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Introduction to the New Edition of Niels Ege's 1993 Translation of Rasmus Rask's Prize Essay of 1818*

1. *Introduction*

This edition constitutes a photographic reprint of the English edition of Rasmus Rask's prize essay of 1818 which appeared as volume XXVI in the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague* in 1993. The only difference, besides the new front matter, is the present introduction, which serves to introduce the author Rasmus Rask, the man and his career, and to contextualize his famous work. It also serves to introduce the translation and the translator, Niels Ege (1927–2003).

The prize essay was published in Danish in 1818. In contrast to other works by Rask, notably his introduction to the study of Icelandic (on which, see further below), it was never reissued until Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) published a corrected version in Danish as part of his edition of Rask's selected works (Rask 1932). It was thus rare, but not impossible, to find, and certainly very expensive to buy, until Roy Harris included a photographic reprint of the original 1818 edition in his 13-volume Routledge series *Foundations of Indo-European Comparative Philology 1800–1850*, where it makes up volume 2 (Rask 1999). Thus there are now two Danish editions readily available to the public, the original and the corrected edition (Rask 1932). The present work is, however, the only translation of the work into English and indeed into any other language.

During Rask's lifetime the sections on the so-called Thracian language family were translated into German as part of Johann Severin Vater's (1772–1826) *Vergleichungsstafeln* (Vater 1822; cf. Koerner 1976), and there is a summary of it in Danish in the first edition of the Royal Danish Academy's *Oversigt* (i.e., summary of proceedings), Ørsted 1813–1815. For readers of German it is interesting to note that the 1932 corrected edition features a parallel German apparatus and a translation of the introduction as a separate work. The work itself, however, is still in Danish.

The reason for this strange state of affairs seems to be that Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) made the results of the prize essay available to a linguistic community generally unable to read Danish (obviously, he himself was) as an integrated part of his second edition of his German grammar (Grimm 1822); and due to the rapid development of Indo-European comparative philology in the early 19th century, the substantial results of the prize essay, notably the contributions to the delimitation of the Indo-European family and the specific letter correspondences governing the relationships between Germanic and Greek and Latin, were soon considered common

* I most gratefully acknowledge the stylistic corrections suggested to me by Professor John Considine (University of Alberta), all of which I have found to be improvements of my narrative. I also take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to Konrad Koerner for his constant support and frequent suggestions for revisions, all of which have prompted me to rethink my argument. The remaining shortcomings are my own.

knowledge (the latter under the name of Grimm's Law), or even out of date since Sanskrit had not been taken sufficiently into account.

That might again make readers wonder whether publishing the reprint and the translation is a service only to historians of linguistics. Of course, it is a service to historians of linguistics to make a classic text available in the only language which the majority of historians feel at ease with. And it is to be hoped that the burgeoning field of the history of linguistics will thereby receive a new impetus to scrutinize the early beginnings of Indo-European scholarship. But, just as importantly, the translation of this work of genius reveals that even if details in the substantial treatment of the various branches of language have now been superseded, the theoretical parts of the book, notably the introduction and the first chapter, are still worth reading by all linguists for their own sake.

2. *Rasmus Rask, the man and his career*

2.1 *Early years*

Rasmus Rask, or to use the earliest form of his name, Rasmus Christian Rasch, was born in a small village called Brændekilde on Funen, one of the Danish islands, on 22 November, 1787.

Rask's father was not a farmer, but a village tailor, and he earned his living also by being a 'wise man' which at that time may best be characterized as a healer and a barefoot doctor rolled into one. He educated his son himself until Rasmus was sent to grammar school in Odense at the age of thirteen, either in April 1801 (Petersen 1834: 2) or on 3 June 1801 (Diderichsen 1960: 28, with reference to Rønning 1887: 4, based on the school protocol). Here he was fortunate enough two years later to experience a breakthrough of a new pedagogy and new regulations which replaced a fundamentally medieval tradition of grammar-school teaching in Denmark. The new order was at the beginning only established in Trondheim, Copenhagen, and Odense since it was considerably more costly (cf. Paludan 1885: 78-79, and Henrichsen 1861, where the content of the reform is outlined). It is an accident, but an extremely lucky one, that Rask was able to transfer in 1802 to the new type of school which in Odense was apparently blessed with an extremely well-qualified faculty, many of whom were soon promoted, some to the university (Diderichsen 1960: 28-29 and elsewhere).

Diderichsen 1960 demonstrates in detail how much Rask owed to his school days at Odense precisely because the reform had as its explicit goal to further independent thinking. This was ideal for Rask (Bjerrum 1959: 17-18) and it is interesting to see that one of his most important teachers, the mathematician Carl Ferdinand Degen (1766–1825),¹ characterizes him as among the most gifted in these words:

Talent for application of already acquired knowledge, that is a *practical genius*, and for applying them in a new way, that is a *heuristic genius*, I think I have detected with R. ... R does show an aptitude for independent judgment and reasoning.²

¹ On Degen's own attempts to create a new etymological method cf. Karlsson et al 2000: 158.

² "Talent til at anvende allerede erhvervede Kundskaber, altsaa et *praktisk Genie*, og til at anvende dem paa en ny Maade, altsaa et *heuristic Genie*, troer jeg at have sporet hos R. [...] R. viser altsaa Anlæg"

(Degen in the school protocol 31 March 1803, after Diderichsen 1960: 20)

Diderichsen has also documented that the philologist S.N.J. Bloch (1772–1862) who was Rask's teacher of Greek, profoundly influenced his general linguistic outlook, and his grammatical apparatus in particular (see Diderichsen 1960: 33-39). Yet, Bloch praises precisely Rask's independent mind:

And he is not one of those numerous individuals who without any further investigation takes for granted all that his teacher says; oftentimes he will make good, well founded, even very fine protests and counter suggestions.³ (Bloch in the school protocol of October 1803; after Diderichsen 1960: 32)

It was while still in school that Rask found his unique object of study, Old Norse. It is certainly true that there was an interest in matters Icelandic among his contemporaries but the lack of knowledge of Icelandic, the language of the sagas, was almost total. So, Rask had to start by himself. He had already begun studying Icelandic early in 1804 (Diderichsen 1960: 30) but in March 1805 he had, as a tribute to his diligence, been awarded the Schønning edition of Snorris Heimskringla, more specifically the three parts which had appeared by then bound in one volume (Diderichsen 1960: 30; Petersen 1834: 4-5; *Letters I*: 298). In his biography of Rask, his schoolmate, and later the first professor of the Nordic languages in Denmark, Niels Matthias Petersen (1791–1862), details the method invented for this purpose (Petersen 1834: 5-6):

The only means which Rask had at his disposal for the study of this language [i.e. Old Norse] was Heimskringla itself, the text with the translations [into Danish and Latin]; while reading it he would extract, using the same method which he applied in his many linguistic studies later, the morphological structure [Dan. *Formlære*] of the language by scrutinizing the various contexts in which each word occurred. With a language as difficult as the Old Norse it would have been thought impossible for anyone else his age. The difficulties were multiplied considerably by the uncritical treatment of the text (which in later years he would often elaborate on *privatissime* for me) since not only was the same word not written in the same way, the very grammatical forms were confused. It was thus a hard and tedious job by repeated comparisons to discover which form was the right one. He proceeded in the following way: he wrote down each form of the word as it occurred in the text in his notebook and quoted the passage where it was found, compared when he found it repeated and thus carried on until finally a number of nouns, pronouns and verbs etc. were completed. This was continued until as many paradigms were laid out as were necessary to complete the system; then began the ordering of declensional classes and finally a complete make-over after an ordered plan.⁴

til at dømme og slutte selv.” (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Danish originals are the present author's own: JG.)

³ „Og er han ikke af den store Hob, der uden videre Undersøgelse tager for fuldt alt hvad Læreren siger. Idelig gjør han mig gode, velgrundede, ofte endog meget fine Anmærkninger og Indvendinger.“

⁴ „Den eneste Hjælp, som Rask havde til at studere dette Sprog, var Heimskringla selv, Teksten med Oversættelserne; under Læsningen uddrog han, på samme Måde, som i sine mange senere Sproggranskninger, Sprogets Formlære ved at betragte de forskjellige Forbindelser, i hvilke hvert Ord forekom; ved et så vanskeligt Sprog som det islandske, måtte det for enhver anden på hans Alder tykkes en Umulighed. Vanskeligheden forøgedes meget ved den ukritiske Behandling af Teksten

In a biographical letter to his Swedish friend Anders Jacob Danielsson Cnattingius (1792–1864), Rask complains that it was impossible for him to obtain any dictionary or grammar, but this is part of the solution to the riddle of how he was able to break new ground: he started from scratch by making his own.

The work invested during his school years was to remain the basic capital for his work with Icelandic and Old Norse and it was to place him as the only linguist in his time who really understood virtually every word in the old texts.

While in Odense, Rask made the acquaintance of Johan von Bülow (1751–1828), a gentleman of means who had been close to the king until he was relieved of his duties in 1793. Bülow had retired to his manor house, Sanderumgaard on Funen, and had started to use his considerable fortune to support all kinds of scholarly activities. He seems to have had a penchant for Nordic history and prehistory. Bülow was to remain a central source of support for Rask at the beginning of his career, and Rask wrote numerous letters to him, partly as reports on how work that had already been supported was progressing, partly as more or less poorly disguised applications for money for new projects. Rask seems to have been quite candid in his letters to Bülow about his reliance on him as his only benefactor until he was later supported by public funds (i.e., the royal treasury) and indeed considered him a paternal friend in whom to confide his deepest desires.

