

## On the "pre-history" of Romance linguistics: precursors of Friedrich Diez

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**ABSTRACT.** It is received opinion that Romance linguistics is a scientific discipline that begins with Friedrich Diez, who in his *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen* (1836-43) first applied to Romance the principles and methods of IE comparative linguistics newly developed by Rask, Bopp, and Grimm. In fact, however, many of the innovations attributed to Diez (and his Indo-Europeanist contemporaries) were anticipated by now-forgotten predecessors like Pierre Nicholas Bonamy (1694-1770), Carlo Denina (1731-1813), and Carl Ludwig Fernow (1763-1808). It even seems probable that the concept of an Indo-European proto-language and the IE family tree was indirectly inspired by the generally recognized relationship between Latin ("Proto-Romance") and its "daughter languages", French, Italian, Spanish, etc., and that the beginnings of IE linguistics owe at least as much to Romance linguistics as Diez's Romance linguistics owes to the Indo-Europeanists.

According to a tradition that goes back more than a century to G. Ascoli (1829-1907), Romance linguistics as a scientific discipline begins with the *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen* of Friedrich Diez (1st ed. 1836-43), which was the product of the applications of views, methods, and procedures developed in the first decades of the Nineteenth Century by Bopp, Rask, and Grimm, who in turn were inspired by the discovery of Sanskrit by William Jones and its diffusion especially by Schlegel. An overly simplified, almost mythologized history of linguistics, which comes to us North Americans through Holger Pedersen's *The Discovery of Language*, Bloomfield's *Language*, and John T. Waterman's *Perspectives in Linguistics* (as well as through a number of introductory linguistic textbooks, etc.) would have it that with one flash of insight Sir W. Jones in 1786 perceived or intuited a previously unsuspected relationship between Sanskrit and the languages of Europe and that this insight was the seed that grew to a flower (or should I say a tree?) in the works of Bopp, Rask, and Grimm who created the historico-comparative study of Indo-European and thereby replaced the Eighteenth Century ignorance and confusion about languages by modern scientific linguistics.<sup>1</sup> Many Romance scholars have been willing to accept not only that IE comparativism is the creation of Bopp, Rask, and Grimm but that the creation of Romance linguistics

follows and is dependent upon their works. Hence we read in Iorgu Iordan's *Romance Linguistics, Its Schools and Scholars*: "[u]ntil the early 19th century there is no scientific scholarship in the field of Romance linguistics" (introduction sentence, p.3); "[o]ur discipline really begins only after 1800, when, with the discovery of Sanskrit, Indo-European linguistics begins" (p.8); "[w]e cannot talk about Fr. Diez, the real founder of Romance linguistics without first mentioning his precursors in related fields. In 1816 Franz Bopp published his *Über das Konjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache*, which initiated the comparative method and so gave rise to the scientific study of the Indo-European languages" (p.15); "[t]aking as his point of departure the works of Bopp and Grimm, F. Diez published his *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen*, in which he applied the comparative method of the first and the historical method of the second" (p.18).<sup>2</sup>

Maurizio Vitale in *Preistoria e storia degli studi romanzi* is equally emphatic: he calls the third chapter of his study simply "La linguistica scientifica" and devotes its twenty pages to the propositions that Schlegel, Bopp, Rask, and Grimm created comparative linguistics (which equals scientific linguistics) and passed it on to Diez. Comparative Indo-European may therefore be said to have been born with Bopp.<sup>3</sup> And more recently Robert Hall, in his brief history of Romance linguistics which constitutes the last chapter of his *External History of the Romance Languages* (1974) states without qualification that "[t]he title of founder of Romance linguistics must be given to Fr. Diez".<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the possible contributions of Romance linguistics to general and to IE linguistics are not even mentioned.

I wish to argue that the contribution of the early IE comparativists to Romance linguistics and even to linguistics in general has been greatly overestimated and the work of certain of their predecessors, especially in Romance, has been much underestimated (In fact the three scholars whom I wish to call attention to were, until very recently, entirely forgotten by the history of linguistics).

