

## The Fate of the Appellation “Sound Law” in Linguistics

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### Abstract

*The urgency of the problem under investigation is determined by the current state of science in the light of the revision of the foundations of scientific knowledge, making the notion of scientific law problematic. The purpose of the article is to analyze the emergence and evolution of the concept of sound (scientific) law in linguistics. The leading approach to the study of this problem is a diachronic approach. The main results of the study consist in the fact that methodological understanding of the status of law in science leads to better order in the organization of linguistic knowledge of the history of language. The materials of the article may be useful for teaching general questions of linguistics, theory of language, history of German.*

**Keywords:** sound law, scientific law, the law of nature, Schleicher natural concept, Neogrammarian concept, universals.

## INTRODUCTION

The linguists of the nineteenth century and twentieth century speculated a lot upon the concept of scientific law. Not apparently whether they all looked back at the laws in natural science and whether all equally realized what the law was. It is generally assumed that the concept of law was then a standard, but it is not known for certain whether it was standard and, if so, whether it is valid now; there is a need to determine the status of law, understand its position in linguistic thought in relation to general cultural thought.

Before considering the scientific laws in linguistics, the classical notion of law in science should be determined in general. In modern methodological literature, scientific law is regarded as universal, indispensable, essential, stable, recurring relationship between the elements of the subject, between the properties of things, as well as between the properties inside the thing. The universality of law in science means that it applies to every object of its area, acts at all times and at any point in space. The need inherent in the scientific law is not logical but ontological, it is determined not by the structure of thinking but by the real world structure, though it also depends on the hierarchy of the statements included in scientific theory. Owing to the laws, the scientists are trying to understand and reconstruct the phenomena. At the same time, it is important to remember that scientific laws deal with the ideal objects that represent the essence of phenomena.

It is necessary to appeal to the history of the formation of the concept of scientific law and assign the causes of its problematical character. The concept of scientific law began to take shape in XVI - XVII centuries during the formation of modern science. However, the idea of regular connections between the phenomena of the human world had already been developed in ancient philosophy. Although the notion of natural law (*lex naturae*) is found only in Roman philosophy of Lucretius. And if the ancient materialist philosophers emphasize the objectivity and universality of the laws of the material world, the medieval philosophy of Thomism considers these laws as an expression of the divine will, as deliberate tendencies imposed by God on the things. One can find the understanding of the law as manifestation of the Divine Reason in Berkeley and Leibniz. This approach is opposed to the pantheism of identification of God and the nature in Bruno and Spinoza, which suits natural science rapidly developing in XVI and XVII centuries. However, at that time of the supremacy of mechanics instead of the concept of law being not universal yet, math or natural-science concepts were often used. Thus, Copernicus and Kepler suggested hypotheses, Galileo - axioms and theorems. And Descartes and Newton only suggested the concept of natural law along with the concept of rule in the scientific context in which science “ministered” to God to prove the excellence of the Creator (Klaus und Buhr, 1966: 220).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, at the dawn of its development, science “denied” God, but despite it, the notion of the law of nature had been preserved. Now, however, nature imposes upon itself the laws. It has been generally believed that law is a universal concept and applied to all areas of knowledge. Every science is destined to discover laws and describe and explain the phenomena based on them.

In linguistics, the notion of law came together with the emergence and development of comparative historical linguistics at the start of the nineteenth century. It is common knowledge that “scientific nature” of science was defined by the presence of natural laws in it since the discovery of these laws by the scientists of that time was considered to be principal.

The first such law in linguistics was Grimm’s law – the law of consonantal shift. However, Franz Bopp, the founder of comparative-historical method, was first to use the notion of law in linguistics. It was he who introduced the notion of “sound law” (*Lautgesetz*). But, according to T.A. Amirova, it was “largely simple use of “convenient” terminology” (Amirova and others, 2006: 248). A. V.

Desnitskaya explains it by the fact that F. Bopp, by using such analogies, sought to objectively develop linguistics as a science exact in its methods and concrete in its content (Desnitskaya, 1984: 125).

However, the concept of law receives a natural-science "coloring" already in A. Schleicher's works. Confirmation of this view comes from the statements of the scientist as the fact that "languages are natural organisms" that "grew and developed according to certain laws, and in turn, grow old and die" (Schleicher, 1873: 12). Although Schleicher used the phrase "natural organism" in the literal biological significance, it would be wrong to think that he had thought so. It should be noted that the subjective-idealistic psychology was dominated at that time, and using similar natural-science terms, Schleicher said about materialism of his approach to language.

Ranking linguistics with natural science, Schleicher compared the objective laws of language development with the laws of natural phenomena, therefore, he thought it possible using the methods of natural science in linguistics, which would have more reliable results than the results obtained by historical science. Schleicher claimed that the task of linguistics, as well as the natural sciences, was the study of natural laws, to be not a subject to the "influence of human will and lawlessness" (quoted from Desnitskaya, 1984: 240). Thus, according to A. Desnitskaya, the idea of "natural science" of linguistics metaphorically expressed his seeking for accuracy and objectivity of the methods of linguistic research and the idea of "organic" development covered the language acceptance of its own internal laws. And there is no doubt that Schleicher in his work endeavoured to establish universal laws of language.