Rask remained in the Odense school until late in 1807. As an incident in the pan-European Napoleonic wars, Copenhagen was bombed by the British in early September 1807, and the war was not over until October 1807, when Rask was to be sent by the school to the University of Copenhagen ‘as soon as circumstances allow it’ (Diderichsen 1960: 28). He was enrolled to study theology, the only humanistic study which could lead to any job at the time.

Rask was soon given a (free) room at the Regensen, the royal college in the centre of Copenhagen, close to the university, and a job at the university library assisting the Professor of Literary History (and provost of the Regensen) Rasmus Nyerup (1759–1829), who was to remain a close friend and colleague, playing a significant role in his life until the end.

The first book that Rasmus Rask published was on Icelandic. It was called *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle nordiske Sprog* (A guide to the Icelandic or old Nordic language) (1811), a title which clearly showed that for Rask the contemporary Icelandic language was either identical to the Old Norse or so closely

(hvilken han i senere År oftere privatissime har udviklet mig), da ikke blot det selvsamme Ord ikke var skrevet på samme Måde, men selve de grammatikalske Former vare forvirrede; det var derfor et möjsommeligt Arbejde, ved gjentagen Sammenligning endelig at udfinde, hvilken Form der var den rette. Hans Fremgangsmåde dermed var følgende: han optegnede hver enkelt Ordform efterhånden som den forekom på sit Sted i sit Hæfte, og siterede hvor den fandtes, sammenlignede, når den kom igjen, og blev således ved, indtil enkelte Navneord, Stedord, Gjærningsord, o.s.v. stode opstillede fuldstændig; dette fortsattes så længe, indtil så mange Paradigmata vare forhånden, at der kunde granskes over det hele System, hvorefter Deklinationer, o.s.v. skulde ordnes; da begyndte en Omarbejdelse efter ordnet Plan.”

related to it as to be for all research purposes identical. He changed his mind on this issue in the second Danish edition of the book (1832), cf. the preface where he notes that in the original work ‘the old and common Nordic language is not as clearly differentiated from the new Icelandic language as it probably should have been in order to be used for deeper studies of language [i.e. for comparative historical purposes]’.⁵ The book was translated by its author into Swedish and considerably enlarged (1818) and this enlarged edition minus the author’s preface was translated into English by Sir George Webbe Dasent (1817–1896). That edition has been reprinted photographically as no. 2 of *Amsterdam Classics in Linguistics* with an introduction by Thomas L. Markey which partly also covers the prize essay and its importance (Markey 1976: xxvi-xxix). This volume also includes valuable bibliographical information on manuscripts and works on Rask to which I hereby refer the reader of the present work. The bibliographical details may, however, now be supplemented by direct searches via the web in the collections of the Danish Royal Library at www.kb.dk using ‘Rask’ as the author entry, since the various Rask manuscripts are now included in the searchable catalogue.

2.2 To Iceland

Rask not only wanted to study the Icelandic language in manuscripts; he wanted to actually go to Iceland to see for himself the places where all the events he had read about had taken place and to learn the language to perfection. First, however, he got the chance to go to Sweden and Norway with Nyerup. The travels were dressed up as scientific but also had the secret objective of espionage which Rask naively betrayed to Bülow (*Letters I*: 109; 116). The voyage occurred at the time when Napoleon was about to invade Russia and there were tensions along the borders. But as it happened Rask met individuals in Stockholm (notably Arvid August Afzelius (1785–1871)), in Uppsala and in Norway, who were later to be of importance in his work on Icelandic.

Rask had mentioned his intention to go to Iceland already in a very personal and frank letter to Bülow about his future position and scientific plans (*Letters I*: 106-115 at 112), and had thus indirectly sought Bülow’s support. He now received support to finish his prize essay, not only from Bülow but also from the influential Norwegian businessman Jacob Aall (1773–1844) (*Letters I*: 157), and an Icelander offered him free passage to Iceland. Finally, he had in fact also received the support of the Board of the University (commentary in *Letters III, I*: 62).

While he was in Iceland Rask finished the prize essay and sent the manuscript down to the Royal Academy in Copenhagen (*Letters I*: 172). In a long letter of 4 July 1814 to his former professor of theology Peter Erasmus Müller (1776–1834), Rask does everything he can to downplay expectations about the quality of the manuscript: he was forced to work in the only room in the house (i.e. surrounded by a lot of people and unable to lay out his books) and he makes many excuses about the style of

⁵ “[V]or [...] den gamle og almennordiske Sprogform ikke er så tydelig adskilt fra den ny islandske, som den vel burde været, for med sikkerhed at kunne anvendes i dybere Sprogundersøgelser”

his work, while insisting so much the more on its valuable content. The prize essay must have been underway for quite some time for it was only received at the Academy on 2 December 1814 (Lomborg 1960: 481).

Rask was deeply surprised by the poverty he found where the events described in the sagas had once taken place; but he was even more impressed by the natural scenery and the people he met on the island. In letters he boasted that he was actually taken for an Icelander, so well had he learnt to speak the language, and he gave vivid descriptions of the *geysirs* in whose immediate vicinity he had been camping together with a friend.

The importance of Rask's visit to Iceland lies in the fact that he acquainted himself thoroughly with Icelandic through hunting down the individuals who spoke the language to perfection (he complains about Reykjavik being infected by Danish). He writes in English in a letter to an unknown recipient that

This most valuable remainder of Gothic Antiquity, and almost the only one preserved in Iceland, is certainly the ancient general language of all the kingdoms of the North; which is still spoken throughout that Island to a truly astonishing degree of purity and elegance. This I may pretend to ascertain; for having travelled through the kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden and parts of Norway in order to study the languages and the philological antiquities of the North, I have now spent these two years in travelling around the island of Iceland to inquire into the present state of that remarkable language, and in every corner of the country I have been able to converse with the natives in the antient [*sic*] Scandinavian tongue and I have found them reading still the old *sagas* of the heroic age. (*Letters I*: 183)

Rask had thus entered into close friendships with a number of Icelanders who were active in preserving the island's cultural heritage. This was the golden age of learned societies. They would produce the critical editions needed for the advancement of knowledge and they would form the material basis of production by securing enough subscriptions. In picturing the lonely genius in his study, it is often overlooked that Rasmus Rask was an expert at doing such organizational work. He virtually created the two societies that were to become central in promoting scholarship on Icelandic (cf. commentary in *Letters III, 1*: 66f): Hid íslenzka Bókmenntafjelag and the Nordisk Oldskriftselskab. He served as the chairman of both.

Back from Iceland Rask had formed another plan. He wanted to get the prize essay published and he also wanted to work further along the lines suggested in it, but most of all, and all through his life, he wanted a job that would enable him to establish his own household and let him work solely on the issues he was concerned with. Thus, the perennial problem for Rask was how to navigate strategically in order to make himself attractive as a candidate for a professorship for the powers that be, while still producing scholarly publications. The problem was in principle unsolvable. If he did not produce any scholarly work, he would not get a position because he would be considered finished as a scholar. If he did publish, he would risk, in the eyes of the authorities, seeming not to be in need of a permanent position at all.

2.3 *The great voyage to South Asia 1816--1823*

One way to finance a scholarly career was then, as it is now, to apply for money for *projects* that only one promising individual could carry out. Rask's great voyage to the South Asia was one such project. It started out as a trip to Stockholm but this was to mark the beginning of a huge and long-lasting journey, which I shall not detail here since it is less important in this connection. The start, however, had obvious consequences both for Rask's life and for his reputation; and Rask's peculiar way of travelling and his reasons for doing so are both of immediate concern here.

Once Rask was back from Iceland he had written a report to the Board of the University of Copenhagen in November 1815, asking for a position. He received no answer. He then wrote to the Board again in July 1816 asking, first, for leave from his post as assistant university librarian and, second, asking whether on his return from a long journey financed by a private *maecenas* (i.e., Johan v. Bülow), he could expect to be affiliated with the university. He originally planned to rely solely on Bülow's money (*Letters I*: 192 and commentary ad loc.) and to go to the Caucasus via Stockholm and St. Petersburg. In answer to his letter the Board actually granted him a raise of 200 Rigsbankdaler (but made no promises as to a future affiliation). Immediately before his departure Rask also applied for money from the royal funds *ad usos publicos* to finance the printing of the prize essay (*Letters II*: 292). Rask sailed to Stockholm on 25 October 1816 (cf. *Letters III.1*: 74).

Once he was in Stockholm, however, Rask found being there so agreeable, and he met so much enthusiasm for his person and his plans that he actually wanted to stay there. At that time, the nation states of Sweden and Denmark were not on good terms, and it was seen as close to treason that a man of his standing, who had after all been supported repeatedly by the Danish King, would even consider accepting a position in Stockholm. The facts were these. Rask had accepted to help the above mentioned Afzelius produce editions of both the Snorra Edda and the Sæmundar Edda (Rask 1932–1935, bibliography, items 25 and 26). He produced an enlarged Swedish translation of his own guide to Icelandic, the *Vejledning* (Rask 1818a) and the next year a reader of Old Norse. In short, in two years he produced a complete apparatus to renew the study of the Old Icelandic language and was thus able to finish most of the works he had wanted to work on in Denmark — yet it was all published in Stockholm.

