



BENVENISTE, ÉMILE

BENVENISTE, ÉMILE (1902-76), French scholar, eminent Iranist, and one of the greatest linguists of his era. He was born at Aleppo and studied in Paris. His biography is entirely bound up in the stages of his career as a scholar. At a very young age he caught the attention of the dean of linguistics in France, Antoine Meillet, and was soon engaged in the research activities that he was to pursue through half a century with exceptional productivity. In 1927 he succeeded Meillet at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, teaching advanced comparative grammar and Iranian, and in 1937 at the *Collège de France*, in the chair of comparative grammar. He continued his teaching in both establishments without interruption, except during the war years (when he had to flee and hide, his apartment pillaged and his manuscripts destroyed), until the autumn of 1969, when, stricken suddenly by illness, he was forced to give up all activity.

Benveniste's work is exceptional in its scope, its diversity, and its influence. In each of his fields of study he made major contributions, which were to inspire numerous scholars.

His bibliography covers fifty years, from 1922 to 1972. It includes eighteen books, 291 articles and contributions of various kinds, and 300 reviews. It may be divided into three main parts; Iranian studies, comparative grammar of Indo-European languages, and general linguistics. Although he was more and more attracted by the last discipline, Benveniste never abandoned either Iranian philology or the comparative study of Indo-European languages. It was his custom to divide his teaching at the *Collège de France* and the *École*



Pratique des Hautes Études among these three areas, and the last books that he published (*Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1966; *Titres et noms propres en iranien ancien*, 1966; and *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 1969) bear witness to this triple loyalty.

Avestan. Iranian philology is a particularly difficult field, for it requires familiarity with very different traditions, Indian for Avestan, Greek and Mesopotamian for Old Persian, Indian and Chinese for Sogdian, and Semitic for Middle Persian generally, not to mention the Arab and Islamic world. Although this field was steadily being enlarged and diversified, Benveniste investigated most of its aspects; there are very few Iranian languages that he did not broach or study in depth. He made an important contribution to the difficult philology of the Avesta in some twenty articles and one book, *Les infinitifs avestiques* (1935), in which, with the perspicacity, rigor, and clarity characteristic of his mind, he introduced some order into the mass of forms classified by Bartholomae as infinitives. His articles are either grammatical or etymological notes or discussions of passages involving questions of ancient Iranian civilization.

Old Persian. Old Persian was one of Benveniste's favored fields. The study of the Achaemenid inscriptions was notably enriched in his day by the discovery of important texts. He always followed these discoveries closely, commenting immediately on data newly brought to light. In 1931 he published a new edition, revised and enlarged, of Meillet's *Grammaire du vieux-perse*, a work rendered necessary by the progress of research. This book has remained a classic, as have various articles on vocabulary, morphology, and syntax in which the author, with brilliant intuition, often explains details that had remained stubbornly obscure in these otherwise crystal-clear texts. Benveniste was vice-president of the international committee for the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, and he was given responsibility for preparing the definitive edition of the Old Persian inscriptions; illness unfortunately prevented him from bringing this work to a conclusion.

He was always interested, too, in the Old Persian proper names and institutional names preserved by foreign witnesses—Greeks, Lycians, Arameans, and especially Elamites. No one was better able than he to recognize Iranian forms under the double mask of foreign language and foreign spelling. The task was especially arduous in the instance of the Elamite tablets from Persepolis, which abound in Iranian names but in forms difficult to interpret: The chapter devoted to them in *Titres et noms propres* was the



first study undertaken of these very important documents.

