

Introduction: Collecting Languages in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Introduction

The long nineteenth century saw both collecting and interest in languages take scientific turns, and the essays in this Special Issue show how these interests coincided in seven figures of the period. Their acts of collecting, ordering, classifying, and displaying gathered language data came to serve self-proclaimed scientific enquiry. The collecting occurred within the context of political and, ultimately, cultural shifts in perceptions about countries and the language communities living within them. Individual languages (and their speakers) were increasingly identified with Romantic ideas of nation, with a single, politically dominant, language being presented as the ancestral language of the newly conceived nation-state, even where that state was not (or not yet) a united or political reality. Such are the ideas expressed in Fichte's *Discourse of the German Nation* (1807-1808), for instance.¹ A desired uniformity of identity between language and nation state was everywhere contravened, however, by empirical evidence from language collections, and the common observations that many languages and dialects were spoken within and across the borders of most countries, and that this multiplicity of languages was rooted in time as well as space. As a background, I will introduce the essays that follow against a brief and necessarily generalizing sketch of the growing use of collected materials in the service of scientific enquiry, and of nineteenth-century shifts in perceptions of language and country.

Collections and Science

A collection is defined as “a concerted gathering of selected items which manifest themselves as a pattern or set, thereby reconciling their divergent origins within a collective discourse” (Cardinal 71); “the overall significance [of a collection] is somehow more than the sum of the individual parts” (Pearce 3). The late decades of the eighteenth century saw, among scientists studying the natural world, a move from the incorporation of observations within their speculations to an empiricism that had collecting at its heart. Something similar happened in the world of philology, where the objects of collections would be elements of language, materialized and collected in written form. Schleicher was to claim that “the method of linguistics [...] aligns itself essentially with the method of the other natural sciences” (1850 2).² Now, that which connects collecting to scientific enquiry, and the life sciences (as they emerged) to the study of language (as it emerged), is reliance upon taxonomy, categorization, and classification—and collections, say Elsner and Cardinal, are “classification lived” (2). We find nineteenth century linguists repeatedly identifying themselves with, or as, scientists: as reported in Zuloaga’s essay, Luis-Lucien Bonaparte’s earliest studies, collections, and publications were in chemistry (his first collection was of chemical elements),³ and in his later, and longer, career as a language collector and linguist he produced typologies, groupings, and classifications of languages, as well as comparative studies and dialectological work. As my essay reports, Joseph Wright, who constantly described his work as “scientific,” claimed that a linguist had to be a good mathematician.

Collecting becomes self-consciously scientific when it involves principled field research and methods (recording, in addition to the primary data, observations, and illustrations), and the systematic and ultimately analytic categorizing and sub-categorizing, ordering, listing, classifying, naming, studying, and coherent displaying (or cataloguing, or mapping, in word lists, grammars, or atlases) of the collected items. Discoveries leading to further advances in human understanding occur

when these activities are combined with enquiring and informed minds. This was what occurred with the groundbreaking collectors and scientists Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778),⁴ Georges Cuvier (1769-1832),⁵ Charles Lyell (1797-1875),⁶ Charles Darwin (1809-1882),⁷ and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913).⁸

These practices of consciously scientific collecting and ordering and displaying these materials (in print) were extended and adapted to the study of languages soon after they had proved so effective in the material sciences. Instead of ruminating upon theories and philosophies of language, a new generation of philologists followed Lyell's dictum that evidence of the present day—or evidence from one slice of time—can be explained by occurrences in its past, and that scrutiny of that slice of time can also be used to unlock the processes of the past that gave rise to it. For these philologists, this meant that informed study and comparison between coexisting or related variants (languages, later dialects) could lead to the reconstruction of earlier, less varied forms (as they liked to believe), while revealing linguistic processes of change that led to their divergence. This idea had been present as an insight explored by William Jones (1746-1794)⁹ in his famous analysis of comparable forms from Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, and lay behind the postulated family-tree model of language divergences, that was to be more fully developed by Schleicher in 1853 (Jankowsky 1329). The model was extraordinarily powerful and enduring at its conceptual level, perhaps because it is so easily visualized and graphically representable. Even after its weaknesses became evident, and alternative and an often more revealing (wave) model was used alongside it, a branching but linear descent-and-divergence model has informed most subsequent linguistic work in Europe and America, including linguistic explanations of variant forms. Until recent advances in neuro- and cognitive linguistics, the tree model dominated even theoretical linguistics.¹⁰

