Noch einmal comparative Germanic: A tale of two journals

B. Elan Dresher
University of Toronto


The year 1997 saw the introduction of a number of new journals, among them The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics (JCGL), edited by Ken Safir and Gert Webelhuth. According to its mission statement (p. 73), the journal “provides a platform for discussion of theoretical linguistic research into the modern and older languages and dialects of the Germanic family.” Someone who has not been paying close attention to developments in linguistics over the last hundred years might be surprised that a new journal in 1997 proposes to devote itself to research into comparative Germanic. “Still comparative Germanic?” I hear one ask. “Isn’t that the sort of thing a new journal in 1887 would have been about?”

As it happens, in 1887 a new journal was founded at the University of Indiana called The Journal of Germanic Philology. It soon moved to the University of Illinois and changed its name to the Journal of English and Germanic Philology (JEGP), and so it continues to this day, “a quarterly devoted to the English, German, and Scandinavian languages and literatures.” In the October 1997 issue, the current editors, Achsah Guibbory and Marianne E. Kalinke, look back to the first issue of the journal and compare it with its current offerings. Though perspectives and methodologies have changed, they see continuity in the journal’s “concern with texts and their meaning as well as its attentiveness to all periods of English and other Germanic languages and literatures.” The four main articles in the October 1997 issue are: Roberta Frank, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Philologist”, a study of the uses of alliteration in Old English and Old Norse verse in the context of reflections on modern philology; Heather Dubrow, “‘In thievish ways’: Tropes and Robbers in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Early Modern England”; Jack Stillinger, “Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats”; and Hans Rudolf Vaget, “Confession and Camouflage: The Diaries of Thomas Mann”. As representative of the broad range of the journal’s first issue in 1887, they cite: Elisabeth Woodbridge, “Chaucer’s Classicism”; Horatio S. White, “The Home of Walther von der Vogelweide”; Georg Hempl, “Middle English -wō-, -wō-”; Edward P. Morton, “Shakespeare in the Seventeenth Century”; Otto Heller, “Goethe and the Philosophy of Schopenhauer”; and Albert S. Cook, “The Sources of Two Similes in Chapman’s The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois” and “The College Teaching of English”.

The submerged linguistics past of JEGP

Does the modern JEGP really reflect the range of topics covered by the earliest issues? A linguist surveying the above list would no doubt notice that the article by Hempl on Middle English -wō-, -wō- has no counterpart in the current issue. The name of Albert S. Cook, who was associated with the journal from the beginning and eventually became its chief editor, is familiar to any linguist who has worked on Old English as the translator and revisor of Sievers’s An Old English Grammar. Moreover, we learn from the current editors that Gustaf Karsten, the founding editor, wrote a doctoral thesis at the University of Freiburg entitled “Zur Geschichte der altfranzösischen
Consonanten-Verbindungen”. A linguist who browses through the early issues of JEGP quickly sees that these are just the tip of a linguistics iceberg that lies concealed in the pages of the journal.


Philology: The lost province of linguistics

Clearly, then, in terms of personnel and subject matter, a significant part of JEGP was once devoted to linguistics. In his University of Illinois inaugural address, published posthumously in JEGP 1908, 2: 4–21, Gustaf Karsten said, concerning what he called “our special subject”, that “the study of Germanic languages is rooted in the larger subject of general linguistics which ought to consider all languages”. In 1997, by contrast, the theoretical perspectives that animate the current articles in JEGP are, according to Guibbory and Kalinke, “concerns with authorship, autobiography, textual instability, reader response, gender and sexuality, cultural criticism, and new historicism”. Conspicuously absent from this list are new theories of phrase structure, minimalist syntax, thematic roles and argument structure, logical form, lexical phonology and morphology, Government Phonology, the prosodic hierarchy, and Optimality Theory.

What happened? The evolution of JEGP parallels that of the controversial and ever-shifting term, “philology”. The word has always required a special explanation so as not to be misunderstood, or to give offence. Even the OED walks on eggshells when it tries to define it; the relevant senses are (1) and (3):
1. Love of learning and literature; the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.; literary or classical scholarship; polite learning. Now rare in general sense except in the U.S.