Sogdian. When he was just starting out, as a young man, Benveniste was guided toward Iranian by Meillet. That was the period when knowledge of the languages of Iran, as well as those of Central Asia, was being enriched by the discoveries at Turfan and Dunhuang. In particular, the Sogdian texts brought back to Paris by P. Pelliot had to be deciphered and published. R. Gauthiot, who had undertaken this task, had died in World War I, before the publication of even the first volume of his *Essai de grammaire sogdienne*. Benveniste took up the interrupted work. To volume I of Gauthiot's Sogdian grammar (*Phonétique*), he added volume II (*Morphologie, syntaxe et glossaire*, 1929), in which already he was able to correct some points in the former, so rapidly was comprehension of the Sogdian language progressing. Next he issued the definitive edition of the Sogdian manuscripts from the Pelliot collection in his *Textes sogdiens* (1940) and *Vessantara Jātaka* (1946), which were immediately hailed as models by the critics. The most precise and learned philology was combined with that elegance of style that marks all the works of the author. The task of editing this material was completed with a facsimile volume, *Codices Sogdiani* (1940). The entire body of documents assembled in Paris was thus made completely available to the public in an unprecedented way.

Benveniste's contribution to Sogdian studies was not limited to these volumes. He always took a keen interest in the texts in Berlin and London. With remarkable promptness he followed each of his colleagues' publications with a critical article, rich in discoveries and suggestions of every kind. The totality of his "Notes," "Notules," "Observations," and various other works (now gathered in a posthumous volume entitled *Études sogdiennes*, 1979), in which precision and breadth of information vie with the insight of his conjectures, constitutes a fundamental contribution to the exploration of this new province of Iranian linguistics.

Other Middle Iranian languages. In other Middle Iranian languages Benveniste's works are less numerous because the newly discovered texts in Parthian, Manichean Middle Persian, and Khotanese were not found in the Parisian collections or were entirely in the hands of foreign specialists, who exploited them superbly. He was, however, a member of the International Commission for the Publication of the Turfan Texts and contributed clarification on various points. He discovered that several texts in literary Pahlavi, known for a long time and traditionally taken for prose, were in reality poems. He thus gave birth to the study of Middle Persian poetry:



Henning in *BSOAS* 13, 1950, p. 641, refers to “the study of the Pahlavi poetry, so spiritedly initiated by M. Benveniste.” Although the existence of this poetry had been denied in the Arab-Persian tradition, its importance in the history of Iranian literatures has now been recognized, and it was probably not without influence on the beginnings of classical Arab poetry. Benveniste also reconstructed and analyzed two new versions of the great inscription of Surkh Kotal, which is the basis of what is known about the Bactrian language.

Modern Iranian languages and Iranian in general. To this oeuvre must be added a mass of notes on Iranian etymology and phonetics and works on the relations of Iranian to other language families—Slavic, Germanic, and especially Armenian, which yields a large number of very instructive Iranian loanwords. As for modern Iranian, Benveniste published several articles on Persian, one on Pashto, and one on Yaghnobi (a descendant of Sogdian) and in particular a book, *Études sur la langue ossète* (1959), in which, on the basis of a modern language with a conservative vocabulary, he illuminated many aspects of Iranian in general. The results of a dialectological investigation conducted on the borders of the Pamirs in Afghanistan in 1948 remain unpublished.

Iranian culture. Although a linguist above all, Benveniste nevertheless paid close attention to historical context. This field of study is especially difficult in the Iranian world, for the texts are either obscure and altered (the Avesta) or too brief (inscriptions). Many texts are technical and elusive, and the researcher must have constant recourse to foreign or indirect sources, which are very scattered, often divergent, and sometimes contradictory. Benveniste was marvelously skilled in relating information drawn from the most diverse sources and in drawing enlightenment from the comparison of such texts. It is rare in his philological works that the analysis of a word, a phrase, or a passage does not reveal a new insight into a cultural fact.

Other works are frankly oriented toward the history of civilization. Among many comparable writings, the famous articles “Les classes sociales dans la tradition avestique” (1932); “L’Ērān-vē et l’origine légendaire des Iraniens” (1934); a whole series of studies on the religions of ancient Iran, especially “The Persian Religion According to the Chief Greek Texts” (1929), “Vṛtra et Vṛθragna,” a work written in collaboration with L. Renou (1934), and “Les mages dans l’ancien Iran” (1938); and those that concern ancient titles (in *Titres et noms propres*) should be mentioned. In the analysis of texts Benveniste was always careful about the social realities expressed. He knew



admirably how, without being blinded by apparent similarities, to find in the words the characteristic semantic nuances of a culture very different from his own.