But only in the writings of neogrammarians the concept of law, in particular the sound law acquires its problematic significance. It is their concept of law that has been the subject of criticism of the concept of law in general to the extent it may be applicable to linguistics. In this connection, it seems necessary to examine in detail significant works by neogrammarians covered the problem of sound law, as well as the works by the linguists who criticized the concept of scientific law in linguistics.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:**

Theoretical and methodological basis of the study was the propositions and principles set forth in the works of home and foreign scholars in the field of comparative linguistics (J. Grimm, A. Schleicher, and others); prominent neogrammarians (H. Osthoff, K. Brugmann, H. Paul and others); famous philosophers (Shchedrovitskiy, E. Husserl, and others); as well as the work of linguists to develop the theoretical basis of linguistics (I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay and F. de Saussure, H. Schuchardt, V. P. Litvinov and others); works on the history of the German language and the basics of phonology (A. V. Desnitskaya, T. Bynon, A. Sihler and others), on the typology of languages and universals (J. Greenberg and others). The diachronic approach and the method of critical analysis of the works of the above scientific figures were used as the main research methods.

#### **RESULTS**

Neogrammarian concept as an area in linguistics was formed in the last third of the nineteenth century, extending throughout the world and influencing all subsequent linguistics.

That school was the result of realizing unsatisfactory state of comparative-historical linguistics of the middle of the nineteenth century and creative attempts to change the situation. The leading neogrammarians primarily sought to introduce clarity to the basic principles and objectives of linguistics and improve the methods of linguistic analysis (Amirova and others, 2006.: 383).

Neogrammarians H. Osthoff and K. Brugmann urged to abandon the old methods of the study of ancient languages on paper and come out “in the fresh air of the tangible reality and our time” (Osthoff, Brugmann, 1878: IX), as it is the only way to achieve proper understanding of the transformation of linguistic forms and develop those methodological principles, without which it is impossible to achieve reliable results in the research on history of language (Osthoff, Brugmann, 1878: XIV).

H. Osthoff and K. Brugmann advanced and defended three positions in the same paper:

- 1) phonetic laws existing in language do not have exceptions (the exceptions are the results of intersecting laws or caused by other factors);
- 2) analogy plays a very important role in the process of creating new language forms and in the phonetic and morphological changes on the whole;
- 3) modern living languages and dialects are first to be studied, because they (unlike the ancient languages and literary language, created under human control) may serve as a basis for establishing linguistic and psychological patterns (Quoted from Zvegintsev, 1964: 194).

However, H. Paul and B. Delbrück were against the first proposition. Paul in his “Principles of the History of Language” (Paul, 1964: 187) says that the notion of “phonetic law” cannot be understood in the sense in which “law” is understood in physics or chemistry. Phonetic law, he writes, does not say what should happen again and again if certain general conditions; it only finds a certain homogeneity of the group of famous historical events. Delbrück in the “Introduction to the Study of Indo-European Languages” opposes the definition of phonetic laws as the laws of nature as well. According to him, language is made up of human actions and, therefore, phonetic laws refer not to the teaching of the laws of natural phenomena but to the teaching of the laws of human actions that seem to be volitional (Delbrück, 2010: 125).

The teaching of sound laws has been deeply elaborated in the neogrammarians’ works due to purely practical needs to clarify the methods of comparative-historical research. But at the heart of so close attention to this problem there is their philosophical concept: the scientific value is presented by those, and only those propositions that can be checked on the basis of factual material, and any conclusions should not be drawn from them. And here one can observe some contradiction. As, unlike Schleicher, they did not see natural and “organismic” formation in language, and law for them should not represent something important from the methodological point of view, therefore their fidelity to the law is obscure. Language reality for neogrammarians is the reality of human speech acts in specific situations. However, they tried to preserve the concept of law, denying its natural essence.

However, neogrammarians hammered away at awareness of essence and conditions of phonetic changes and creation of consistent and complete theory of the sound law as possible. If before popular were the comparison of sound laws with the natural laws existing with all relevance characteristic of the laws of nature, the works of many neogrammarians represent a restricting interpretation of the sound laws. The sound laws advanced by neogrammarians in linguistic study have been the subject of heated argument for many years. The approach to the problem of sound law had to be revised in the argument. Under pressure of the actual material it had to be admitted that the scope of existing of sound laws was limited by several factors: the chronological and spatial limits, counteraction of analogy, later foreign-language borrowings, different pronunciation conditions. Concerning the character of sound changes, neogrammarians emphasized obscurity, gradualness of linguistic change being so insignificant that the bearers of these changes, i. e. the speakers do not even aware of their existence. Thus, only very minor changes can occur within one

generation. More noticeable changes can take place only when the older generation is ousted by the younger generation.

