CHAPTER EIGHT

ON THE METHODS OF INTERNAL RECONSTRUCTION

Jerzy Kuryłowicz (1895–1978)¹

1. The goal of linguistic reconstruction is to establish the relative chronology of prehistoric stages and the changes immediately preceding the most archaic data. To speculate on the origin of grammatical categories such as gender, aspect, mood, and so on, is a glottogonic enterprise which, since it is of a highly problematic character, should be kept out of historical and comparative grammar.

The expression “internal reconstruction” has been used as a technical term by Pisani,² Hoenigswald,³ Bonfante⁴ and others (cf. also the “innere Gründe” of Porzig,⁵ the “indizii intrinseci” of Pagliaro)⁶ to denote the diachronic conclusions that may be drawn from a synchronic analysis of linguistic data without or before having recourse to comparison, linguistic geography and “areal linguistics”, and glottochronology.

Methods of internal reconstruction have been applied in an increasing degree, more or less consciously and explicitly, by neo-grammarians. Thus, e.g., they have rejected the possibility of spontaneous phonetic split and acquired, by means of the concept of “phonetic law”, a pretty good knowledge of the usual phonetic changes. Similarly, on account of the ever widening field of linguistic research, more and more attention has been paid to general trends in the domain of semantics.

The opposition between diachrony and synchrony, implying differences of linguistic aims and methods, is not immediately given by the material at our disposal. The transitional and at the same time fluctuating character of the linguistic phenomena, the hesitation between residuary and unproductive procedures, on the one hand, and innovations and living

² Paleontologia linguistica, 1938, 32f.
³ Studies in Linguistics, II (1944), no. 4, 78.
⁴ Word, 1 (1945), 133.
⁵ Die Gliederung des idg. Sprachgebietes (1958), 58.
⁶ Sommario di linguistica arioeuropea (1930), 174.
rules, on the other, has been frequently stressed. Everywhere a complete “synchronic” description of a language must have recourse to the notions of archaism and innovation. The ousting of an old form by a new one is not a momentary event but a process extending over time and space. Looked at from the historical point of view, linguistic material, however restricted in time and space, is composed of chronological layers. To realize this point it is sufficient to run over some pages of a careful description of a modern language.

Faced with the task of reconstruction of older linguistic stages, scholars have been aware of the difficulty of a proper selection of material. Forms which could have originated independently in each of the related languages as the outcome of productive derivational rules, e.g. γόνος = Vedic jána-, do not testify to the existence of an I.E. prototype (*ĝóno-). Meillet, among others, has taught us that reconstruction of pre-historical stages is to be based on exceptions and anomalies rather than on the grammatical rules of a language. Another important principle is that if a form is restricted to residuary contexts (idioms) only, whereas the use of its synonym(s) is free, this form must represent an older stage.

Such methodological principles belong to what is called here “internal reconstruction” in the broad sense. They cannot be applied in every particular case, but once they are applicable, the results obtained are of a higher cognitive value than the conclusions reached by statistics, areal linguistics, or linguistic paleontology, which are of a stochastic character. In case of contradiction the inference drawn from internal reconstruction will be decisive.

2. The last decades have witnessed essential progress in linguistic theory. While the validity of the above-mentioned methodological devices still remains intact, certain structural notions which have recently gained ground profoundly differ from the conceptual implements of the neogrammarians, cf. system, predictability, opposition (phonemic, semantic), the difference between phonemic and morphophonemic law (e.g. between vocalic alternation and vowel-gradation), and so on. Let us quote here an example of a concept completely foreign to the old school: the concept of intermediate classes. In many languages the prepositions and the conjunctions occupy an intermediate place between non-autonomous (“synsemantic”) morphemes like suffixes and endings, and full words like the noun and the verb. Similarly in phonemics: the labiovelars of certain languages may function on the one hand as elementary phonemes, parallel to labial, dental, or velar stops, and on the other as groups of phonemes