When Rask approached the recently elected member of the Royal Danish Academy Professor P. E. Müller, a central person in Rask's life, on behalf of a certain printing agent named Scheutz who wanted to produce an edition of Johan Ihre's (1707–1780) *Glossarium Suiogothicum* (Ihre 1769) which would take advantage of the learned Icelander John Olafsen's (1731–1811) supplements (with which Rask was very familiar, having spent much of his time in Copenhagen with the late Olafsen), the Royal Academy responded with unprecedented haste and no intention to hide its hostility:

At the present point in time it would more than ever appear inappropriate that Danes should contribute to making Icelandic books and works by Icelandic authors publicly

available in Sweden. When Mr. Rask wishes to publish the text of the prose Edda in Stockholm at a time when in Denmark both public and private efforts are made to publish in a worthy manner those monuments which are the pride of the North and the property of Denmark, this private indiscretion may hardly be forgiven this in other respects brilliant young man's scientific entrepreneurship; but if the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences were to embark upon a similar thoughtless course, it would in all likelihood arouse the public critique of learned men and possibly even make His Majesty the King, the Royal protector of the Academy, very dissatisfied with the Society indeed.⁶ (Lomborg 1960: 211)

The rebuke to which Rask was subjected is somewhat mollified when the text subsequently suggests that Rask be given the assignment of publishing the Olafsen supplement to Ihre's *Glossarium* 'if he remains in Denmark', a job worth an estimated 200 Rigsbankdaler a year (ibid: 212). The plan was later to be renewed when the Academy in March 1824, at the suggestion of Müller, granted Rask the sum of 200 Rigsbankdaler annually for three years to produce an *Etymologicum Danicum*. Rask's manuscript has survived (ibid: 214-215).

There is no doubt that Rask had found a wonderful environment in Stockholm, and even enthusiasm for his program of work, but still he had only got the money from Bülow for the purpose of going to Russia and later to India and Ceylon. The prospect of a permanent position in Sweden lurked on the horizon and that was what set the whole train in motion. The following section follows the original interpretation by Hjelmlev (1933) as modified and refined in Bjerrum (1957).

Suspecting that Rask would accept a permanent Swedish position, Müller writes in May 1817, that if that were the case, he would consider Rask devoid of any love of his country, and even a traitor to the cause of the nation (*Letters I*: 232). He asks rhetorically what help Rask had enjoyed from his country and answers by listing all the support he had had from the King (thereby inadvertently stressing the contrast between himself, a son of the ruling classes with no need of support, and Rask, 'the son of a peasant from Funen'). Rask answers him in the same letter in which he presented the Swedish plans for a re-edition of Ihre (*Letters I*: 237–242). He details his plans for scholarly work and repeats that he has had no promise of any affiliation to the university in Copenhagen. Furthermore: 'It is true that my country has *partly* made it possible for me to acquire my scholarly learning but it is equally true that it has *never* cared for any use of it' (p. 239).⁷ The letter is a sort of literary testament

⁶ "I nærværende Tidspunct kunde det mere end nogensinde synes upassende, at Danske vilde bidrage til at Islandske Skrifter og Islænderes Arbejder udkom i Sverrig. Naar Hr. Rask i Stokholm udgiver den prosaiske Eddas Text, paa samme Tid, da man i Danmark med offentlig og privat Anstrængelse stræber værdigen at publicere de Monumenter, som ere Nordens Stolthed og Danmarks Ejendom, saa kan denne private Indiscretion neppe nok tilgives den iøvrigt udmærkede unge Mands videnskabelige Nidkiærhed; men dersom Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab begik en lignende Ubetænksomhed, saa vilde denne vist opvække Kyndiges offentlige Uvillie, og muligen endog paadrage det Hs. Majestæt Kongens, Selskabets ophøjede Velgiørers, allerhøjeste Mishag."

⁷ "Det er sandt at Fædrenelandet har *tildels* sat mig istand til at erhverve mine Kundskaber; men det er ogsaa sant at det har *aldrig* brudt sig om at benytte dem." The use of the old (and modern-day Icelandic) word order in the dependent clause is significant.

and an eloquent defense, but as such it bears strong witness to how Rask perceived his gloomy prospects in Denmark.

From the perspective of history he was certainly right. Like all other geniuses, Rask was so much ahead of his time that even though his contemporaries had much veneration for his immense breadth and depth of knowledge and respect for his will power, they were not able to treat him as an exception. They simply could not secure his material circumstances so that his immense capacity could be brought to its full bloom. He was forced to be what he was not — patient! No one was more aware of this predicament than P. E. Müller (cf. Müller 1833: 29).

Rask had a plan which he had presented to Bülow. He had asked for permission to leave Denmark, requesting leave of absence from his position at the university library, and he had even got a small allowance as a contribution towards covering his travel expenses. However, the money from Bülow was not sufficient, and Müller knew that. When the prize essay had finally appeared, Müller went to the King to present him with his especially dedicated copy. This was immediately before the end of 1817 — ‘because I [Müller] knew that the travel scholarships were to be handed out soon’ (*Letters I*: 293) — and he did in fact obtain a promise of support. From now on, everything went surprisingly smoothly: Rask was granted money from the King for the voyage (see *Letters I*: 293-294 and commentary *ad loc.*); and the very letters to document the renewed support for 1819 were sent in transcription to Rask while he was in St. Petersburg in cover letters from Müller (*Letters I*: 408-413). Rask was *en voyage*. The journey would take him to Persia, India and Ceylon and would allow him to buy a collection of manuscripts for the Royal Library in Copenhagen unmatched by any other collection in Europe.

The manuscripts that Rasmus Rask brought home with him were first listed in volume 3 of his collected works edited by his half brother H. K. Rask (the list was also published separately in 1838). They have recently been the subject of scholarly treatment in a complete catalogue (Buescher 2011). As for Rask’s own manuscripts, the reader is referred to the complete inventory in *Letters III.2*: 515-593.

Rasmus Rask had a peculiar way to travel. Everywhere he went he sought the acquaintance of men who have studied the local language, or indeed any language, struck up a linguistic friendship in order to borrow the materials they have available so as to be able to broaden his own linguistic horizon, and offered his own materials in return. In this way his travels became a truly linguistic expedition, much to the chagrin of his audience at home who had expected colourful and vivid descriptions of exotic sights. N.C.L. Abrahams, a somewhat younger and more successful contemporary, says in his memoirs that he and a number of other young friends were invited to Nyerup’s place immediately after Rask’s return, but did not get anything out of the traveler except a story about how he had once ridden an elephant (Abrahams 1876: 179-180).

To travel in his study so to speak, was Rask’s inventive way to make the best out of a very complicated and potentially life-threatening ordeal. He had not at all wanted to go to India himself. What he wanted was to have at his disposal materials akin to the saga manuscripts on which he could base an analysis of the Eastern languages,

notably Sanskrit. When in September 1818 he learned in a letter from Nyerup (*Letters I: 337-338*) that the Danish medical doctor and botanist Nathanael Wulff Wallich (1785–1854) had presented the Copenhagen University Library with ‘all that has been printed in later years in Calcutta and Serampore, among which no less than 3 different Sanskrit grammars and a Sanskrit dictionary’⁸, he wrote to Müller from St. Petersburg suggesting that he should return home (*Letters I: 347-349*, esp. 348). He states that he has acquired Wilkins’ Sanskrit grammar of 1808 and that he has access to more materials here in Russia than would be possible anywhere else, except England and India. Furthermore, he describes how he has been working day and night on a Sanskrit grammar after a new plan so that it is comparable to his Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon grammars. He finally suggests that he could go back to Copenhagen and use the Wallich donation and what he already has at his disposal to produce a Sanskrit grammar and reader. Having finished that, he could, he suggests, take the sea route back to India in 1819 or 1820 in order to study Pali and the Vedas and to get hold of the Buddhists’ books (*ibid.*, p. 349). In a letter of 12 October, Rask pushes Müller for an answer to his suggestion of producing what he explicitly states is a ‘comparative Sanskrit Grammar’ and a reader. His ideas about the relationship between Pali and Sanskrit are that Sanskrit seems to be mixed whereas Pali seems to be closer to Greek (and hence more original) (*Letters I: 353*). Müller gives his answer in a letter of 30 October (*Letters I: 360-361*). He is convinced that both he and Rask will be seen by the King and the circle around him as fraudulent, i.e., as having received money for one purpose but having used them for another, if he were to return home.

Rask continues his journey.

Let us pause here to speculate what it would have meant for Rask’s position in the history of linguistics, had he followed his original plan and produced a Sanskrit grammar and reader in 1819.⁹ The Wallich donation is detailed and annotated in a paper by Jens Lassen Rasmussen (1725–1826) from 1819. It does not only contain Sanskrit books, but focusing on those we note that it covers all the relevant literature on Sanskrit by the English (Colebrooke 1805, Carey 1806, Forster 1810 and Wilkins 1808) and also includes four Sanskrit grammars in Sanskrit. Furthermore, we find the first part of the Wilson Sanskrit dictionary and the dictionary by Amara Sinha annotated by Colebrooke and published in 1808, and, to make the collection complete, a considerable number of Sanskrit texts. There is no doubt that the collection might have substituted for any visit to Serampore or Calcutta. The proof is that these books were exactly the books on which Rask would base his later work on Sanskrit detailed below.

⁸ “Alt hvad i senere Aaringer er bleven trykt i Calcutta og Serampore. Deriblandt ikke mindre end 3 forskjellige Grammatikker over Sanskritsproget samt et Sanskrit-Lexicon”. Buescher (2011: xvii) classifies the manuscripts from the Wallich donation as solely concerning Ayurveda topics but this is only part of the donation.

⁹ Amsterdamska (1987) has pointed to an interesting riddle: Why was it German scholars and not English or French ones that brought Sanskrit into continued and systematic university study? There are reasons to be found for this in the various university systems adopted but Amsterdamska also suggests that the ideology of historicist idealism was decisive (Amsterdamska 1987: 35-36). This seems to me both true and important. It should not be overlooked, however, that the idea of a German linguistic unity and common historical past had important political ramifications as well.

If we now take a look at the European scene it is evident that Sanskrit was *en vogue* after Friedrich Schlegel's famous book of 1808 on the language and wisdom of the Indians. The next period would see the foundation and rapid development of a new scientific discipline, that of Oriental studies (Mangold 2004). Mangold convincingly argues that the study of Oriental languages only gradually separated itself from the study of religion. A crucial person in this respect was Franz Bopp (1791–1867), one of the founders of Indo-European comparative linguistics.

