



MEILLET, (PAUL JULES) ANTOINE

MEILLET, (PAUL JULES) ANTOINE, French linguist and scholar of Iranian and Armenian studies (b. 11 November 1866 in Moulins, Allier, d. 21 September 1936 in Châteaumeillant, Cher; [FIGURE 1](#)). Being the scion of an old family coming from the historical province of Bourbonnais and the son of a notary, Meillet became one of the leading linguists of his time, particularly in the field of historical-comparative philology of the Indo-European languages. In 1885 Meillet took up his broad philological and linguistic studies at the Sorbonne in Paris with the classicist Louis Havet, the Iranianist James Darmesteter (q.v.), and the Indologists Abel Bergaigne and Victor Henry among his teachers. But a stronger influence on him had two scholars teaching at other institutions: the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and Michel Bréal at the Collège de France. In 1897 he received his doctorate at the Sorbonne. But already in 1891, when returning from a first journey to Tbilisi (Tiflis) and Armenia for deepening his knowledge of Armenian (acquired first from Auguste Carrière) and studying the orthography of old Armenian manuscripts (see Meillet, 1987), he had been appointed Professor of comparative philology at the École Pratique (where he taught until 1931) as de Saussure's successor. From 1894, after the premature death of Darmesteter, he held lectures there also on Old Iranian languages. For a couple of years (1902–05) in addition to this he taught Armenian at the École des Langues Orientales. Finally in 1906 he was appointed Professor of comparative philology of the Indo-European languages and of general



linguistics at the Collège de France, where he replaced Bréal.

Meillet called himself a comparatist (see Vendryes, 1937, pp. 13 f.), and probably he would have called himself pointedly a born comparatist. But at the same time he was an acknowledged philologist with a good grounding not only in Greek and Latin, but also in less common languages such as Armenian and Old Church Slavic. Only a linguist with a marked philological orientation like his could write about the history of the Greek and Latin languages in such a sensitive way (Meillet, 1913a; Meillet, 1928). His approach to language history was quite novel in that he took into account together historical grammar proper, the entire philological evidence, and the facts of cultural history such as language contacts and sociolinguistic influences. For Meillet took sociolinguistic aspects much more into account than most scholars do even today; in his opinion language development was first and foremost the result of social changes and diversifications (migrations, changes in the population or in political, economic, religious and other conditions).

He began publishing from 1888, first with some articles concerning particular problems of etymology and comparative grammar in the vast field of the Indo-European languages, but gradually he focused on Armenian. With his appointment at the Collège de France where his professorship involved him also in general linguistics, he became interested in aspects of this field as well as questions of methodology. Meillet himself stressed that the combination of aspects of general linguistics (e. g., the character of language as a system to be studied empirically) and specific problems of historical and comparative grammar, which in many ways determines the character of his oeuvre, is owed not only to his principal teachers Bréal and de Saussure, but is inherent in the dialectic tension between those two ways of looking at languages: He tried at the same time to research both the universal principles of linguistic development and the historical and social conditions which are decisive factors for the special character of any given language.

Meillet's work was accordingly of some importance also for French sociolinguistics, influenced as he was by the ideas of Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and their like, and regarding language explicitly as a social fact (*un fait social*), a social institution immanent in the individuals, but at the same time independent from them. Particularly he showed how in Latin usage various social strata can be distinguished from one another, how linguistic changes can be traced back to social ones and how different elements of aristocratic, vulgar, and familiar words and the like occur side by side in the vocabulary.



Meillet was the editor (together with Marcel Cohen) of a large collective volume, which compactly dealt with all the world's languages from both the synchronic and diachronic point of view (Meillet, 1924a).

In his immensely rich oeuvre of about two dozen books, more than 500 articles and very numerous book reviews nearly all the branches of the Indo-European language family have been treated in some way or other. Most seminal for Indo-European studies as a whole were his *Introduction à l'étude comparative des langues indo-européennes* (1903) and the masterly, even if brief, *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique* (1925). In *Les dialectes indo-européens* (1908) he tried something like developing an Indo-European linguistic geography and indicating prehistoric groups of Indo-European dialects, pointing out in the process the spread of the Indo-European peoples and languages. The national and international recognition of Meillet's scholarly merit is evidenced by the fact that he was decorated Commander of the Legion of Honor and was appointed member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1924 and the member of more than a dozen foreign academies of sciences. In addition he received honorary doctorates from the universities of Berlin (1910), Padua (1922), Dublin (1928), Oxford (1928), and Brussels (1932). Among his disciples were, as far as Iranian studies are concerned, Robert Gauthiot (1876–1916) and Émile Benveniste (q. v.; 1902–76).