The collecting of as much genuine or "authentic" (a problematic word) linguistic material as possible,¹¹ the reordering and categorizing of selected items from collected materials to enable comparisons and to form

grammars, dictionaries, and analytic descriptions of (historical) language, and the use of a comparative method to reveal patterned divergences, underlay the achievements and productions of the founders of the new philology, the early historical comparativists Rasmus Rask (1787-1821),¹² Jacob Grimm (1785-1863),¹³ and Franz Bopp (1791-1867). All insisted upon the use of comparison to establish genetic links between languages: Rask introduced the essential concept of retrievable sound laws as forces of language change and explanation of variation, while Grimm promoted the importance of the historical dimension in comparative grammar and used it in his comparative studies of the Germanic languages, and Bopp (who was concerned with the reconstruction of the originating (proto-) Indo-European language) published the first “compendium” of comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages (Swiggers 1274). Following these foundational works, the same scientific methods and principles were extended to the production of comparative grammars of different language groups: the Slavic languages, the Celtic languages, and the Latinate or Romance languages (*ibid.*).

The principles and methods of research established by the first generation of new philologists, expressed and practiced in stricter, more rigorous fashions, were to be enshrined as fundamental principles of language study by the group known as the *Junggrammatiker* (Neogrammarians), from the late 1870s onwards.¹⁴ They regularly and repeatedly described their work—and especially their methods of research and analysis—as scientific (and more scientific than the work of their philological forefathers), even claiming that historical comparative linguistics was “one of the greatest scientific accomplishments of our century” (Rumpelt 1869 3).¹⁵

Collectors represented in this Issue were using their gathered materials for reasons beyond connoisseurship or curiosity, and all were using their collections for the purpose of increasing knowledge of one type or another. The essays presented here show five of the philologists, L-L. Bonaparte (Zuloaga), Monaci (Autorino and Casacchia), Wright (Sönmez), and Scheuermeier (Kunz), and the missionary and linguist

Strehlow (Moore), adopting consciously scientific language collecting methods. Directing their assistants and field workers, and documenting their carefully thought-out principles and practices of research, they worked hard to compile sufficiently large collections of authentic language materials, and engaged in explicit and appropriate methods of classification and display. Even the earliest of these five, L-L. Bonaparte, designed and led collecting expeditions and campaigns that bear the characteristics of the new, nineteenth-century professionalization of scientific practice, wherein "science makes the shift from being a gentlemanly hobby [...] to a well-populated profession, where progress depends on the work of many individuals who are, to some extent, interchangeable" (Gribbin 359).

The same cannot be said of the very earliest collector presented here, Joseph Hunter (Beal), nor of Miyajima Daihachi (Yang, Wang, and Fan). As Beal's essay's title indicates, Hunter's collecting of dialect forms was a small part of his gentleman-hobbyist, but none the less intellectual and enquiring, engagement with objects of antiquarian interest; his collected samples of a Sheffield dialect interested him as local curiosities, drawing his attention as an antiquarian and local historian, not as a scientist as that concept had developed. Daihichi's collecting was undertaken in a very different context and for primarily practical, not philological, purposes. Far from the European elevation of the discourse of science, he was independently gathering written records of authentic spoken Beijing Mandarin. His collection was a personal one, from which he much later selected illustrative material for use in his Chinese Language Teaching book, *Kyūsyūhen* (1904).