Bopp's *Conjugationssystem* was published in 1816, and it would quite definitely have placed Rask as the only one of the three founders, Grimm included, who mastered all the main branches of the new discipline if he had published on Sanskrit in 1819. We may form quite a definite impression of what the contribution would have been by taking a look at what the group of manuscripts written by Rask and now designated as Ny Kongelige Samling 149^c 61-68 contain. The collection of interlocking manuscripts indeed may be seen as a prime example of the principles and the methodology outlined in the prize essay. A reader of the essay might have asked how Rasmus Rask would work with a language like Sanskrit; here is the answer.

The centerpiece of the group is of course the incomplete, but still very close to completed, Sanskrit grammar in Danish (No.61) which is comprehensive (116 pages long) and built according to the plan used by Rask for his other works. This is supplemented by dictionaries with Devanagari entries and English explanations of word meanings (No. 63) and transliterated entries and Danish explanations (No. 64). No. 68 then contains Rask's selections from the literature and the manuscripts that he was not able to buy, sometimes with translations (into English), sometimes without. This would, of course, be significantly supplemented by his work with the manuscripts he did indeed buy. Finally, there is a (partly annotated) survey of the literature on Sanskrit (No. 62), mentioning a number of English language grammars of Sanskrit, by Wilkins (Rask comments that it is 'very usable'), Forster ('bad'), and Yates, and dictionaries by Colebrooke and Wilson.¹⁰ Bopp's *Conjugationssystem* and Othmar Frank's (1770–1830) *Grammatica Sanscrita* (from 1823) both figure among the later entries. There is also a reference to a paper by Humboldt from 1822 on a Sanskrit topic. The list documents that Rask had had access to what was available and thus was completely *au courant*. Since its latest entry is dated 1823, Marie Bjerrum dates the list as a whole as having been written over the course of the period 1820–1823 (which would mean *en voyage*). Whether that is true for the other manuscripts is impossible to say; they probably represent a sustained effort lasting several years.

Taken as a complete system we note that Rask in order to 'build the grammar of a language' (cf. note 26 below) used dictionaries and philology in the strict sense as his essential instruments, and that in consequence he had to master all these now separate and specialized linguistic fields of inquiry.

But it was not to be. Rask left his materials for a Sanskrit grammar for posterity, but no one noticed; he himself discarded all things Asiatic in despair when he did not

¹⁰ Most of these works were printed in India and thus could be the books that Rask himself acquired and tried to sell in 1831; certainly Bopp mentions Wilson (cf. note 12).

get the professorship he so desired (cf. next section) and only returned to this branch of learning during the 1830s when it was too late to finish his original plans.¹¹

2.4 *Back in Denmark 1823–1832*

Rask's return to Denmark in May 1823 after the great voyage was celebrated twice, first by the Icelandic literary society (Hid íslenska Bókmenntafjelag) on 13 May and secondly, the day after, by some of his university colleagues (Rønning 1887: 118-119). Everybody expected great exotic news but none was produced. Rask was again caught between the expectations that he would deliver and his own need of a steady income and a real position.

The positions available to a scholar of his interests were few. Actually, there was at that time only one professorship of 'Oriental languages' at the University of Copenhagen (and only one University in the kingdom) and this was from the start occupied by teachers of Hebrew for the benefit of students of theology (Slottved 1978 D7: 145ff.).¹²

When Rask returned from his travels the professorship of Hebrew was not vacant. It had been so to speak inherited by Nicolai Christoffer Kall (1749–1823), who succeeded his father Johan Christian Kall (1714–1775), but he died in October 1823, less than half a year after Rask's return. Rask, however, was not promoted; the professorship was taken over by Jens Lassen Rasmussen, who had catalogued the Wallich donation in 1819, thus showing his broad knowledge of all the so-called Oriental languages. Rasmussen had been an adjunct since 1813 and an extraordinary professor since 1815, and thus by university traditions could expect an ordinary professorship (Slottved 1978: 147). This was completely in line with what the university authorities found rational at the time, although we as observers with hindsight may appreciate the feelings that Rask must have had. When, he must have asked himself, would *he* ever be in a position to be promoted — and when had the world of learning ever heard of Jens Lassen Rasmussen?¹³

Rask applied for a post as soon as he arrived in Copenhagen and, after a year of waiting, was given the title of 'Professor of literary history with special reference to Asiatic literature' on 14 May 1825 (Slottved 1978: 165) — but no raise in pay. On the

¹¹ A curious letter from Franz Bopp to Rask of 20 February 1831 has survived (Letter 940, *Letters II*: 254-255) in which Bopp declares himself willing to assist Rask in selling his "schöne Sammlung sanskritischer Bücher". Why Rask wanted to sell his Sanskrit books just when he was again preoccupied with the Oriental languages, remains a mystery. The letter is very generous and kind and seems to indicate genuine friendship. So, for instance, Bopp suggests that Rask would be able to find a better position (than at the University of Copenhagen) in Prussia. The sale in the end turned out to be unsuccessful and the books were returned to Rask.

¹² Ironically, Rask himself by his very scholarship and reputation would become instrumental in making the authorities at the University of Copenhagen create two regular professorships in 1844, shortly after his death: one in the Nordic languages and one in Oriental languages. Both were filled by pupils of Rask: Niels Matthias Petersen, his friend and biographer (1791–1862), and Niels Ludvig Westergaard (1815–1878), his most obvious pupil as a Sanskrit scholar, respectively.

¹³ Rasmussen had studied with Silvestre de Sacy and was an original scholar on the subject of Islamic connections to the Western world, notably trade connections. He was the son in law of N.C. Kall, his predecessor in the position. According to the biographical entry at www.denstoredanske.dk, he committed suicide.

contrary, for formal reasons the Board decided that he was to be given the pay that he had already been given as part of his previous job as a university librarian, but only as an extraordinary bonus for a period of three years, and thus he had to ‘beg’ for a renewal every three years.

Jens Lassen Rasmussen died in 1826, however, and at this junction Rask must again have had high hopes of getting the position. Now he was the extraordinary professor waiting in line for an ordinary professorship. His hopes turned to nothing, however, when Matthias Hagen Hohlenberg (1797–1845) who was even younger than Rask but was the son-in-law of Ove Malling (for whom see section 3.1 below), was appointed as Rasmussen’s successor. Hohlenberg, after 5 years in the position, opted for the professorship in theology and thus left the post vacant in 1831. Finally, Rask got it in December that year (Slottved 1978: 147).

A complication of some relevance here was that the logic of Rask’s whole linguistic enterprise told him to make his basic data as comparable as possible, as can be seen in the text of the prize essay itself. One obstruction was of course the various indigenous orthographies. He not only worked out a scheme for transliterating all the Indian languages into a European orthographical system and had printing types made for that purpose (Müller 1833: 19), but also analyzed the Danish orthography in his great treatise called *Forsøg til en videnskabelig dansk Retskrivningslære* (‘An attempt at a scientific treatment of Danish orthography’) (Rask 1826), and by doing so paved the way for what was later to become standard Danish orthography (Gregersen 1985, Galberg Jacobsen 2010).

This did not, however, make Rask popular. Firstly, even his colleagues did not understand why he spent so much time and energy on this subject (though it should be obvious that it was part and parcel of his program), and secondly, the populace ridiculed him as the inventor of strange letters (Müller 1833: 23). He insisted that societies that were to print his contributions, such as the Royal Academy and the Nordisk Oldskriftselskab, use his own orthography but for that very reason his written works were denied publication. He even left the Royal Danish Society for Danish Language and History because members had complained that he wanted to use his own orthography in his own contributions (Werlauff 1847: 197, note r). No wonder he felt left alone. Even N. M. Petersen quarreled with him as to the right method of getting his orthography used. The issue here was not the orthography per se (although Petersen did later change some aspects of the program) but how to promote it. Rask was adamant that if only enough authors used it, the readers would accept it, whereas Petersen had a much more pessimistic view and preferred gradual reform. Markey (1976: xxiii) quotes the insidious letter written by Christian Molbech (1783–1857) to Jacob Grimm which concludes in the joke, ascribed to the King, that one wondered that the only result of the many years of travel to distant countries would be an o above the a. (Rask had suggested using the letter <å> instead of double a.)

Early on Rask had had ideas that he was being persecuted: in modern day terms he suffered from some sort of paranoia. In a letter to the above mentioned Swedish colleague Cnattingius about his childhood and later biography, he writes as follows:

It happened once at a foreign place where I had to learn something that I got a pretty strong portion of arsenic on an open sandwich. I know the person who gave it to me to revenge himself on me or my father; I know the occasion and remember with certainty the exact circumstances, but my conscience tells me that I was innocent and I have a long time ago forgiven this matter and so will not mention any one.¹⁴

(*Letters I*: 296)

He goes on to say how he got sick and was confined to bed for the better part of a year and how he still suffers from the consequences! It is curious to note that there are certain similarities between the later attacks of paranoia in India, where he could not understand what the natives were saying and feared for his life (Müller 1833: 18 with reference to the diary, see Rønning 1887: 109) and later on when he thought that he was being poisoned by his erstwhile *fiancée*, Louise Nyerup, daughter of his paternal friend Rasmus Nyerup. The similarities lie in the fact that he explicitly *forgives* the natives in India and that he thought that Louise Nyerup would poison him by putting before him *a particular kind of food*.

Now that he was in fact being persecuted for his beliefs (in a rational Danish orthography), his anxieties grew, and N.M. Petersen details how he thought he was being poisoned and some other time that he would be burnt to death like the saga-hero Njal (Petersen 1908: 189, cf. note 1).