Perhaps to begin with, we should ask ourselves why historico-comparative linguistics should be identified with scientific linguistics. It is quite possible to do non-historical linguistics scientifically and also to do historical linguistics scientifically. To claim that only the comparative method is scientific and that no scientific (i.e. sound, objective) study of language existed before its development is narrow-minded and even absurd.

But let us grant that the development of the comparative method and the recognition that such dissimilar languages as Welsh and Hindi come from the same source are intellectual achievements of a very high order. Are they in fact the achievements of a mere three or four scholars during the first two decades of the Nineteenth Century? And more important to me as a Romance linguist, was the course of Romance linguistics really begun by the discovery of Sanskrit and the publication of *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808), *Über das Konjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* (1816), and *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819)?

Already in the Sixteenth Century it was established beyond doubt that French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese were descended from Latin. For example, Benedetto Varchi wrote in 1565 that we rightly call French and Spanish sisters of Italian for they all have the same mother, Latin (cf. Izzo 1976); and Juan de Valdés comments that Spanish is merely Latin somewhat corrupted by contact with Gothic and Arabic.<sup>5</sup> Though there were (and still are) disagreements about the relationships between formal, classical Latin and the *sermo cotidianus* or *vulgaris* form which the Romance languages derived, only the occasional eccentric or Celtomaniac questioned the Latin origin of any of the Romance languages (except Romanian, which for a long time was simply unknown in the West; and even Romanian was established as a Romance language sixty years before Diez [by J. Thunmann, 1774]). Obviously then, and not surprisingly, the idea that the Romance languages had a common source was not borrowed from Bopp, Rask, or Grimm. What is surprising — in view of received doctrine — is that the IE hypothesis (if I may call the idea by its modern name) did *not* originate with Bopp or Jones. Carlo Denina (1731-1818), whose linguistic work has been completely ignored and forgotten for almost a century, claimed in a paper written several years before Jones' famous pronouncement that all the modern languages of Europe came from Latin, Greek, Slavonic, or Germano-Celtic and that these four had come from a single language once spoken in the Caucasus, from which Persian and Sanskrit had also derived. This proto-Indo-European avant-la-lettre Denina called Scythian (cf. Izzo 1985, Marazzini 1985).

Denina, as I indicated earlier, was like the other two authors I shall discuss, entirely forgotten by the history of linguistics for eighty years. He was born in 1731 in a small town in the North Italian region of Piemonte, which at that time was an independent state, the Kingdom of Sardinia, with its capitol at Torino. He entered the Church at an early age, but soon became a professor of Greek literature, then author of a very successful survey of European literature, and soon after that of a controversial work on the history of Italy, which cost him his professorship and internal exile because of his criticism of the role of the Church in Italian society. In 1782 Frederic II invited him to Prussia to be a member of the famous Berlin Academy, and it was there (while also preparing a survey of German literature and a four volume history of Germany) that Denina presented a series of papers on language that he later put together to form the three volume book *La clef des langues*. Whole sections of that work are devoted to etymologies which are intended to demonstrate the relationship among the four European branches and in some cases also their relationship with Persian or Sanskrit. While some of these etymologies are grossly and naïvely mistaken, many show real insight. Consider, for example, Denina's recognition that Latin *hortus*, English *yard*, German *Garten*, and Slavic *grad/gorod* are all the same word; or the following passage: "I don't know how the Scythians may have said the word which in Greek is *pyr*; but we see that *pyr* has become *Feuer* in German and *fire* in English. But another word which also meant 'fire' in Asia spread into Eastern Europe and replaced the word *pyr*; Sanskrit *akni* is *ogien* in Slavic [Polish] and *ignis* in Latin. The daughter languages of Latin have replaced *ignis*

by *focus*, taking the container for the content".<sup>6</sup> This passage shows that Denina was by no means stupid or naïve.

Denina's concept of IE (Scythian) is not identical to our own. For one thing, the Baltic languages don't figure in it at all, and he thinks Gothic is Proto-Germanic. On the other hand, unlike some Indo-Europeanists, he is not tempted to call Sanskrit or any other attested language the *Ursprache*. All the languages we know about, he says, come from earlier languages. There are no primitive languages — except perhaps in America.

