



WACKERNAGEL, JACOB

WACKERNAGEL, JACOB, Swiss classicist and scholar of Indo-European and Indo-Iranian studies (b. Basel, Switzerland, 11 December 1853; d. Basel, 22 May 1938; [Figure 1](#)), the son of Wilhelm Wackernagel (1806-1869), professor of German Language and Literature in Basel from 1835. He was named Jacob (written with “c”) after the famous German scholar Jacob Grimm, who acted as his godfather. Jacob received a fine classical education in his hometown and then studied classical philology and comparative linguistics in Basel (1871), and from 1872 in Göttingen, where the great Indologist [Theodor Benfey](#) (1809-81) taught him Vedic and Sanskrit and exerted a particular influence on him.

Wackernagel left Göttingen for Leipzig after two years, where, in the winter term of 1874-75, he attended the lectures of Ernst Kuhn (1846-1920) and other prominent linguists. He returned to Basel and obtained his doctorate there in 1875 with a thesis on the ancient Greek grammarians’ phonological doctrine and theory (Wackernagel, 1876). After a six-month stay in Oxford, he completed in the following year his habilitation as a lecturer in Greek Philology and Sanskrit. In 1879 Wackernagel was appointed extraordinary professor, and two years later became full professor of Greek Language and Literature in Basel. In 1902 he was offered the chair of Comparative Philology at Göttingen University, where he taught until 1915. In protest against the German-Prussian nationalist policy in World War I, in particular against the infringement on Belgian neutrality, he resigned his professorship and returned to his native town.



From 1915, he held first his former chair of Greek Philology and, from 1926 until his retirement in 1936, that of Linguistics. Twice (in 1890 and 1918-19) he served as the rector of Basel University, and in 1912-13 he was also pro-rector in Göttingen (where the King of Prussia himself, in name only, was the rector). His worldwide standing is reflected by the honorary degrees conferred on him and his membership in several academies of sciences.

Wackernagel described himself as “a linguist of philological orientation” (Sprachforscher philologischer Richtung). This means that his linguistic studies were not based on the data collected in grammars and dictionaries, but on the factual material preserved in the texts themselves, more exactly, on historical principles and on a philological foundation. His method made it possible for him to develop the idea that various phenomena considered before as characteristics typical of Greek or of the Indo-Iranian languages only, actually belong to the common Indo-European heritage (especially the so-called Wackernagel’s Law; see below).

Works. Connected with his name are important publications concerning Greek studies, his syntactic investigations, and in particular his scholarship in the field of Old Indo-Aryan, best reflected in his large-scale *Altindische Grammatik*, a work of fundamental significance for Indo-Iranian and Iranian studies. Perhaps the most significant feature of Wackernagel’s approach to Indo-European studies is that he pursued what we may call an Indo-European Philology, that is, renouncing comparative reconstruction as a goal in itself, but, on the contrary, taking into account a linguistic development within separate languages as a feature from prehistoric times, thus imbuing linguistics with the spirit of history (e.g., his discussion of the Atticisms in Homer; see below).

Though being professor of Greek, Wackernagel began in the early 1880s to collect material for a comprehensive grammar of Old Indo-Aryan, which was to become his masterpiece, *Altindische Grammatik*. This work, which originally was proposed to him by Ernst Kuhn, is the first historical grammar of that language ever compiled. It is the most exhaustive scholarly treatment that an Old Indo-European language has ever received, although even today it is not yet completed and presumably remains a torso. This standard work is presenting a fundamental view of the history and comparative grammar of Old Indo-Aryan language and thus is the model of a linguistic handbook, combining both stringent linguistic methodology and philological accuracy and scrutiny, not to mention its comprehensive factual and bibliographical



aspect. As expected, however, certain points discussed in the book would be indicated, expressed, or explained in a different way, at least formally, by today's Indo-European scholars. The work is based on careful reference to the Vedic evidence, on thorough knowledge of the Indian grammarians and an impressive use of the Indo-Europeanist methodology. This book clearly reflects the influence of Wackernagel's Göttingen teacher Theodor Benfey, who had a more philological proclivity than the other comparatists of the mid-19th century and had initiated Wackernagel into the writings and the theory of the native Indian grammarians like Pāṇini and his followers. The most important characteristic feature of this grammar is that Wackernagel is always stressing the primacy of the Vedic language within Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit), although he considers the linguistic development within India altogether down to Middle Indo-Aryan.

Wackernagel deemed himself lucky that during his years in Göttingen he was able to work together with the famous Iranist scholar [Friedrich Carl Andreas](#) (1846-1930) on the *Gathas* (see below). At the same time he turned to Greek and finished his great book on the Homeric language, *Sprachliche Untersuchungen* (1916), which, on the one hand, resumed the question of the so-called "epische Zerdehnung" (treated by him already in 1878: see Wackernagel, 1955-79, III, pp. 1512-65), an artificial restoration of uncontracted forms out of later contracted ones according to him, and on the other hand, and primarily, dealt with the so-called Atticisms in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which in his view show the strong influence of an Attic redaction of the Homeric epic poems. Another quite interesting topic of the *Sprachliche Untersuchungen* is the so-called "gaps" of Homeric Greek, that is, the intrusion of later developments, of features foreign to the basic dialects of the epic language and, not least, of vulgar and improper matters (like the words for "arse" or "to piss"), which are quite inappropriate in a totally aristocratic poetry.

Wackernagel's best known and most widely read book is *Vorlesungen über Syntax* (1920-24), a two-volume treatment of problems of Greek, Latin, and German syntax based on a course of lectures. This book, with its lively presentation of the subject matter written in an appealing style without forgoing scientific rigor, is something absolutely novel. It gives a striking impression of Wackernagel as a teaching professor explaining in detail and with the help of convincing examples general concepts and notions like the functions of the various kinds of words (or 'parts of speech', as the ancient



grammarians put it) and other categories such as gender, number, person, mood, tense, and so on. Although, according to his own statement, not being interested in general linguistics, Wackernagel advanced questions of such kind by his detailed philological studies in a decisive way.