Markey (1976: xxv) bases his rendering of the relationship to Nyerup and his daughter on Diderichsen's discovery among N. M. Petersen's papers of a draft for his biography of Rask, where Petersen is much more explicit than he is in the published biography of 1834 (Diderichsen 1960: 216). It is vital in this case to distinguish between the facts and the interpretations by Petersen and Diderichsen. The facts are that Nyerup was until his death at age seventy in 1829 a provost of the Regensen and thus had free lodging there (and a lot of space) and was at the same time head of the University Library. Rask wanted to succeed him in both of these positions when his paternal friend died. He thus applied for both (*Letters II*: 224f and commentary ad loc.; Diderichsen 1960: 216-263). Now, what Petersen says is that Rask had wondered why he did not get promoted, Petersen concludes that he had fallen out of favour, presumably because of the feud about the orthography during 1825 and 1826. This turned out not to be true in the end, but it is the basis for Rask's speculations. Petersen surmises that it was possible that someone was trying to force Rask to marry 'a person whom he disliked thoroughly'. This someone presumably was Rasmus Nyerup who wanted his youngest daughter married and cared for.

Louise Nyerup was born in 1799 and, by the customs of the day, she was a housekeeper for her father since Nyerup's wife had died in 1818, and she was the only unmarried daughter to remain at home; it was high time that she got married if she was to have a chance; both Nyerup and she herself were getting older. Rask, on the other hand, as we have heard above, had actually suspected Louise Nyerup of

¹⁴ „Undertiden hände det att jag på et främmanda ställe, der jag skulle lära någon ting, fick en ganska stark portion arsenik på en smörgås. Jag känner personen, som gaf mig den för att hämnas på mig eller min far, jag vet anledningen och erinrar fullkomligt väl den minsta omständigheten; men mitt samvete säger mig att jag var oskyldig, och jag har länge sedan förlåtit denna sak, hvarföre jag ingen vill nämna.“

being able to plan to poison him in March 1829. This was two years after Rask had proposed to her only to see the engagement broken off ‘under peculiar circumstances which hurt him immensely’ (P. E. Müller 1833: 27). Rask mentions in his letter of application to the Board of the University of Copenhagen, in which he declares his interest in the position as provost of Regensen, that Nyerup had promised him to resign when he turned seventy, both from the Library and from Regensen, only to make it possible for Rask to become his successor (Diderichsen 1960: 217, n. 22). This would have given him both a permanent position (and salary) and a place to live; but Rask was quite aware of the fact that he had only slim chances of getting the particular post at Regensen since he was single.

Louise Nyerup apparently did not want to marry Rask and according to the Rask diary turned him down on 13 May 1827 in spite of her initial acceptance of Rask’s proposal on 10 May (Diderichsen 1960: 216, n. 22). The diary has the following peculiar wording: ‘I proposed to Nyerup’s daughter [Rask does not refer to her as ‘Louise’] and almost got her and her father’s yes’ (ibid.). Petersen writes that ‘Nyerup did not know either his wife’s or his daughter’s secrets’ and Rask talks about Louise Nyerup making ‘a journey to Germany (but actually only to Jutland)’ in connection with the broken engagement (ibid.).

My suggested interpretation is that Louise Nyerup had a child outside marriage and that this child was the reason for her journey. Rask only proposed to her to solve two problems at once: Nyerup’s problem of having his daughter cared for and Rask’s own problem of getting a wife (so that he would be able to succeed Nyerup at the Regensen and at the same time continue having Louise cook for him).

Incidentally, Louise Nyerup never married and lived with various relatives for the rest of her life. She died at the age of 84.

The hope of getting Nyerup’s position as head of the University Library was fulfilled, but the hope of getting the free lodging at the Regensen was not. The board preferred the classical philologist Frederik Christian Petersen (1786–1859) who was indeed married and had children.

In his biography of Rask, N. M. Petersen comments that, when Rask finally had realistic hopes of concentrating on the ‘Oriental languages’, he did in fact put everything else aside and seemed to be his good old self (Petersen 1834: 85-86). This is as solid evidence as we may hope for, namely, that Rask’s paranoia was related to the fact that in spite of his contemporary European reputation as a *savant* of the first order, he did not get any university promotion until the very end of his life.

Rask did not die a rich man but he turned out to be somewhat wealthier than the world had had reason to suspect him to have been by the way he had lived. He gave N. M. Petersen a considerable sum of money to produce something to be published in his new orthography (it was eventually used to finance Rask’s collected papers in three volumes) and he left money for his half brother and his sister (Christensen 1932a, b).

Rask was buried on 20 November 1832, and since the organizers had expected a large crowd, they had ordered 13 carriages complete with drivers and servants. But the students relieved the pall bearers and carried his coffin from his home in

Badstuestræde no.17 to Nørreport. Here the hearse waited to take him to Assistens Cemetery where his grave is still to be found. The hearse was followed to its destination by a huge crowd of Copenhageners.

After the funeral his books were sold. Clearly they made up the better part of the fortune left by his estate, a fortune which when he lived served him as a scholar and thus could not be used to ameliorate his living conditions. We have a good grasp of which books Rask had owned, since there is a complete catalogue of the auction, numbering 1773 items in total (Christensen 1932a, b).

2.5 Rasmus Rask in the history of Danish linguistics

All Danish linguists are, whether they are aware of this or not, pupils of Rask. A number of them have given their interpretation of his life and what he accomplished, often in connection with centenaries or bicentenaries, starting with his friend and pupil, Niels Matthias Petersen, who never tired of championing his cause, and who wrote the authoritative biography as his contribution to the first volume of the edition of Rask's collected papers in 1834. This is a beautifully written and comprehensive account of Rask's life produced by a close friend who had discussed a number of issues with the protagonist. This was followed by Wimmer (1887), Thomsen (1887, translated into German 1889) and (1902: 38ff.), Pedersen (1916: 41-44), and Pedersen (1924: 228-234, translated into English 1931, and still a wonderful, though one-sided, introduction to the triumphs of 19th-century linguistics). Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) wrote his book about Rask (Jespersen 1918) as a volume in a series on 'Leaders of the people' commemorating the centenary of the prize essay, while Holger Pedersen (1867–1953) subsequently contributed the introduction (Pedersen 1932) to the Hjelmslev edition of the selected works (also in German), published 100 years after Rask's death. Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) himself had planned to write a biography of Rask, and no one would have been in a better position to do so judging by his exquisite notes to the selected works and his commentaries on the letters, but apart from Hjelmslev (1932) and the brief but important study of 1933, he only published his "Commentaires sur la vie et l'oeuvre de Rasmus Rask" in 1951. Hjelmslev's point of view on Rask forms the basis for Marie Bjerrum's (1920–2001) dissertation of 1959, which in turn triggered the book of 1960 by Paul Diderichsen (1905–1964). Diderichsen, by the way, had been appointed an opponent at the defense of Bjerrum's dissertation. However, while he was preparing his opposition, he became so engulfed in the history of Rask's early years that the dissertation defense had to wait until he had finished his own book. Finally, Jørgen Rischel wrote a booklet on Rasmus Rask celebrating his bicentenary in 1987. For English-only researchers, the treatment in Karlsson et al. (2000: 156-164 and *ad indicem*) may be recommended, since it places Rask among his contemporaries in the Nordic countries and does so on the backdrop of the European scene. Diderichsen wrote a short version of his book as his contribution to the Wenner-Gren Foundation symposium on 'Revolution vs. Continuity in the Study of Language' in August 1964. It was first published as part of the volume of Diderichsen's papers produced on the occasion of his all too early

death (Diderichsen 1966) but is now readily available in Hymes (1974). The Society for Nordic Philology has celebrated selected anniversaries by publishing a book dedicated to ascertaining the state of the art. In 1937, when the first 25 years had passed, Poul Andersen (1901–1985) wrote the piece on Rask (Andersen 1937). In 1979 the University of Copenhagen celebrated the first 500 years of its existence by staging a number of scientific symposia. Among them was the Rask–Hjelmslev symposium on Typology and Genetics of Language a report of which may be found in Thrane et al. (1980). The translator of the prize essay, Niels Ege, contributed several papers, the most obviously relevant one being Ege (1980). Jørgen Rischel in his contributions to volume 2 of the handbook on the Nordic languages edited by Bandle et al. has given a highly original overview of ‘The Contribution of the Nordic countries to historical-comparative linguistics: Rasmus Rask and his followers’ (Rischel 2002). Finally, Hans Frede Nielsen contributed the biographical entry on Rask in volume 24 of *Hoops’ Reallexikon* (Nielsen 2003).

Among the books on Rask written by non-linguists we may single out F.V.V. Rønning’s treatment which is well documented and lucidly written (Rønning 1887). Rask has even found his way into Danish fiction as witnessed by recent publications by the well known writer Hanne Marie Svendsen (2009) and the considerably younger author Mathilde Walther Clark (2005). A popular biography of Rasmus Rask’s life and letters by Kirsten Rask appeared in 2002.

3. *The prize essay*

3.1 *A question and its consequences*

The prize question which was announced by the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences on 10 June 1810 (Lomborg 1960: 480-481) in Danish and Latin translates as follows (after Karlsson et al. 2000: 219; cf. the translation below p.8 [= 23 in the original]):

To investigate, by means of historical criticism, and to illustrate with appropriate examples, from what source the ancient Scandinavian language can most correctly be derived; to explain the nature of the language and its relationships, from ancient times and up through the Middle Ages, to Scandinavian and German dialects; and to determine exactly the rules on which all derivations and comparisons in these languages should be based.¹⁵

Louis Hjelmslev has discussed the origin and wording of this question in his commentary to the corrected edition of 1932. He suggests that it might have been Peter Erasmus Müller who was responsible for the proposal to announce this question precisely at that time, but that he could not have had any knowledge of the fact that Rask had prepared an investigation along these lines in his school days (Hjelmslev 1934: 2-3, with reference to a now lost letter quoted by Petersen 1834: 15-18). P. E. Müller cannot, however, have been the original spokesman for Rask at the meeting when the prize question was formulated since he was not yet a member of the Royal Academy in 1810. He was only elected in 1811 (Lomborg 1942: 365). Neither was Johan von Bülow able to speak for Rask. He was awarded an honorary membership

¹⁵ The Danish original is found in Fig.1 below.

only in 1815 (ibid: 431); Rasmus Nyerup was elected even later, in 1823, immediately before Rask himself in 1825 (Lomborg 1942: 367). On the other hand, the previously mentioned C. F. Degen was a member (ibid. 363).

