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C.C. Uhlenbeck's work on Sanskrit and his role in the history of Dutch Indology

Arlo Griffiths

At the age of 26, C.C. Uhlenbeck was appointed at the University of Amsterdam as “Extraord. Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology”. Those at least were the English words he chose for the cover page of the 1898 English edition of his *Manual of Sanskrit Phonetics*. The original *Handboek der Indische klankleer* had been published in 1894 without any corresponding indication, while the opening paragraph of his 1892 inaugural lecture as extraordinary Professor of Sanskrit and related fields (*buitengewoon hoogleraar in het Sanskrit en aanverwante vakken*)¹ addresses the very question what those “related fields” might be. While by 1898 he seems to have felt confident that the answer to this question must be “comparative philology”, the amusing conclusion to the opening paragraphs of his inaugural lecture six years earlier shows the young linguist still to have been more timid in this respect:

Why should I exert myself in text-critical cleverness [*spitsvondigheden*] with regard to my appointment, while I may assume that those who appointed me intended with this term *related fields* to leave me the freedom to introduce at this University also *that* branch of Indogermanic, which has in recent times become indispensable for comparative language study, to spread in our Capital the knowledge of *that* language, which is the Grand Duchess of Slavic languages [...]. (Uhlenbeck 1892:8)

Uhlenbeck's choice of topic for the main part of his inaugural lecture, the place of Sanskrit in comparative linguistics – that is: comparative Indo-European linguistics – was a clear if perhaps not conscious announcement of the fact that he was destined for a career as a comparative linguist, rather than as a Sanskrit philologist. It is my task here, however, to sketch the historical importance of his work on Sanskrit, his role in the history of Dutch Indology, and to draw from his publications in this field some strokes for the general

picture of his character and development as a scholar, which this volume hopes to paint.²

For a period of at least six years after his appointment in Amsterdam, Uhlenbeck must have devoted much of his time to the compilation of his *Concise Etymological Dictionary of Sanskrit* (1898-1899), which would be his first and last research monograph in the field. During the first decades of the twentieth century, it served as a work of reference to Sanskrit scholars. It was extensively used for instance by his student F.B.J. Kuiper, for the latter's *Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit*, a work written during the war years but published a few years later:

Nearly half a century has passed since Professor Uhlenbeck published his etymological dictionary of Sanskrit. Although much has since been done in this field, the majority of the very large number of words there labelled as "unexplained" still await explanation, and many explanations there given require reconsideration. May this little book, dedicated to my venerated guru on the occasion of his 80th birthday, show him that, although the progress made in these studies since 1899 is not perhaps spectacular, still it is hoped that the number of obscure words, even of those which have hitherto defied all attempts at explanation, will gradually be reduced. (Kuiper 1948:9)

The same dictionary, however, had a few years before the war been criticized severely by Walther Wüst in the elaborate *Vorrede* to his etymological dictionary, which itself never saw the light of day:

Wenige Jahre nach der Leumann'schen Doktorarbeit ist C.C. Uhlenbecks "Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch der Altindischen Sprache" (Amsterdam 1898/1899) erschienen. Es ist im Unterschied zu der Veröffentlichung der Gebrüder Leumann ein G a n z e s, weswegen es, schon aus Billigkeitsgründen, schärfer beurteilt werden muß. Es tut mir aufrichtig leid, daß diese Beurteilung mit einem sonst hochverdienten Gelehrten ins Gericht gehen muß, aber die Sache der Gerechtigkeit, der Wahrheit und der Wissenschaftsgeschichte erfordern ein männlich-offnes Wort. Mehr als zehn Jahre eindringender, genauer Bekanntschaft mit dem Uhlenbeck'schen Buche ermächtigen mich, dies Wort sofort, zu Beginn meiner Erörterung auszusprechen. Es lautet, daß es für die indogermanische wie indo-arische Sprachwissenschaft besser gewesen wäre, wenn der heute noch von so vielen benutzte "Uhlenbeck" nie erschienen wäre. (Wüst 1935:15)

These "manly-outspoken words", involving some just, but still perhaps too severe, criticism, continue over one and a half pages, until their author, on p. 17, considers that Uhlenbeck's "Fahrlässigkeit" has been duly demonstrated, so that he can quote from the foreword "desselben Uhlenbeck, der in éinem Atem sein Wörterbuch "eine möglichst vollständige sammlung altindischer etymologien", gleich darauf eine "anspruchlose arbeit" und ein "bequemes handbuch" nennt (Vorwort p. V)", and conclude his tirade:

Nach allem, was gesagt ist, habe ich weder Lust noch Zeit, diesem Widerspruch auch noch nachzugehen. Ich denke und hoffe nur, daß man jetzt allseits begreifen wird, warum ich für diese Art Lexicographie, die bei ihrem Erscheinen schon unmöglich ist, keinerlei Verständnis aufzubringen in der Lage bin. (Wüst 1935:17)

This was not the only moment in his life that Wüst demonstrated his limited ability to empathize.³ The (modest) price he had to pay for it probably has something to do with the fact that he himself never managed to complete his attempt to supersede Uhlenbeck's "anspruchlose arbeit", but in the second half of the 20th century Manfred Mayrhofer's two etymological dictionaries certainly did.