Iranian studies. Avestan. Indo-Iranian as an entity reconstructible with absolute certainty is the only dialect group within the Indo-European language family, that Meillet acknowledged for the period after the proto-Indo-European language (*Les dialectes indo-européens*, pp. 24ff.). To this field of study belong also some papers on problems of Indo-Iranian historical phonology and the impressive study about “Le dieu indo-iranien Mitra” (*JA* X/10, 1907, pp. 143–59), who according to Meillet was the deity personifying “Contract.” Apart from one paper on several Sogdian words and some brief notes about Middle Iranian matters (but see below about his Armenian studies), in the field of Iranian proper Meillet published almost exclusively on the two Old Iranian languages attested (Avestan and Old Persian).

In the field of Avestan, in which Meillet expressly called James Darmesteter his teacher, he discussed more than once problems of writing (in a manner sympathizing with the view of Andreas [q. v.] on an Avestan text originally written in a consonantal alphabet and later mechanically transcribed into Avestan letters) and likewise published critical observations of grammatical



kind on Avestan texts. Regarding the more general assessment of the Avestan language and its history, Meillet stressed the many profound differences of Young Avestan in grammar and vocabulary from the *Gāthās* (q. v.), which, according to him, ruled out the possibility of a direct sequence of the two. He regarded the Gathic, i.e. the Old Avestan dialect (which he classified as a Northwest Iranian dialect) altogether as quite archaic (esp. in morphology) and often more archaic than the language of the Rigveda, even though in the *Gāthās* remarkable innovations are not missing, and conversely, Young Avestan, too, shows notable archaisms. Differently from the authors of the later texts, the author(s) of the *Gāthās* did not write a language essentially different from his (or their) everyday idiom. (Incidentally, for some *Gāthās* Meillet doubted Zarathushtra's authorship.) As a matter of fact, Meillet recognized that the Young Avestan texts preserved the traditional Indo-Iranian vocabulary more faithfully than the *Gāthās*, and he found the most reflexes of the old Indo-Iranian religion and mythology in the *Hōm Yašt* (Y. 9–11).

Meillet's most important publication on the Avesta is *Trois conférences sur les Gāthā de l'Avesta* (1925), which presents quite original ideas about Zarathushtra and his hymns. After an introduction, dealing mostly with the linguistic questions mentioned above, Meillet turns to the date of Zarathushtra (ch. 1), which, following the Zoroastrian tradition, he assigned to the early Achaemenid period (7th–6th cent. B.C.E.). As to their composition (ch. 2) Meillet regarded the *Gāthās* as a collection of haphazard fragments preserved by chance, the original order of which cannot be recognized any more. Like Bartholomae he assumed that the single metric strophes had originally been linked by connecting pieces in prose, now lost, and that by this assumption the seemingly incoherent juxtaposition of the strophes may find its explanation. In chapter 3 about the character of the Gathic doctrine Meillet emphasized that the dualism so characteristic of later periods is not elaborated in the *Gāthās* in detail. He saw the resistance of the oppressed peasants and herdsmen to the ruling noble warriors reflected in the *Gāthās* and consequently interpreted Zarathushtra's religious reform as the outcome of the social conditions of the time.

Old Persian. In 1915 Meillet published a grammar of the Old Persian language (*Grammaire du vieux perse*) providing in it an exact description of this language as attested in the then available texts. In this excellent work, which filled a painfully felt gap, Meillet tried to demonstrate how the comparative



method of historical linguistics can help describe a language, the subsystems of which are known only in part. Therefore notes of a comparative nature were inserted only wherever they might contribute to the explanation of a textual passage. Thus Meillet dealt essentially with the main characteristics of the phonological and morphological aspects of the language, confining himself to those forms which are attested authentically and could be interpreted with a degree of certainty. By this he also made clear which problems had not yet been solved and which linguistic facts were not yet established with sufficient dependability.