Language and Nation-State

As described in Hobsbawm, from the last decades of the eighteenth century, European thinking reconceived countries that were once seen as their rulers' domains, as nation-states, and their populations (even while ruled by a head of state), became somewhat romantically identified with the nation itself (88).¹⁶ Historically, rulers of countries had often spoken

languages that were different from the languages spoken by their subjects, and linguistic and population diversity within their territories was a matter of fact, not debate.¹⁷ Throughout the period, however, growing nationalism proceeded in tandem with a tacit acceptance of Herder's (1772) argument that language and thought had interdependent origins, and this led to a generally agreed and enthusiastically promoted concept (expounded also by Wilhelm von Humboldt), of "the individuality of a nation's speech and its intimate bonds with national thought, national literature, and national solidarity" (Robins 155-6, 165).

These ideas, together with ongoing geo-political changes, led in the second half of the nineteenth century to the phenomenon of a widespread (and escalating) identification of people and their languages with newly formulated concepts of nation (Hobsbawm 6ff.), and with the culturally (not biologically) founded concepts of ethnicity (ibid 63) and race (ibid 98). At the same time, many Western countries saw a "rise of interest in language that could be part of state administration" (ibid. 82). Each newly-conceived unitary nation, redefined in terms of its apparently united population, seemed, then, to require identification with a unitary national language (an enterprise akin to squaring the circle), often accompanied by a consequent nationalistic de-selection (and even derogation) of the other languages spoken in that territory. For this role, and in spite of changed borders and governments, most countries already had to hand one or two standard or literary languages used for administration and by the politically dominant population, which they could (and did—and continue to) impose upon their territories through various channels of language planning (education being prime among them).

The nation-and-language question had fast become not only a hot potato, but (in Hobsbawm's delightfully coined expression) one with a "self-heating capacity," since linguistic nationalism is raised just by asking the question (100). The selection and enforcement of national languages, along with increasingly complex power-play related to language planning (both at home and abroad), grew throughout the long nineteenth century, a period that saw the entrenchment of colonial claims and borders outside

of Europe as well as numerous changes and redefinitions of national borders within it. Although the states of Europe discovered that nationality was "too complex to be seized by language alone," it remained, according to the Eighth International Statistical Congress at St. Petersburg (1872) "the only aspect of nationality which could be at least objectively counted and tabulated" (Hobsbawm 98).

While the overall situation of dialectology in the long nineteenth century was promising, and it was developing a fully scientific methodology, by the end of the century (as reported in the "remarks" part of Zuloaga's essay), collecting language data in situ could not be unaffected by the sensitivities of linguistic and cultural identities and/or nationalism, or the insensitivities of colonialism, especially when marginalized languages were to be recorded. In France at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, when Edmont and Gilliéron were amassing their vast collection, and mapping the great diversity of languages of the territory for the *Atlas Linguistique de France* (1897-1901), "dialectology was at variance with the linguistic unification then actively implemented by the French Republic, and with the dim view that was taken of the so-called *patois*" (Ausson and Fortis xi). There must have been a hardening of attitudes against the marginalized dialects and languages of France since L-L. Bonaparte's collections of Basque materials, which had been gathered in the time of Napoleon III (notoriously a people's man, and Louis Lucien's cousin); Zuloaga presents no reports of hostility to Louis Lucien's work on Basque dialects (that covered a very large area spanning both sides of the Franco-Spanish border). On the contrary, he identifies, at this time, a post-Napoleonic-era [sanctification] of the popular, "that benefited the collecting of materials relating to, especially, rural culture."

The impact of politics on language collecting is glimpsed in the histories of five of our linguists' collections. In what turned out to be only minor inconveniences, two of L-L. Bonaparte's field-trips to the Basque country (in 1856 and in 1868) were delayed or put off because of the closing of borders due to (unrelated) political unease—the first in France, the second