3. spec. (in mod. use) The study of the structure and development of language; the science of language; linguistics. Now usu. restricted to the study of the development of specific languages or language families, esp. research into phonological and morphological history based on written documents. (Really one branch of sense (1).) This sense has never been current in the U.S. Linguistics is now the more usual term for the study of the structure of language, and, with qualifying adjective or adjective phrase, is replacing philology even in the restricted sense.

In his inaugural address, Karsten characterized philology as follows:

In English, and especially in American English, the word Philology has largely come to mean the History of Languages and, perhaps, the Science of Human Speech, and nothing more. A...much broader interpretation obtains in continental Europe...like the Greek φιλολογία, Philology refers not only to the form but also to the content of the λόγος; it virtually means the whole history of the human mind, as it manifests itself in language documents of the past and present.

A hundred years ago, when linguistics was mainly a historical-comparative endeavour, the study of old European languages was bound up, necessarily, with the study of old texts. There was thus a confluence of interests between those who studied texts to better understand language (philology_{LIN}), and those who studied language to better understand the texts (philology_{LIT}). JEGP initially embraced both these streams. But philology_{LIN} gradually faded, not just from JEGP, but as a coherent field of study. In linguistics, “philology” gave way to “historical linguistics”. By whatever name, historical-comparative linguistics was no longer in the main current of linguistic theory, which was increasingly taken up by synchronic grammar.

Meanwhile, philology_{LIT} carried on, becoming closely identified with Medieval Studies. In the last decade, the nature and methodology of this kind of philology has been the subject of lively debate (see Speculum 65, 1, 1990, a special issue on “The New Philology”, edited by Stephen G. Nichols; Towards a Synthesis? Essays on the New Philology, edited by Keith Busby, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993; and Roberta Frank’s article in JEGP 96, 4: 486–513, 1997), but these controversies have little to do with us. JEGP continues to publish some articles that are relevant to linguistic theory, particularly in the area of Old English meter, stress, and prosody; however, the study of language with a view to advancing linguistic theory no longer falls within the purview of philology today.

Comparative Germanic linguistics: Cool again

Linguistic theory as understood within generative grammar aims at developing a theory of Universal Grammar (UG) that will allow us to properly characterize the notion “human language” and account for linguistic competence and acquisition. Somewhat unexpectedly, this effort to develop a constrained theory of UG has again put the focus on comparative linguistics. A study of a single dialect, no matter how detailed, cannot tell us which aspects of the language necessarily co-occur (because of some principle of UG), and which are coincidentally present. To pursue this project, we must compare languages. Comparing Swedish and Walpiri is unlikely to yield very fine-grained results, since there are so many differences between them in every component of the grammar that it is hard to pinpoint why the two are different with respect to any particular construction. But comparing Swedish with related contemporary languages or with older stages of Swedish allows for more controlled experiments in the limits of variation.

The new JCGL, then, is devoted to a type of study that would not have been feasible even a few years ago. It is based on a premise that would still strike many nonlinguists as incredible: the
idea that small differences between languages are not just accidents of history or culture, but are
connected by universal principles to other small, seemingly insignificant, differences.

Off the coast of Newfoundland from March to June, one can see icebergs float by. When
some friends reported late last summer that there were still icebergs near the St. John’s harbour,
another asked: “Still icebergs? How do they know that it’s not icebergs already?” So it is with the
new comparative Germanic linguistics: we should not ask “Still comparative Germanic?” but rather
“Comparative Germanic already?!” Here’s to the next hundred years of the Journal of English and
Germanic Philology, and to the first hundred of The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics, a
new chip off the old glacier.

Notes
1. I ought to disclose that I am on the Editorial Board of this journal.
2. Roberta Frank is the Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto; readers may want
to know that I am cross-appointed to the Centre.
3. I have worked on Old English phonology.
4. I belong to the LSA.
5. I have lived in St. John’s, Newfoundland.