The substantial introduction of the book discussed mainly the dialectological position of Persian within the Iranian family of languages, the foreign influences on Old Persian especially in Achaemenid times, and both the stereotyped character and the internal inconsistencies of the inscriptions. Also the linguistic innovations and the incorrect forms of the late Achaemenid texts were dealt with. Regarding his method, Meillet emphasized that it always must be comparative, looking back to Proto-Aryan (with an eye on Avestan and Old Indo-Aryan) and forwards to the Middle and New Persian developments, so that paradoxically his descriptive grammar basically became a comparative grammar. But the language was not yet integrated by him into the whole of the Iranian languages (this remained to be done by his pupil Benveniste in the revised edition). Nor did Meillet intend to trace Old Persian back to proto-Indo-European (as was attempted later by Roland G. Kent).

Meillet's *Grammaire* thus undertook no more than to describe as exactly as possible the Persian language in the form spoken at the earliest known stage of its development. Taking into account of the later developments of Persian is found also in some of Meillet's articles written about the time when Meillet was preparing the *Grammaire*. Here belongs an earlier article on stress in Old Persian (*JA* IX/15, 1900, pp. 254–77), which Meillet described on the basis of the developments in Middle and New Persian, as a stress accent regulated in some rhythmical way (falling on the penultimate syllable, if heavy, else receding to the antepenultimate one). Without doubt we see here the influence of his teacher Darmesteter, who had made fundamental contributions to study of the history of the Persian language and was the first to have drawn a direct line from Old via Middle to New Persian and to have shown their continuous linguistic development.

It is remarkable that after the publication of the *Grammaire du vieux perse* (1915) Meillet did not write practically a single line about Old Persian. He



entrusted the revision and updating of this book for a second edition (published in 1931) entirely to Émile Benveniste, who used his judgement freely, sometimes not totally approved by Meillet.

Armenian studies. Meillet became engaged in learning the Armenian language and in elucidating its origin from the beginning of his studies. For at that time the problem of Armenian was quite current, since Heinrich Hübschmann (q. v.) in 1875 had proved that it did not belong to the Iranian family of languages, but was an independent branch of Indo-European. Meillet was well acquainted with the ancient literary tradition of Armenian as well as with its philological aspects: Repeatedly he dealt with textual problems of Armenian manuscripts, not least with the problems of the spelling in several ancient manuscripts of the Armenian gospels and with the study of particular passages in the works of the Armenian authors Agathangelus, Elišē and Eznik of Kołb. His research derived much benefit from his two trips to Armenia in 1891 (see above) and 1902, during which he was able to examine the original manuscripts.

In a great number of articles (collected in Meillet, 1962–77) Meillet treated various problems of Armenian etymology and historical phonology and morphology. As to historical phonology, the most remarkable discovery of Meillet's (even if not undisputed) is the phonetic law often called "Meillet's law" that IE. **du-* resulted in Arm. *erk-*. Notwithstanding the morphological innovations found in Armenian, this language has preserved also some remarkable archaisms (e. g., seven distinct cases and some remnants of old dual forms), to which Meillet added the traces of ablaut in the inflexion of *n*-stems (Meillet, 1977, pp. 85 ff.). The fact that Meillet is still considered (aside from Hübschmann) one of the founders of comparative studies of Armenian primarily is the result of his pioneering work on Armenian syntax, which field had been more or less ignored by all Armenian linguists before him. In a series of seminal articles published between 1897 and 1914 (and reprinted in Meillet, 1962, pp. 5–157) he dealt in great detail with the demonstrative pronouns, the rules of agreement of adjectives, the use of the cases, the personal forms of verbs and the plural of nouns. Although his accounts in this respect are descriptive, their importance for the historical aspects of the language cannot be denied.

The result of all his studies were distilled in two monographs: a short introductory description of Armenian in his *Altarmenisches Elementarbuch* (1913) with some emphasis on syntax, and his *Esquisse d'une grammaire*



comparée de l'arménien classique (1903), a fundamental historical phonology and morphology of the language. This book, being the first of its kind, had a double purpose: to describe succinctly the structure of Classical Armenian and to set forth the historical origins of the language as far as they could be ascertained. Meillet devoted also several minor studies to the influence of Iranian on Armenian vocabulary. It was Meillet who in 1911 first produced proof of the Parthian, i.e. Northwestern Iranian character of most of the borrowings from Iranian (Meillet, 1977, pp. 142–50) by noticing that the Armenian loans show all the distinctive features of the Parthian Manichean texts from Turfan. But Meillet raised the question, too, as to whether some of the Armenian borrowings did not originate already in Achaemenid times. He took this possibility into consideration, however, only for one isolated case, *partēz* “garden,” which is ultimately derived from OIr. **paridaiza-* and shows the Armenian consonant shift.

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