INSERT Fig. 1 ca. HERE

It turns out that the question¹⁶ bears the signatures of the following members of the Historical Class of the Academy: A(braham) Kall, N(iels Iversen) Schow, (Ove) Malling and B(ørge) Thorlacius.¹⁷

The authors turn out to be a cross section of Danish intellectuals interested in the historical elucidation of the state of Denmark and its past: Abraham Kall (1743–1821) was by then senior Professor of History and Geography at the University of Copenhagen. Niels Iversen Schow (1754–1830) was extraordinary Professor of Archaeology; Ove Malling (1747–1829) was an extremely influential civil servant and for some time prime minister, now mostly known for his book on *Store og gode handlinger*, which was used as a reader (and a template for spelling) by successive generations of pupils from 1777 onwards (Malling 1777), and finally Børge Thorlacius (1775–1829), who was the son of the learned Iclander who was to finish the Schønning edition of *Heimskringla*, Skuli Thorlacius Thordarson (1741–1815), and who himself took over where his father had left off. Thorlacius the younger may be supposed to be the real instigator of this particular question although he only signed last (probably, they signed according to year of election and thus seniority in the Academy). He had only been appointed to the post as an ordinary Professor of Latin in 1803 and elected to the Academy in 1810, the year in which the question was formulated; but with his background and typically rationalistic erudition it would be obvious to see him as the instigator *par excellence* among these four. Incidentally, he was also the son in law of Abraham Kall, the senior member of the group (and thus the one to sign first).

We may discuss how much the question actually limited Rask's response and how much it furthered it. It did indeed determine the characteristic structure of the work in that the Icelandic language is taken as the pivot for a comparative exercise taking us through the various geographical candidates for the position as the language best suited to elucidate the 'source of the Old Icelandic or Nordic tongue', gradually giving a total picture of which languages were related to Icelandic and which were not. This, however, was probably very much a picture of the development of the author's own studies, having Icelandic as the core around which he built his successive raids into foreign territory, always illuminating them by first casting the available evidence in the same mould.

On the other hand, the strategy used allows the author to demonstrate his mastery of his own stated principles of discovery in that he has to discard any original relationship in four out of the eight cases which he analyzes, namely, Greenlandic, Celtic, Basque and Finnic. In the case of Celtic this soon turned out to be wrong but it

¹⁶ Interestingly, the word order is a little different from the one given by Rask himself in the prize essay and accords better with the one given above than the translation found below on page 8 of the edition.

¹⁷ The excerpt from the protocol at the Academy was kindly sent to me by Katrine Hassenkam Zoref.

is still interesting to study why Rask came to the wrong conclusion and why he changed his mind so quickly (Pedersen 1924: 53).

Rask wrote at a time when the differentiation between what Collinge calls the T (for Typology) strain, the G (for Genetic) strain and finally the E (for Evolution) strain was not in place (Collinge 1995). This gives the prize essay its character of being close to the discovery of the various types of linguistic relationships outlined in the theoretical chapter at the beginning of the prize essay. The sheer possibility of being wrong is still open and vibrant. That only enhances its value for us in forcing us to question whether the orthodoxy of differentiating between the various strains has indeed brought us closer to a clear picture of the history of language or not. The present interest in language contact, originally fuelled by the appearance of Thomason & Kaufman (1988), and the somewhat more recent (renewed) revolt against seeing languages as delimited national entities under the watchword of ‘linguaging’ (e.g., Jørgensen 2010) bear witness to the fact that this is not a foregone conclusion.

Rask was no Herderian.¹⁸ There is no reference at all to Herder in his letters, nor is there in his works. His personality as a researcher is thoroughly rationalist and he disliked — for both scientific and personal reasons — the proponents of Herderian nationalism in Denmark, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) and Christian Molbech (1783–1857), as can be seen in his letter to Bülow of 1 January 1812 (*Letters* I: 85), where he characterizes Grundtvig as an irrational mystic. Although he, like Grimm, is a staunch patriot, it is not a romantic idealist stance based on the idea of a *Volksgeist* that leads him to the love of his language and its ancient roots, but rather an old-fashioned idea of the King as the father of his country and an acute sense of cultural independence from Germany and German scholarship.

The differences between Jacob Grimm and Rasmus Rask thus may be phrased partly in terms of ideological background — Grimm certainly was a Herderian (according to Robins 1967: 172) — and partly in the different objectives they had set for themselves.¹⁹ Grimm concentrated on Germanic, whereas Rask continued his search for relationships until he reached the limit, as can be seen in the final pages of the essay itself, where Rask refers to the clearly unrelated Malayan and Australian classes, thus rounding off his treatise not only for lack of evidence (which goes for the Indic and Persian languages) but because of clear evidence that a boundary has been detected.

3.2 *The genesis of Rask's prize essay*

The production of the prize essay was no simple thing. Rask approached the Academy (anonymously of course) in a letter of 14 December 1811 (*Letters* I: 77-72) and asked for an extension of the deadline by at least a year. He refers in the letter to his collections which he had begun to systematize and reorder to make the production

¹⁸ Or rather, in the prize essay he isn't. Diderichsen 1968 lists Herderian statements in his other works (233, note 6), but I would seriously question whether the statements are really Herderian or just commonplace for the period. This merits further study.

¹⁹ The relationship between Rask and the two brothers Grimm has been analyzed in detail by Sonderegger 1986, where a most useful survey of the German reception of Rask may also be found.

of a response possible. Privately he showed the plan and some specimens to his friend Rasmus Nyerup and to Peter Erasmus Müller, who had now been elected to the class in the Royal Academy which was to form a verdict when the time came. In a letter to Johan von Bülow asking for money on the occasion of a possibility to go to Sweden (*Letters* I, 115-119), Rask writes (p. 117):

the Royal Academy has published a prize question calling for an investigation of the source of the old Nordic language. This I have thought I would try to answer and I will explain the Icelandic by the Greek as the oldest and most original language in the whole of Europe. The question was actually to be answered last year and I sent in a specimen of the treatise with a request for extension. I had sent in a number of lexical comparisons and of the grammar a comparison between the declension systems of Icelandic and Greek where each ending in the first was referred to and deduced by the last. I showed these fragments to Nyerup and he said that ‘they were excellent’ and ‘that the grammatical comparison was something completely new which no one before me had discovered or even suspected’. A verdict just as flattering I received from Professor Erasm. Müller, who is in that class of the Academy that will have to evaluate it. Obviously I was highly flattered and encouraged and the more so since I believe by this in addition much can be illuminated of the inner workings of *the Greek language* itself.²⁰

The Academy granted the extension on 3 January 1812 (Lomborg 1960: 481), but the essay was not delivered to the Academy until 2 December 1814 (*ibid.*). By that time Rask was on his trip to Iceland. Much has been made of the fact that Rask was unable to see the book through the printing press, as stated in Rask’s own preface below, and that professors Nyerup and Finn Magnusson (1781–1847), the latter among the first learned Icelanders to greet Rasmus Rask as a worthy friend of Iceland (*Letters* I: 87ff.) and later to become Chief of the Archives in Copenhagen, had to correct the proofs. This is not quite true however, since the very last proofs seem to have been sent to Rask himself when he was in Stockholm (*Letters* I: 242, 256, 283). However that may be, the extremely complicated nature of the printing assignment and the haste which was so characteristic of Rask — in combination with the above-mentioned factors — in sum explain the many discrepancies that Hjeltslev notes between the manuscript and the edition. These discrepancies have been resolved in the corrected edition by Hjeltslev, and this corrected edition without variants is the basis for the present work, Niels Ege’s translation into English. Thus, this version may be said to convey to the reader what Rask would have intended to communicate,

²⁰ „af Videnskab. Selskab er udsat den Prisopgave at *undersøge det gamle nordiske Sprogs Oprindelse*. Dette har jeg tænkt at forsøge paa og jeg udleder Islandsken af Græsken som det ældste og originaleste Sprog i hele Evropa [...] Opgaven var egentlig for forrige Aar og jeg indsendte en Prøve af Afhandlingen med Anmodning om Udsættelse. Det indsendte indeholdt en Del Lexicalske Sammenligninger, og af grammati. en Sammenligning imellem den islandske og Græske Deklinationssteori, hvori enhver Endelse i den første var henført til og udledt af det sidste. Jeg viste Nyerup disse Brudstykker og han sagde „de vare fortræffelige“ og at den grammatikalske Sammenligning var noget ganske nyt, „som ingen før havde opdaget eller ahnet“ [...] En ligesaa smigrende Dom fik jeg af Prof. Erasm. Müller som er i den Klasse af Vidensk. Selskab der skal bedømme det. Naturligvis maatte dette smigre mig meget og opmuntre mig saa meget mer som jeg tror derved tillige kann opdages og oplyses meget i *det græske Sprogs* inderste Væsen.“

as far as we are able to reconstruct this, if he had written his work in the international language of today.