(a revolution) in Spain. In contrast, both Monaci's (1870s-1918) and Scheuermeier's (1919-1928) work on dialects in Italy were carried out when the newly unified country was establishing itself internally, solidifying its territorial claims, and altering its borders, and both linguists were significantly affected by this context. In Monaci's case, in fact, his mission was directed by this situation. As Autorino and Casacchia explain, Monaci was overtly putting philology at the service of "the construction of a national myth," and the spreading of Italian throughout the country, "at a time when the attitude of the institutions toward dialects was, if not open hostility, at least one of total disinterest." Scheuermeier, as Kunz describes, was conducting his data gathering in a post-war Italy that was suspicious of and sometimes aggressive towards foreign travelers asking questions; the rise of fascism was also to bring "challenges" to his fieldwork. He insisted upon the inclusion of newly annexed Trieste, Istria, and Rijeka in the *Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Italy and Southern Switzerland* for which he was collecting his materials. As for collecting data from marginal languages in Australia, Moore's description of Strehlow's careful work in his collection of Arrernte (or "Aranda") myths and legends (1890-1910), shows that, while linguistic nationalism did not impede this collection, there were inevitable difficulties with culture-based untranslatable elements, and, later, worries were expressed about the colonial appropriation of heritage material that was in its original usage already restricted; this has led to continuing difficulties in gaining access to the materials. Daihachi's collecting of Beijing Mandarin utterances was entirely due to changing relations between countries: as Yang, Wang, and Fan explain, newly established official exchanges between Japan and China (starting in 1871) necessitated the use of Beijing Mandarin, whereas the Chinese variety previously taught in Japan was the Nanjing dialect that Daihachi already knew. In the absence of any readily available Beijing Mandarin teaching materials, Daihachi went on a long language-learning trip to China, during which he compiled his language collection, later used in his teaching text.

In many countries undergoing the transformation to nation-statism, increased and politicized identification of people with language eventually

encouraged speakers of non-selected languages (many of which were or had been prestigious languages in other times or places) to rally around their language as a heritage banner, either to create or to reinforce a subversive local nationalism. Much later (mostly in the twentieth century), when such languages were weakened to near extinction by a mixture of population thinning and oppressive language planning, some language laws in some places were sufficiently relinquished to allow them to be "revived" and presented as distinctive but historically and organically embedded parts of the nation-state, culturally parallel to local varieties (dialects) of the national language.¹⁸ In the middle and later nineteenth century, histories of languages (and nations) were rewritten in these terms (Hobsbawm 95) as part of a "programmatic mythology" (ibid 101).¹⁹ The weakened languages were used as markers of separate and independent cultural and (many wished) political nationhood, even if their political independence was rarely likely to be attained.²⁰ The stories of the recognition and restitution or continued marginalization of nations' so-called minority languages are as various and numerous as the languages themselves, but the point is that the long nineteenth century saw the emergence and rise of the discourse of linguistic nationalism, and its use to politicize separate linguistic communities within a country.

As for the selected national language, the binding of people to nation-state by identification with and appreciation of their shared linguistic culture, could be extended to increased interest in its local varieties (dialects). German philologists from the early nineteenth century had applied historical-comparative methods to materials collected from different varieties of German and from the different Germanic Languages, and toward the end of the century mapped German dialects (Wenker's *Sprachatlas des deutschen Reichs*, 1888). The institutional approval of Joseph Wright's work on the *English Dialect Dictionary* (1888-1905) may be understood as a reflection of a Fichte-like expansion of linguistic nationalism, whereby ancient and organic links between language, people, and place are explored. At the same time as Wright's magnum opus, Gilliéron and Edmont were compiling their *Atlas linguistique de la*

France; and soon after, the surveying and mapping of Italian dialects in Italy and southern Switzerland, which is the project on which Scheuermeier worked, produced its *Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Sudschweiz* (1928-1940). It seems, then, that the new linguistic nationalism was not averse to the reification and study of all varieties of the national language, and may, in some countries and at some times, have encouraged the expansion of language collecting to cover the entire national territory, and all varieties of the national language.

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An animated map of language collecting through the long nineteenth century would be a very busy sight. Ant-like figures would be seen scurrying across the globe, busying themselves with gathering language bits and pieces from Lapland to Tasmania, from Iceland all the way round and back to the east coast of Canada. Because the matter of their collections is language itself, the contents verbally testify (where spoken language was recorded) to the movements of the collectors. I started the introduction with reference to a scientific turn in collecting, but I hope to have also indicated the enormously dynamic collecting turn that so many sciences took, and how this turn itself established new scientific disciplines. Language collecting has rarely been considered as a phenomenon separate from the disciplines it serves; it has been subsumed within histories of linguistics, or the study of anthropological and ethnographical methods and practices—these disciplines having themselves been the outcomes of the collecting and classifying kind of empiricism that was spreading in that period. It is often perceived as implicated, to its detriment, in the actions and ideas of nationalism, colonialism, and missionary work, even where individual collectors may have been motivated by a timeless mania for collecting, expressed through their personal character traits and drives, rather than by geographical expansionism of any nature. The change from independently conducted language collecting practices to institutionally-backed collecting, and from gentleman-hobby collecting to professional collecting is illustrated by the collectors whose endeavors are represented in the essays that follow.