More precise definition of this range of problems has become possible only with the emergence of theoretical phonology – the branch of linguistics dealing with the analysis of phonemes in general and in specific languages. The representatives of structuralist tendencies investigating the relations that exist within the language system suggested considering not the sounds but their abstract types – phonemes and the variants of these phonemes – allophones, and as a result of which more detailed study of the “sound laws” became possible (Bynon, 1981: 22). Theodora Bynon in her book “Historical Linguistics” and Andrew Sihler in his “Histories of Language” focus on the sound laws such as blending and splitting (which, in turn, is divided into primary and secondary) (Bynon, 1981: 22; Sihler, 2000: 45-47).

However, in their day, neogrammarians did not know all the refinements but realized that the sound processes under study could not happen very rapidly, as it was at first. However, one should admit that the extensive factual material collected by neogrammarians in phonetics and morphology had an enormous influence on the development of linguistics on the whole.

## DISCUSSIONS

But, despite the fact that neogrammarians made an enormous contribution to the development of linguistics, some aspects of their teachings, however, were subjected to severe criticism from within the movement and by the representatives of other areas. One criticized historicism and atomism of neogrammarians, their understanding of the language as an independent mechanism functioning in accordance with sound laws. After all, in fact, the main objects of neogrammarians’ study were phonology and morphology, and the main point of their research came only to the collection and description of language facts. However, it should be noted that at the end of the nineteenth century W. Windelband and H. Rickert put forward the idea that in addition to generalizing (nomothetic) sciences with the task to discover scientific laws, there existed individualizing (ideographic) sciences not formulating any own laws but representing the studied objects in their uniqueness and originality. That is, there is the differentiation of natural sciences, where the object remains scientific laws, and human sciences, where scientific laws leave their important positions. These processes in the world of science could not but have an impact on the further development of linguistics. The impact of sociology was observed in the ideas of the most prominent critics of the Neogrammarian concept I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay, H. Schuchardt, K. Vossler. They saw the phenomenon being not immanent but a tool a person needs to understand and communicate information, complex system consisting not only of phonetics and morphology.

Naturally, criticizing the principal propositions of neogrammarians, they criticized sound laws first. Here important is that none of the critics did not deny the very facts of the sound law. Thus, F. de Saussure wrote that “it would be the greatest good deed” for linguistics to get rid of the concept of “law” (Saussure, 2000: 125). But it should be noted that in criticizing the sound laws, they objected the mechanicalness of the laws, i. e. the attempts of neogrammarians to give them a natural science character. At that time one started to ponder over the concept of “law”, and, in principle, no one categorically denied it. For example, I. A. Baudouin de Courtenay claims the “laws” of language balance and the laws of historical language movement (Amirova and others, 2006: 448). As far as Mr. Schuchardt is concerned, in addition, he deprecated “immutable laws” limited by time, space and the phenomena of analogy, that is, the “non-universality” of these laws (Schuchardt, 1950: 53). However, after the theory of relativity to have been discovered by Einstein in the early XX century, the well-known laws of mechanics, too, ceased to be universal, remaining valid in their

environment of functioning. This might be a general scientific justification for the limited laws of neogrammarians. An interesting fact is that the criticism of Neogrammarian concept has not led to the fact that the concept of law ceased to be used in the history of linguistics, i. e., Grimm's law has remained to be the law, but modern linguists largely avoid using the notion of law in their own investigations.

E. Husserl worked exceedingly on regeneration of the problem. It was his phenomenological concept that drew attention of science and philosophy to the problem of scientific law. The law from the phenomenological point of view is a moment of objectifying an intention, while objectivity is our ideal in cognitive activity but not fun of the nature itself (Husserl, 2012: 57).

Joseph Greenberg suggests replacing the "law" of "universals" and at the same time he says that «when we think of universals we think of laws ...» (Greenberg, 1995: 146). V. P. Litvinov thinks differently about it calling universal with "more pretentious word" (Litvinov, 2008: 74), thus calling for a little more than scientific sobriety. Law, according to V. P. Litvinov, "is a form of theoretical knowledge, not necessarily to be something extra" (Litvinov, 2006: 57). Thus, at the end of XX century there was growing recognition of the fact that law is not the laws by which nature exists, but that "is reflected in a certain stage of development of human activity in the form of laws" (Schedrovitsky, 2003: 148). Moreover, G. P. Schedrovitsky believes that "law is a very inaccurate and inefficient form of symbolic expression of mechanism", but that "law is very advantageous to be used because it is inadequate to actually occurring phenomena" (Schedrovitsky, 2003: 250).

As can be seen from the above stated, skeptical attitude has been really formed to the notion of "law" in modern science, but it is also evident that the science does deny it, there takes place the reinterpretation of its meaning and its place just in cognizing the world.

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