The prize essay was evaluated by the Historical Class at the Royal Academy. The evaluators produced the following verdict:

The treatise with the motto *Sialdan eru dasmidir ahlaupaværk*²¹ which was delivered to the Academy contains many erudite and new investigations, bears witness to vast linguistic knowledge and an extraordinary gift of combination. Although the author has not yet reached as far back as to the oldest and furthest removed sources of the Nordic languages and although he has not treated the Persian, the Indic and other Asiatic languages with the same diligence and success as that with which he has treated the comparison of the Gothic, Finnic, Slavic, and Thracian (Greek and Latin) languages, he has yet penetrated deeper into the origins of the Nordic languages than any of his predecessors and the stretch of the road that he has cleared is already so considerable and his new discoveries so important that the treatise for these reasons seems to deserve the prize. Some points which one would wish the author to take into closer consideration might on demand be conveyed to him.²² (Ørsted 1813/1815: 29-30)

We note that already in 1815 the evaluators point to the lack of a thorough investigation of the Oriental and Asian languages and thereby so to speak outline the program that Rask was to follow after his completion of the prize essay. There seems to have been a demand for knowledge about precisely these languages in the air, or rather in the *Zeitgeist*. This is backed up by a letter only five years later from Nyerup to Rask, by then in St. Petersburg, where Nyerup mentions the fact that ‘Sanskrit is after all, as we all know, the basis on which our progress rests’.²³ Nyerup goes on to mention that two professors were already lecturing on Sanskrit in Germany, one in Berlin (Franz Bopp, the other in Bonn (August Wilhelm Schlegel [1767–1845])). In other words, Nyerup agreed with Rask that he did not have to go to India to gather materials for his Sanskrit studies.

Thus the Academy had approved the prize essay but that was of course not enough. The book still had to appear and to be brought to the notice of the world of learning. The Secretary of the Royal Academy, the famous Danish physicist Hans Christian Ørsted (1777–1851), wrote a fairly substantial *resumé* of the essay in the same volume of *Oversigt over Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Forhandlinger og det Medlemmers Arbejder de sidste to Aar* (“Summary of negotiations of the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters and a review of the

²¹ This Icelandic proverb says literally that ‘rare are those works which are worth admiration’, i.e. it is not easy to produce an admirable work. I gratefully acknowledge the help of Ari Páll Kristinsson here.

²² „Den med Devise: *Sialdan eru dasmidir ahlaupaværk* indkomne Afhandling indeholder mange lærde og nye Undersøgelser, röber udbredte Sprogkundskaber, og en ualmindelig Combinationsgave. Er Forfatteren end ikke trængt frem til de nordiske Sprogs ældste og fjerneste Kilder, og har han ikke med saadan Flid og Held, som den, hvormed han har behandlet Sammenligningen af de Gothiske, Finniske, Slaviske, Traciske (Græske og Latinske) Sprog, undersøgt det Persiske, det Indiske og flere asiatiske Sprog, er han dog trængt dybere ind i de nordiske Sprogs Oprindelse end nogen af hans Forgjængere, og den Strækning af Veien, han har banet, er allerede saa betydelig, og det Nye, han har opdaget, saa vigtigt, at Afhandlingen desaarsag synes at fortjene den udsatte Præmie. Nogle Poster, som man ønskede Forfatteren vilde tage under nöiere Overveielse, skulle paa Forlangende blive ham meddeelte.”

²³ ”Sanskrit er jo, som bekjendt, det hvorpaa alt vor Vee og Vel beroer.”

works published by its members”) which had carried the evaluation (Ørsted 1813/1815: 19-24). Considering the position of the Royal Danish Academy and other academies in the contemporary world of learning, this must have been a most effective advertisement of a treatise soon to appear.

Rask applied for money to print the book and the King provided a grant for the printing in May 1817 (see *Letters* I: 233) in the middle of the crisis created by Rask’s stay in Sweden. When the prize essay was finally printed (it was finished in January 1818), it did indeed have a deep and lasting influence on Rask’s life, since it was on the occasion of delivering the book to his Majesty Frederik VI that Peter Erasmus Müller succeeded in obtaining the grant from the King’s treasury to make Rask’s travels to India and Ceylon possible.

The structure of the essay itself and its results have been admirably and thoroughly discussed in Holger Pedersen’s introduction to the Hjelmslev edition. Pedersen wrote on the essay from the point of view of the Neogrammarian school and thus pointed out where Rask went wrong compared with the prevailing orthodoxy: He did not clearly distinguish between sounds and letters (Pedersen 1932: xxxii; cf. Gregersen(2009 [1987]): 36 *et passim*), he was wrong about Celtic (but very soon corrected the mistake (Pedersen, p. xxviii) and he does not clearly distinguish between typological and genetic comparisons (p. xxxi), but he may be excused for his mistakes by the heritage from the past. More serious seems to be the possible accusation of not belonging to the historical school which alone is responsible for progress according to Pedersen (p. xxx) but rather to the systematic school (i.e., language philosophy, to use Pedersen’s term, or a structuralism *avant la lettre* to follow Hjelmslev’s analysis in his *Commentaires* of 1951). Pedersen quickly dismisses the discussion by noting that ‘Systematics is no opposition to language history, on the contrary it may be an excellent preparation for it’.²⁴ Yet, half a page later he concludes that the ultimate goal that Rask had in mind undoubtedly was to discover genetic relationships.²⁵

I think Pedersen’s suspicion captures some of the essence of the work as it vacillates between the various currents which were then as now present on the linguistic scene (if not at that time so precisely formulated as it is now): Historical studies focused on genetic relationships still owe us a theoretical solution to the riddle of how hunter gatherer languages might be ‘related’ in the distant past before the

²⁴ ”Men systematik er ikke nogen modsætning til sproghistorie, kan tværtimod være en udmærket forberedelse dertil.”

²⁵ An episode from Rask’s latest year recounted by Henrichsen 1861 (and repeated by Jespersen 1918: 58 with a comment on the word *build* (‘danne’) cf. below) may perhaps give us an impression of how Rask saw himself: ‘About a year before his death I found him with an – as far as I can recall – Georgian bible in front of him working on such a grammatical topic and when asked how he could do this without a dictionary or any other instrument or preliminary work, he answered “that he did not need anything else than the Lord’s prayer in a particular language in order to build the morphological system of the language”. Such was the expertise he had accomplished.’ [“Omtrent en Maaned før hans Død traf jeg ham endnu med en, saa vidt jeg mindes, georgisk Bibel foran sig, sysselsat med et saadant grammatisk Arbeide, og da jeg spurgte ham, hvorledes han bar sig ad dermed uden Ordbog og andet Hjelpemiddel eller Forarbeide, svarede han, ”at han ikke behøvede Andet end Fadervor i et Sprog for at danne samme Sprogs Formlære.” Saadan Færdighed havde han opnaaet,” (Henrichsen 1861: 14)].

advent of writing (and nationalities). And contact linguistics and ‘linguaging’ still have to provide answers about how much we are in fact able to reverse the contemporary, yet of course historical, conception of language which seems to be if not inherently then at least irreparably Herderian.

From this point of view — as from Pedersen (1932: xxxi) — the methodological and theoretical first chapter of the book stands out as the main contribution and the most important reason why this book will never fall out of fashion. Let me make just two observations.

To my knowledge, this is the first time the distinction between theoretical and applied linguistics is central to a linguistic argument (p.17 in the translation): The theoretical part of ‘Etymology’ is characterized as follows: “on the basis of well-known and indisputable instances, [it] finds out and sets forth the propositions and rules on which its applied counterpart bases itself”, whereas the applied type of linguistic analysis includes a dictionary and a grammar. This distinction is supplemented by a distinction between single language descriptions and universal statements. As we have seen above, Rask is in like measures concerned with finding the unique system appropriate for each language and with having the same plan for all descriptions in order to obtain strict comparability. The theoretical part of the linguistic effort would then be the abstract plan arrived at which ensures comparability, while the applied part would correspond to the various descriptions of single languages made according to the plan, e.g., the description of Sanskrit outlined above.

Rask underlines a demand for an extensive knowledge of languages and makes fun of predecessors who demonstrably did not have that. As we have seen, he was himself eager to analyze all (kinds of) languages he met on his way. Furthermore, he seems to have been well aware of the artificiality of any delimitation of languages (cf. the discussion on pages 28-29 of the translation below), but still demands that the practicing linguist analyze each language on its own terms. In this he is more Humboldtian²⁶ (or structuralist?) than one would expect of one of the founders of Indo-European comparative philology, cf. also his concept of the ‘structure and inner essence’ of a language (p. 33 and again p. 36).

The demand for structural analysis is basic to the proposition that seems to have made Rask the first to state that lexical correspondences were secondary, grammatical similarities primary, in the investigation of genetic correspondences between languages. This was his claim to fame according to Pedersen, and one must admit that the case is well argued. But from a modern perspective, Rask’s insistence that language mixing may result in simplification, his bifurcation of the lexicon into the basic vocabulary and lexicon for special purposes, whether they be scientific or relating to commerce or politeness (pp. 34-35), and his ideas of universal laws of

²⁶ Actually, Humboldt approached Rask in a letter from Schloss Tegel of 25 August 1826 on the occasion of his son in law going to Denmark (*Letters II*: 184-186). There is no indication of an answer, but that might have been conveyed by word of mouth by the son in law, of course.

sound change (45-46) are equally thrilling. Did he really write that? Yes he did, just study the text below!

4. *Notes on the translator Niels Ege*

Niels Ege was born in 1927, the youngest of three brothers, in Ørbæk, Funen, where his father practiced as a medical doctor. He graduated in 1944 from the local *gymnasium* as the youngest student in the country and at the same time the student with the highest marks. He immediately took up studies at the University of Copenhagen, at first at the Faculty of Law but soon transferred to comparative Indo-European philology with Louis Hjelmslev as his chosen professor.