Language collections exist in many forms now, and my own experience illustrates developments of the past forty years. Collecting (on a small scale) comes naturally to me, and the expansion and attainment of knowledge through collections, whether abstract (ideas, knowledge), or abstracted (notes, so many notes!), or material (written language), fits my way of doing things. As a linguist of the card-index generation, my own love of language prompted a collect-and-sort approach to language data, which soon progressed to the compilation and use of electronic corpora, a form of language collecting that has greatly changed the possibilities and outcomes of linguistic research. I am now enthusiastically engaged in the shared creation of open-ended digital data-bases that can be sorted, ordered, and displayed in a variety of ways, another technological tool for language collectors. These and other digital (and "cloud") storage and sorting tools, allow individuals and teams, at any stage of experience, to become collectors within large-scale and even multi-national projects. Twenty-first century language collectors may not often be found seated on mules in attractive settings, but they are still at the frontiers of linguistic research.

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Notes

¹ Judt, Tony and Denis Lacorne *Language, Nation and Identity Politics in a Multilingual Age*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2004) presents a collection of excellent essays related to this issue, as it applies to several different countries.

² Schleicher, August. *Die Sprachen Europas in systematischer Übersicht*. [Bonn: König, 1850]. Ed. Konrad Koerner (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1983), p. 2. The quotation was cited (and translated) by Jankowsky, 1328.

³ He bequeathed this collection to the Kensington Museum (now the Science Museum) in 1892. It was first displayed in 1906 and remains on view. (Rupert Cole, "150 Years of the Periodic Table," Science Museum Blog, <https://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/150-years-of-the-periodic-table/>. Accessed 3 April 2024.

⁴ Linnaeus was an obsessive collector, cataloguer, and systematizer, whose *Systema Naturae* was published in 1735 (Gribbin 215).

⁵ Cuvier was a collector of specimens and a user of other, greater collections (such as those that came to France from the time of the Napoleonic expeditions), who had access to the greater collections in botanical gardens and in the Paris Museum of Natural History with its Jardin des Plantes, where he held various senior positions. His 4-volume masterpiece, *The Animal Kingdom* (1817), based on comparisons of living animals with fossils, established the modern disciplines of comparative anatomy and paleontology (Gribbin 233); his fieldwork in the Paris basin led to a study in which he established the principles of biostratigraphy (Bowler 112-13). His reputation has recently been stained by his involvement in the appalling mistreatment and exhibition of Sarah Baartman, a Khokhoi woman displayed as the “Hottentot Venus” (see Young n.p.).

⁶ Lyell’s extensive field trips led to the publication of *Principles of Geology* (1st ed. 3 vols. 1830-33), a work that he continuously updated. The ideas in this book, which led to the establishment of Geology as a scientific discipline, were formative of Charles Darwin’s later understanding of evolution. Lyell’s principle that “the present day is key to the past” led the way to the historical interpretation of present forms, and especially variations—in linguistics as much as in other sciences.

⁷ Darwin was an obsessive collector from his youth, through to his famous sample-collecting trips on *HMS Beagle* (1831-1836), and thereafter adding to his collections by purchasing samples from professional collectors. His scientific credentials need no repetition here. *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and *The Descent of Man* in 1871. Echoing Cardinal’s definition of a collection creating out of diversity “a collective discourse,” Darwin’s explanation of evolution, as a collective discourse itself, has become a sort of super-collection, for it is described as “the unifying theory of the life sciences, explaining the diversity of life” (“Charles Darwin” n.p.).

