred language of India, was related to Latin and Greek and to other languages of Europe. This discovery was made independently by many scholars. Of these the most influential was the British orientalist, Sir William Jones, who declared in 1786, in words that have since become famous, the Sanskrit bore to Greek and Latin ‘a stronger affinity both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar than could possibly have been produced by accident…’. It belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. It is one of the three ancient documented languages that likely arose from a common root language now referred to as the ‘Proto-Indo-European ‘languages (Vedic Sanskrit, Mycenaean Greek, Hittite).

1. **A Glance at the History of Linguistics**

The science that has been developed around the facts of language passed through three stages before finding its true and unique object.

**5.1 Grammar**:

This study, initiated by the Greeks and continued mainly by the French, was based on logic. It lacked a scientific approach and was detached from language itself. Its only aim was to give rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms, it was a ‘normative discipline’: far removed from actual observation and its scope was limited.

**5.2 Philology**:

A philological school has existed much earlier in Alexandria, but this name is more often applied to the scientific movement which was started by Friedrich August Wolf in 1777 and which continues to this day. Language is not its sole object. The earliest philologists sought specially to correct, interpret and comment upon written texts. Their studies also led to an interest in literary history, customs, and the like. They applied the methods of criticism for their own purposes. When they dealt with linguistic questions, they did it for the purpose of comparing texts of different periods, determining the language peculiar to each author, or deciphering and explaining inscriptions made in an archaic or obscure language. In fact, these investigations broke the ground for historical linguistics. But philological criticism is still deficient on one point: it follows the written language too slavishly and neglects the living language. Also, it is concerned with little except Greek and Latin antiquity.

**5.3 Compared Philology:**

This stage began when scholars discovered that languages can be compared with one another. This discovery was the origin of ‘comparative philology’. In 1816, Franz Bopp compared Sanskrit with German, Greek and Latin, etc. He was not the first to do that, the English Orientalist W. Jones (died in 1794) preceded Bopp.

**6. Role of Analogy (Analogy and Structure)**

It had long been recognized that the development of language had frequently been influenced by the tendency to create new forms ‘by analogy with’ the more common or more regular patterns of formation in the language (eg., flied, goed, tooths instead of flew, went, teeth). Since this tendency was thought to have the effect of introducing into the language ‘incorrect’ forms, it was regarded as one of the factors responsible for the ‘corruption’ of the language. And it was thought that, just as parents and teachers should correct the false analogical formations of children, so should grammarians correct the ‘false analogies’ of adult speakers which threatened to gain wider currency. Whereas the traditional grammarian regarded ‘analogy’ as the principle of regularity in language, the comparative philologist of the late 19th century tended to look upon it as one of the main factors which inhibited the ‘regular’ development of language.

1. **Comparative Philology and General Linguistics**

Comparative linguistics (as a branch of general linguistics) is an explanatory science. It sets out to explain the evident fact that languages change and that different languages are related to one another in different degrees.

* We may recognize more clearly than our predecessors that language-change is not simply a function of time, but also of social and geographical conditions.
* The earliest comparative philologists inherited the classical view, that the written medium was in some sense prior to the spoken. But one of the fundamental assumptions of modern linguistics that sound, not writing, is the primary medium of language.
* Comparative philology gave a powerful impetus to the development of phonetics
* The assumption that all languages have the same grammatical structure is no longer generally accepted by linguists. One reason for its abandonment derives from the demonstration by 9th century comparative philologists that all languages are subject to continuous change.