But to return to the surprising age of the IE hypothesis, Denina states both in his preface and near the end of volume I that resemblances between Persian and the languages of Europe were recognized long ago:

Depuis deux siècles qu'on commence à faire des recherches sur l'origine des langues, les auteurs qui s'en sont occupés ont trouvé dans la langue latine des rapports frappants avec la persane, ainsi qu'avec l'allemande et la flamande. Dernièrement le père Paolino Carme déchausse Hongrois, après avoir établi que l'ancienne langue persane est au fond la même que celle qu'on nomme Samscritamique, a donné une assez longue liste tant de noms que de verbes de cet idiome, qui ressemblent en tout point aux latins, à quelque diversité près d'orthographe, suite certainement de la différence de l'accent. Quand même on supposeroit que quelques uns de ces mots peuvent avoir été portés dans l'Inde par des missionnaires chrétiens européens, la plus grande partie cependant présentent la racine incontestable du mot latin. Mais ce qui est à remarquer c'est qu'ils l'ont aussi commune avec les mots grecs et avec les allemands. Cela vient puissamment à l'appuy de ce que nous avons avancé sur l'origine commune de ces langues.... (Denina 1804:1, 378).

In view of the reverence with which we regard Jones' famous statement in 1786, Denina's "two centuries" seems impossible; but recently George Metcalf (1974), in a very interesting article, has shown that the IE (Scythian) hypothesis was in fact current more than 100 years before Denina.

An ancient language, once spoken in the distant past in the area of the Caucasus mountains and spreading by waves of migration throughout Europe and Asia, had itself ceased to be spoken and had left no linguistic monuments behind, but had as a "mother" generated a host of "daughter languages", many of which in turn had become "mothers" to further "daughters" (for a language tends to develop dialects, and these dialects in the course of time become independent, mutually unintelligible languages). Descendants of the ancestral language include Persian, Greek, Italic (whence Latin and in time the modern Romance tongues), the Slavonic languages, Celtic, and finally Gothic and the other Germanic tongues.

The similarity with views held today concerning the Indo-European family is obvious despite certain quaintnesses:

Yet the views are the summary of a public lecture delivered in 1686 in Wittenberg, Germany (and published there that same year) by one Andreas Jäger. Far from being new or sensational, they are highly derivative and typical of at least one important strand of linguistic tradition in Northern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Metcalf 1974:233).

If the relatedness of the IE languages because of descent from a common ancestor is not a discovery of the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, one might suppose that at least the method of proving relatedness by means of regular sound correspondences is. But this does not seem to be the case either. Schlegel speaks only of shared vocabulary and, especially, of grammatical similarity. Rask wrote “[a] language belongs to the same branch as another if it has in common with it the most essential, most concrete, most common words” but “[g]rammatical similarity is a much more certain indication of relatedness or original identity, because a language rarely or never borrows morphological changes or inflexion from another”. Rask does in fact speak of regularity of sound (letter) correspondences, but he does not put it in first place for proof of relatedness as we do today. While regularity of sound correspondences is assumed, the *insistence* that sound correspondences *must* be regular and that apparent irregularities must be explained as phonetically conditioned subrules or as due borrowings or analogical levelling develops considerably later. Denina’s position was inconsistent, or perhaps transitional. On the one hand, he lists a number of universal sound affinities — sound substitutions that may occur in any language at any time; on the other hand, he generally assumes regular sound change for specific languages at specific times. For example, he says about Spanish,

When *f* was initial, Castile changed it to *h* in all the words that came from Latin and were in common use, like *filio*, which became *hijo* and *herir*. The Spanish words in which the letter *f* is found were introduced by learned people after the common people had already formed the body of the language; or they were taken from Aragonese, which had retained it.<sup>7</sup>