His efficiency and versatility appears above all in his minor publications, including dozens of articles published in journals, commemorative volumes and the like, which now are almost completely reprinted in three volumes of *Kleine Schriften* (1955-79). Here may be found many examples showing his deductive method of stringent argumentation resulting from an attentive and critical examination of the sources. One of the most characteristic features of his studies is the combination of the Greek and the Indo-Iranian evidence, in particular Homeric Greek as well as Vedic Indo-Aryan and Old Iranian, which are the keystones of his successful and conclusive studies and display his meticulous reading of those texts.

Iranian studies. In Göttingen, when working together with his colleague Andreas, the leading Iranian scholar of that time, who came to Göttingen one year after him, Wackernagel familiarized himself considerably well with the Old Iranian languages, particularly since he became aware more and more that taking the closely related Old Iranian languages into account was imperative for his work on Old Indo-Aryan. As the result of classes jointly held by both of them, they published four of the *Gathas* (1911, 1913, and 1931, all regrettably not reprinted in Wackernagel's *Kleine Schriften* or elsewhere) in order to show in practice the impact of Andreas's theory on the textual history of the Avesta, and that this collection of religious texts first was written down in Arsacid times in some rather simple Aramaic-based consonantal writing system and only later, at some time under the Sasanians, was transposed quite mechanically into the newly created, fully vocalized Avestan script. So Wackernagel can take the credit for having induced Andreas, who was extremely hesitant about making known the results of his investigations, to publish those studies together, which really and truly are a joint work (highly praised by Wackernagel even later).

These studies were deeply rooted in the much discussed theory of Andreas concerning the transmission of the Avestan text corpus, which has become obsolete long since; nevertheless, the phonological, morphological, lexicological, and other comments (often showing plainly Wackernagel's authorship), with their observations that are significant even today, are important contributions to the exegesis of the *Gathas*, worthy to be consulted.



Out of the text transmitted in the manuscripts, they attempt, by eliminating younger forms, to reconstruct the older (Arsacid) text, the so-called “Urtext” in its “real” pronunciation (as claimed by the authors) and to interpret it with regard to phonetics (see [ANDREAS iii](#)).

The cooperation with Andreas attracted Wackernagel’s attention to Iranian studies to the point that, even after having left Göttingen in 1915, he devoted his scholarly efforts more intensively than before to Iranian studies, and in later years in Basel gave preference almost exclusively to Indo-Aryan and Old Iranian in his teaching activity. Thus a series of six installments of “Indoiranica” appeared between 1910 and 1942 (often starting from Old Iranian questions) and also one further article with the title “Indoiranisches,” all reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften* (I, pp. 262-397). One of the most noteworthy contributions therein resolved the remarkable occurrence of the nominal suffixes *-mant-* and *-uuant-* side by side in Avestan, while **-mant-* already in Indo-Iranian being restricted to the position after an *u* vowel in the final syllable of the basic word (*ibid.*, pp. 262-73).

Among the other issues treated by Wackernagel, the more significant are the expressions of the type Iran. **hubṭtam bar* (Ved. *Súbhṛtam bhar*) “to treat in a good way” (*Kleine Schriften* I, pp. 405-8); the historical future OPers. *patiyāvanhyaiy* (DB 1.55) “I was to pray,” and the Avestan nouns in *-ana-* (*Kleine Schriften* I, pp. 444-47, 452-56). Wackernagel dealt also with Iranian evidence attested in Greek sources, for instance, the problems connected with the rendering of Iranian proper names in Greek writing, or the words supposed to be Old Persian in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* (*Kleine Schriften* II, pp. 1212-14, III, pp. 1657-58). Especially noteworthy is the study on the toponym Gk. *Persépolis* (*ibid.*, II, pp. 844-52), that, as he could prove cogently, goes back to older *Persáipolis* (though attested only later) and further to *Pérsai* (OPers. *Pārsa-*), which, as a toponym, was remodeled to **Pérsai pólis* (the town Persai) in order to distinguish it from the ethnonym.

Summary. Wackernagel’s most important discoveries arose from observing specific points in a particular language and then noticing that their conditions are valid also for other Indo-European languages and probably for all of them, which means, for their common proto-language. The best known of those discoveries is what usually is called now “Wackernagel’s Law,” that enclitics originally tended towards the position immediately following the first word of the sentence (*Kleine Schriften* I, pp. 1-104), a rule that Berthold Delbrück had already defined for Vedic prose and [Christian Bartholomae](#) had proved for the



Avestan Gathas. But the same holds true also for other matters, such as the Greek perfect, which primarily indicated the achieved state (*Kleine Schriften* II, pp. 1000-21), or the reluctance of several Indo-European languages to employ short monosyllables as verbal or nominal or other forms (*ibid.*, I, pp. 148-85).

Since Wackernagel did prefer to look on the history of a language through observing the inherited facts and not in terms of preconceived opinions, one may understand why he never became involved in the discussion about the ways and the method to reconstruct the Indo-European proto-language, or about such fundamental issues as the Neogrammarians' principle of phonetic laws operating without exceptions. Being independent from the linguistic theories and the main schools of linguistic thought of his age, he had in mind linguistic research into the Old Indo-European languages firmly based on philological principles.

Wackernagel married Maria, née Stehlin (1864-1940), in 1886. They had eight children. Two of their three sons became full professors of law and of history, respectively, at Basel University. Wackernagel is buried in Reihen near Basel.

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