Indo-European comparative grammar. This work as an Iranist would in itself have been enough to fill a career. But Benveniste's ambitions and intellectual powers went far beyond that. With prodigious energy, while pursuing Iranian he soon began, under the influence of Meillet, the comparative study of Indo-European languages; after he started at the Collège de France, he also undertook research on general linguistics on a large scale. This article is not the place to describe in detail these two other aspects of his work. It should be recalled only that his studies on comparative grammar revolutionized the field: To cite only two, his thesis for the doctorat ès lettres (*Origines de la formation des noms en indo-européen*, Paris, 1935) was epoch-making, and his last book (*Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 1969; [the 1973 English tr.](#) by Elizabeth Palmer, rev. and updated by Jeremy Lin, Jacqueline Lewandowski, and Vergil Parson is available on the website of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University) combined enormous experience in comparative studies with a semantic intuition enriched by familiarity with archaic cultures.

General linguistics. As for general linguistics, in the intellectual tradition founded by Saussure, the teacher of his own teacher Meillet, he went straight to several essential problems: the nature of the linguistic sign, the nature of language categories, relations of language to society, and underlying conditions for "conversion of language into discourse." Gifted also with a curiosity that propelled him toward exotic languages (he traveled to Alaska to investigate Amerindian languages), he opened up new vistas for research in the different humanistic disciplines, not only linguistics and philology but also ethnology, psychology, semiotics, and analysis of literary forms. The collection of his articles published under the title *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966) has been translated into English, Spanish, Italian, and Russian.

Benveniste was a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, to which he was elected in 1960. He was for a time secretary of the Société Asiatique. He was also the guiding spirit, in his capacity as secretary, of the Société de Linguistique de Paris from 1959 to 1969 and edited its *Bulletin*. He revitalized *Revue des études arméniennes* and took over direction of the new series. As director of the Institut d'Études Iraniennes at the Sorbonne, he established the series of *Travaux* of that institution and inaugurated it with his



own *Titres et noms propres*. He was founder and first president of the International Association of Semiotics.

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A bibliography of Benveniste's works by M. J. Moïnfar can be found in *Mélanges linguistiques* (see below), pp. ix-liii. All his works (except articles) related to Iranian studies have been mentioned in the body of the article; see also the collection *E. Benveniste aujourd'hui* cited below. Three volumes of essays have been dedicated to Benveniste: *Ētrennes de linguistique offertes par quelques amis à Ē. Benveniste*, Paris, 1928 (foreword by A. Meillet); *Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Ē. Benveniste*, Paris, 1975 (Collection linguistique publiée par la Société de Linguistique de Paris, LXX; foreword by the staff of the Société de Linguistique de Paris; with two photographs); *Langue, discours, société: Pour Ē. Benveniste*, edited by J. Kristeva, J.-C. Milner, and N. Ruwet, Paris, 1975.

An international colloquium in memory of Benveniste was held at Tours in September, 1983; see G. Serbat et al., eds., *Ē. Benveniste aujourd'hui: Actes du Colloque international du C.N.R.S. . . .*, 2 vols., Paris and Louvain, 1984 (volume 2 contains seven papers dealing with Benveniste's works on Iranian studies in particular: G. Bolognesi, "Arménien et iranien dans l'œuvre d'Ē. Benveniste," pp. 183-96; J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "La contribution d'Ē. Benveniste aux études avestiques," pp. 197-206; I. Gershevitch, "Benveniste and Sogdology," pp. 207-13; Ph. Gignoux, "Le moyen-iranien dans l'œuvre de Benveniste," pp.



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