This passage takes in all the points that we consider today: the change occurs in a particular phonetic environment (word initial); it occurs in one particular dialect (Castilian but not Aragonese); it affects all words that were in the dialect at the time of the change (words that do not show the sound change must be either learned or dialect borrowings).<sup>8</sup>

I have tried to show that the early Nineteenth Century was a less miraculous period in the development of linguistics partly by alleging that some of what has been credited to it actually existed earlier and partly by claiming that some of what we attribute to it did not come about until later. There are still other negative aspects to be mentioned. The early Indo-Europeanists did not bother to learn anything about phonetics;

they were content to talk about changes of letters and seemed to know nothing about such simple phonetic processes as voicing, palatalization, spirantization, etc. They looked upon linguistic evolution as decay, hoping that by going back to older and older stages of IE they were getting nearer to its original perfect state. Because they considered decay inevitable, they did not seek causes of linguistic change. Because they were interested only in the oldest stages of the IE languages, they concerned themselves only with written records and did not deal in the descriptions of living languages and dialects, or with the relationship of dialects to national languages. They considered inflecting languages intrinsically superior to isolating languages, and they thought that peoples using different types of language structure had the supposed superiority or inferiority of the languages they spoke. Since inflecting languages were superior languages, IE speakers were a superior race.

Romance linguists, perhaps because they studied living languages and because their proto-language was a fairly understood entity rather than a mysterious and mythical entity lost in the obscurity of dim and distant past, generally had ideas and attitudes that seem saner and sounder today. Denina, for example, conjectured that the "barbarians" among whom the Latin poet Ovid was forced to live probably found his polished Latin just as strange and disagreeable as he found their language; and he comments further that "[i]t is quite natural that each person finds richest and most beautiful the language that he has the best mastery of; and it also seems natural that every language has all the words necessary to name all the things known to the nation that speaks it. Aside from their more or less noble or ancient origin, the words of every people are equally pure, proper, and expressive". Likewise for Denina the dialects of the Romance languages are not corruptions of the national language but sisters to it, born from the same mother at the same time. The rise of one of them (e.g. the dialect of Florence in Italy) to the status of national language is due to the cultural superiority or political and economic strength of the region that uses it. Likewise Carl Ludwig Fernow and Pierre-Nicholas Bonamy have very modern attitudes towards dialects.

Fernow, who was born in a small North German town in 1763 and died in Weimar in 1808, went to Rome in 1794 to study art history and returned to Germany an expert on Italian language and dialectology. His two volume *Italienische Sprachlehre* (Tübingen, 1804) is one of the most complete descriptions of Standard Italian ever written, and the third volume of his *Römische Studien* (Zurich, 1808) contains the first (and for a century the only) detailed survey of Italian dialects. Among other things Fernow deals with the possible influence of pre-Roman (or substratum) languages and the Germanic invasions (or superstratum languages) on the evolution and differentiation of the Romance languages. In his long and impassioned defense of dialect study he suggests that instead of puristic language academies (like the Académie Française) whose effects are entirely deleterious, there should be academies of dialectology, which could help us to understand language and language history.<sup>9</sup>

Bonamy (1694-1770), the earliest of the three scholars mentioned at the beginning of this paper was, like Denina, chiefly an historian. He is somewhat less in need of rediscovery since he is at least mentioned in one recent survey of Romance linguistics, since his total linguistic output was small, and since it was republished in its entirety (by Jörn Albrecht) in 1975. Some things about him seem worth mentioning however: in a time and place of linguistic elitism he studied the living speech of French peasants for the light they could throw upon the history of the language and was able to notice that the despised patois of Southern France were more like the parent Latin than standard French; in a period of rational grammar, when speech seemed less important than writing, Bonamy distinguished carefully between sounds and letters; and he seems to have been the first to reconstruct hypothetical proto-forms for Romance words whose etyma could not be found in Latin.