Niels Ege distinguished himself early on as one of Hjelmslev's brightest students and contributed a much admired piece to the Festschrift presented to his teacher on his 50th birthday (*Recherches structurales*, 1949). In this paper, which is actually the first one in the whole collection which also includes papers by distinguished scholars such as Roman Jakobson and Émile Benveniste, Ege discusses a Saussurean problem, that of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. He courageously, and to my mind convincingly, argues that Benveniste had misunderstood Saussure. At the time, he had only studied linguistics for five years. He was thus an immediate success.

He was, however, considerably delayed in finishing his studies: the process of his taking the final *magister* exam started in 1953 and only ended in 1957, due to his already by then highly developed perfectionism coupled with the atrocious demands that the study of Indo-European linguistics at the University of Copenhagen made on its practitioners. A student who wanted to pass his magister exam had to master all branches of Indo-European. As we all know, this is well-nigh impossible. In addition, thorough knowledge of a non-Indo-European language was required. In consequence, Hjelmslev actually only graduated four students as *magisters* of Comparative Indo-European Philology during his entire career as a university professor of linguistics at the University of Copenhagen (1937–1965).

Already before the long march towards a final degree started, Ege seems to have been desperately in doubt as to his abilities and his standing. He wrote to Eli Fischer-Jørgensen (1911–2010), then reader in phonetics, and expressed his concerns and even seems to have complained that he had had too little attention from Louis Hjelmslev (Letter from EFJ of 21 July 1952, in the Ege archives). Eli Fischer-Jørgensen wrote a sensitive and sensible reply. She explained Hjelmslev's life-long adversity to giving advice to his students, particularly if they did not seek it themselves, and urged him to push forward and to confront his native penchant for self-criticism, which, as she points out, had probably been nourished by his studies at the local school (actually the same one she had attended) where he had found no competition for his talent. Throughout she delicately used herself to illustrate parallels in their careers (early success followed by serious doubts and unhappiness). In the end, she persuaded him to finish his studies by writing the required M.A. thesis on the Bloomfield school. This paper, which survives in the Ege archives, is interesting for

its perspective: it is that of a glossematicist looking at a related, competing, school of linguistic thought.

One reason for Ege's delayed exam was that he had a job to do at the same time, the intelligence work discussed below. Thus he had to choose between a career at the military and a career in scholarly research. In 1962 he opted for the latter. During his student years, Niels Ege had taken courses at Yale in 1951–1952 with Bernard Bloch (1909–1965) where he acquired an interest in Japanese. Thus in 1962, he went to Japan where he taught Linguistics at the International Christian University in Tokyo. From this period dates a paper called 'Introduction to Glossematics' which is all too little known (Ege 1965). Ege had unusual gifts for teaching and readers who wish to understand glossematics, which arguably is not easy to approach due to its revolutionary view of language and linguistic categories, may well benefit from starting here.

From Tokyo, Ege went to Berkeley, California, where during his stay from 1965 to 1968 he was able to witness at close range the turmoil around the theory of transformational generative grammar. When he returned to Denmark in 1968 to take up a scholarship with Søren Egerod (1923–1995), the famous Danish Sinologist, he brought back news of the situation in the United States which was highly appreciated, at least by his students, of which the present author was one.

When Louis Hjelmslev died in 1965, linguistic studies at the University of Copenhagen had to be restructured completely. Through a series of accidents, Niels Ege had to relinquish his research scholarship in order to become the central person of the restructured linguistics program and, together with Una Canger (b.1938), a student of Hjelmslev's and Francis Whitfield's (1916–1996), one of its two main teachers. By then his self-criticism had culminated to the extent that he published nothing at all; he had in fact turned into an inveterate linguistic skeptic. Paradoxically, this made him a highly demanding and therefore brilliant teacher, since he was in no position to profess any eternal truths about anything at all, while on the other hand he was able to argue *pro et contra* about the advantage and disadvantage of any solution to any linguistic problem. However, Niels Ege himself was not happy with his university work. He finally left the university in order to work full-time at what he had been doing almost since his first student years, i.e., military intelligence work. Starting when he was at high school and broke German codes for the resistance movement in Denmark, he had specialized in this line of work. For many years he worked as a professional code-breaker for the Defense Intelligence Service and he enjoyed it. Admittedly, there he found the spirit of a shared quest for truth that he missed so much at the university!

Niels Ege never retired completely from intelligence work until forced to do so by the illness that killed him in November 2002, but he did scale down his work in order to devote himself to the planning, begun several years earlier, of the publication of an English translation of Rask's prize essay, in celebration of the 150th anniversary of its appearance in 1968 (cf. his Translator's Note below). Accompanied by the untiring support and the steady encouragement of Una Canger, he was finally able to finish the task in 1993. Ege's translation of the prize essay was published as volume XXVI of

the *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague*, a book series founded by Hjelmslev. In his important Translator's Note, Ege writes in detail about the principles underlying the translation, the difficulties he had encountered in the course of the translation process, and the solutions adopted in translating the prize essay into English.

I am immensely grateful to be allowed to contribute to bringing the translation, reflecting Niels Ege's and Rask's minds performing a spirited dialogue across the divide of 175 years, to the attention of the linguistic world once again.

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Figure 1 [to be inserted above]

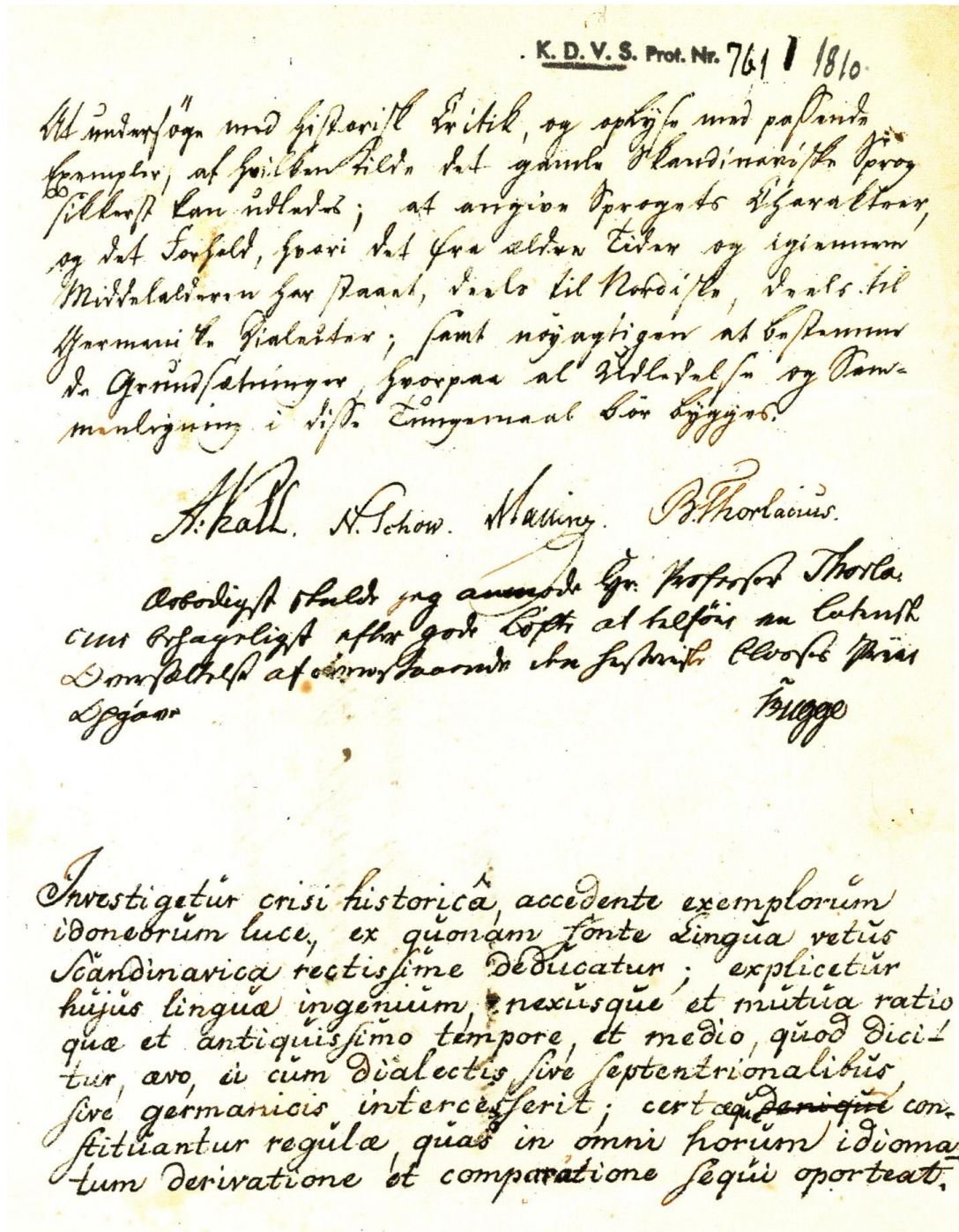


Fig.1. The original question posed by the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. At the top the Danish version: "At undersøge med historisk Kritik, og oplyse med passende Exempler, af hvilken Kilde det gamle skandinaviske Sprog sikkest kan udledes; at angive Sprogets Charakter og det Forhold, hvori det fra ældre Tider og igiennem Middelalderen har staaet, deels til Nordiske, deels til Germaniske Dialecter; samt nøyagtigen at bestemme de Grundsætninger, hvorpaa al Udledelse og Sammenligning i disse Tungemaal bör bygges." – For the two translations cf. the present text. After the signatures there is a message from the Secretary (Thomas Bugge) who asks the Professor of Latin, Børge Thorlacius, to add a Latin version which is the easily readable version below.