⁸ Wallace was a professional collector of natural specimens, whose observations and study led him to conclude (forestalling Darwin) that

evolution occurred incrementally and through natural selection. On learning that Darwin had come to the same conclusions, independently, he suggested they present a co-authored paper, which was published and introduced by Lyell at a meeting of the Linnaeus Society in London, in 1858, "without causing any great stir" (Gribbin 356).

⁹ Jones's use of the comparative method convinced the academic community of the existence of an Indo-European language family.

¹⁰ Chomsky and Halle's influential *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968), for instance, is little more than a reconfiguration of this model, reassigning historical and present time strata to "deep" and "surface" mental structures, and the processes of sound change to rule-based "transformations."

¹¹ The word used was and is "authentic," but what this meant in earlier days was very different from what it means now. Until the twentieth century (see Kunz's essay on Scheuermeir and the AIS), most collected language material came from edited and published written works, or from written reports obtained by correspondence.

¹² Rask's obsessions with collecting (knowledge of) languages and making systematized comparisons led to his greatly advancing historical and comparative linguistics, refining the Indo-European family tree model, contributing to understandings of regular sound laws (a mainstay of Neogrammatical methods, as set out by the following generation), and producing a very large number of linguistic publications.

¹³ For his *History of the German Language*, Jacob Grimm collected early Germanic words from Greek and Latin literature, and tried to identify the relationship between these earliest traces of German and the other, long-dead languages that were also witnessed in these records. For his *German Grammar* (1819, 1822, 1840), he collected a huge amount of textual material related to Germanic languages, dating from the Renaissance onwards, and importantly including Rask's work on Icelandic and his recently published Old English grammar. Grimm's German Dictionary, compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, was a project of such immense scope that it could only be completed long after their deaths, by succeeding scholars, in 1961.

¹⁴ See Jankowsky 1331-32 for acknowledgements that neogrammarian principles were “consistent developments” (Brugmann 1885) from the earlier practices, and that they were not at all revolutionary (Koerner 1989).

¹⁵ Rumpelt, Hermann B. *Das Natürliche System der Sprachlaute und sein Verhältnis zu den wichtigsten Cultursprachen mit besonderer Rücksicht auf deutsche Grammatik und Orthographie*. Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1869. This claim is quoted (and translated) in Jankowsky 1326.

¹⁶ There was even, from the French Revolution, the distinctly “revolutionary concept of the nation as constituted by the deliberate political opinion of its potential citizens” (Hobsbawm 88). This led, in revolutionary France, to a common language being seen as “a measure of the unity” of the nation, to the extent that “during the early years of the Revolution, non-French was seen as counterrevolutionary and, therefore, dangerous” (Markham n.p, citing also G. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799*, Tr. J. Hall and J. Friguglietti (New York, 1964) and A. Soboul, *Understanding the French Revolution*, Tr. A. Knutson (New York, 1988)).

¹⁷ “In the era before general primary education” (Hobsbawm 52), that is also the era before the age of revolutions, the “actual or literal ‘mother tongue’ [...] was certainly not in any sense a ‘national language,’” although speakers have perhaps always held “a certain popular cultural identification” with their local as well as supra-local languages (ibid. 53). In 1789, for example 50% of the population in France did not speak French at all, and “outside of a central region” within the *langues d’ouïl*, it was nowhere habitually spoken in the countryside (ibid. 60).

¹⁸ In England, for instance, by the late nineteenth century we can find non-satirical ascription of positive qualities such as authenticity and honesty, cleverness, wit, or industry to local speakers in some writings. An example of non-literary writings that ascribes behavioral characteristics to locality and to local speech is Elizabeth Wright’s biography of her “broad Yorkshire” speaking husband, where such observations are made regularly through the two volumes.

¹⁹ For a detailed survey of the many steps and strands involved in these shifts and new ideas throughout Europe, see the entirety of Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. The reformulation, by nineteenth-century states, of a national cultural heritage to become "the central emotional component" (90) of state patriotism is introduced and discussed on pages 88-96.

²⁰ Notable examples are the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories of Welsh and Irish in Britain, and of the Breton language in France.

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