This paper has not, of course, considered all the precursors of Friedrich Diez or of IE comparativism;<sup>10</sup> but I hope that by pointing out (a) that the relatedness of Germanic, Slavic, Italic, Hellenic, Iranian, and Indic was recognized well before the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, (b) that regularity of sound change was assumed and exceptions to regularity were explained as they are today, and (c) that the known descent of the Romance language from their known proto-language, Latin (and the reconstruction of unattested Proto-Romance [Latin] words), provided the model for the postulation (and reconstruction) of Proto-Indo-European, it has shown that the work of Bopp, Rask, and Grimm was not a new departure and the beginning of "scientific linguistics" but merely the further development, solidification, and codification of ideas that had been known to students of language for some time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pedersen 1931:1-13, Bloomfield 1933:14f, Waterman 1970. There is, of course another view of the history of linguistics, set forth in Chomsky 1966 and 1968 and treated as received doctrine in Newmeyer 1980, according to which the current of linguistics which supposedly ran from the beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the middle of the Twentieth Century was an unfortunate, entirely wrong-headed deviation from the path of true scientific linguistics that had started with Descartes and Port Royal and was revived by Chomsky 1957. For refutation of this version of the history of linguistics cf. Aarsleff 1970 and 1971, Hall 1981, Izzo 1976, Koerner 1983.

<sup>2</sup> This book was originally written more than half a century ago, but the editor-authors of the recent revised and updated versions in English (1970) and Spanish (1967), Rebecca Posner and Manuel Alvar have not thought it necessary to modify these judgements.

<sup>3</sup> "Con il Bopp può quindi considerarsi nata la linguistica comparata indoeuropea; sull'esempio e per l'insegnamento di essa sorse la linguistica romanza che trasse da quella, nel metodo e nella impostazione, le lezioni più significative. Successivamente la linguistica romanza, operando su lingue le cui fasi di origini e di sviluppo sono storiche e attestate, escogitò altri principi e altri metodi che la resero autonoma e le consentirono grandi progressi; ma alle sue origini essa si ispirò ai metodi e ai principi della linguistica indoeuropea, alla quale sola spetta d'aver dato origine alla linguistica scientifica" (Vitale 1955:98).

<sup>4</sup> "Diez' method was essentially that of his contemporaries: Rasmus Rask, Jakob Grimm, and Franz Bopp in Indo-European comparative linguistics" (Hall 1974:235).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also J. J. Scaliger (1540-1609), who classified the Romance languages as daughters of Latin and who also set up Germanic and Slavic families (*matrices*), although it apparently did not occur to him that these families were related to each other.

<sup>6</sup> "Je ne sais pas comment les Barbares asiatiques ont pu orthographier le mot qui chez les Grecs est *pur*; mais nous voyons que ce *pyr* est devenu *Feuer* chez les Germains, *fire*, prononcé *faire*, chez les Anglois, ...Cependant un autre monosyllable qui dans l'Asie signifioit aussi *feu*, se répandit dans l'Europe orientale, et remplaça le mot *pyr*; *akni* samscritamique devint *ogien* en esclavon, *ignis* en latin. Les langues filles de la latine, lui ont substitué *focus*, prenant le contenant pour le contenu" (Denina 1804:1.xxvii).

<sup>7</sup> "Lorsque l'*F* étoit initial, le Castillan l'a changé en *H* dans tous les mots venus du latin, et qui étoient fort usités et inévitables, comme dans *filio*, *ferire*, dont il fit *hijo*, *herir*. Les noms et les verbes espagnols, où cette lettre *F* se retrouve, ont été introduits par les gens lettrés, après que le peuple ignorant avoit formé le corps de la langue; où étoient pros des Aragonois dont l'organe l'avoit retenue (Denina 1804:1.27).



8 But it is important to keep in mind that already in the Sixteenth Century Claudio Tolomei (1492-1555) had established precisely these same points, as Robert Hall has pointed out several times (most recently in Hall 1974:231f).

9 For more on the life and work of Fernow see Izzo 1976c, Thun 1976.

10 Most in need of reconsideration by Romance scholars is, I believe, François Raynouard (1761-1836), who has not been entirely forgotten but is remembered only for his work on Old Provençal poetry. His views on the origins and relationship of the Romance languages have been misunderstood and therefore disparaged. (cf. Hall 1974:235)

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