The *Manual of Sanskrit Phonetics* (1894 and 1898), which Uhlenbeck produced during the same years as his etymological dictionary, was intended as a "handbook [...] to introduce the student into the comparative-phonetic study of Sanskrit" (1898:v), and indeed makes the impression of being a handy compendium of the state of knowledge at the time, but naturally it went out-of-date soon, with the rapid developments in Indo-European linguistics. I have no information to ascertain whether it was ever disseminated widely enough for the author's hope that it might "be of some use to the students in England, America and India" (1898:vi) to be fulfilled. Even in the Netherlands, the Dutch version seems to have gone out of use several generations ago.

The one short Sanskrit-related article that Uhlenbeck produced in these years (1894a), with its supplement that appeared in the next issue of the same Dutch journal (1895), is a handy survey of words (substantive nouns and adjectives, including *epitheta ornantia*) for the 'monkey' in the Sanskrit epics, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, and provides an etymological – or perhaps one ought rather to say derivational – explanation for the word *vānara-*, that has since become generally accepted.

But Uhlenbeck's significance in the history of Dutch Indology does not lie in his publications in the field. To Uhlenbeck falls the exceptional honor of having trained two successive and internationally most successful occupants of the chair of Sanskrit at Leiden University, J.Ph. Vogel and F.B.J. Kuiper. Indeed this is – as far as I know – a unique distinction in the history of Dutch Indology and of this chair in particular. Uhlenbeck had himself been trained by its first incumbent, the famous J.H.C. Kern, for whom Uhlenbeck wrote an elaborate obituary (1918), which, true to one of the necrologist's extracurricular passions, included extensive genealogical tables.

Vogel's lasting warm feelings for his own guru, from the days that he studied at Uhlenbeck's feet in Amsterdam, are evident from their correspondence (see Eggermont-Molenaar 2009), and appear also from the customary note of thanks at the end of Vogel's inaugural lecture, which – in line with Dutch academic tradition – was published as a booklet in 1914:

I am particularly pleased, highly esteemed UHLENBECK, to be able to greet you as a colleague. You were the first, with your inspired word, to awaken my interest in

ancient India and through your great knowledge and helpfulness you were an excellent guide in my first scholarly work. Although the field which you represent at this Institution and the studies in which you nowadays prefer to be engaged, are far removed from Indo-Aryan philology, your cordial involvement has never failed me. I may certainly count upon your friendship, which followed me in the Land of five Rivers [i.e. the Indian Punjab – A.G.], now that we meet again as colleagues at the mouth of the Rhine. (Vogel 1914:35-6)

Vogel's successor Kuiper left his long departed guru unmentioned when the time came for him to offer the same customary note in 1939,⁴ but his words of 1948, quoted above, leave no doubt as to how he saw his relationship with Uhlenbeck. In his recollections on the life of N. van Wijk, another great Dutch linguist of the pre-war period, Kuiper tells us more about his experiences with Uhlenbeck, and the influence of exposure to Sanskrit culture that the latter had undergone:

When, in 1913, Van Wijk was appointed as the first professor of Balto-Slavic languages [...] he became the younger colleague of his former teacher Christianus Cornelius Uhlenbeck and from 1913 to 1926 they made, each in his own way, Leiden a centre of linguistic studies. The contrast between them could not have been greater. Uhlenbeck, who had started as an Indo-Europeanist but had soon been attracted by the more exotic fields of Basque and Caucasian, later by Black-foot and Eskimo, was a romantic. Linguistics was for him primarily a personal adventure, a journey into the unknown. To him, professional Indo-Europeanists were mere *binnenschippers* [masters of river craft, as opposed to seafarers]. It can be understood that the atomistic 'comparative grammar' of those days had no attraction for him and that ethnolinguistics was more satisfactory. His attitude, however, had aspects which in their extreme form, as exhibited by his boisterous student van Ginneken, proved dangerous. Uhlenbeck abhorred teaching, particularly the lectures before large audiences which it had become his task to give in the 'twenties'. To get to know him one had to attend the *privatissima*, an institution now probably long forgotten. At his home, in the living room, he read in the late afternoon Old English and Old Icelandic texts with some four or five students and there one experienced the charm of his complex but charismatic personality: a romantic, at times almost boyish in spite of his age, but also extremely touchy; and a mystic who, driven by his inner conflicts, had gained some rare insights into life. Although not quite a man of this world, his influence upon some of the most gifted of many generations of students was strong, thanks to the fascination of his person more than to the theories he developed in his later years. It was my privilege to be one of his students until 1926 when, at the age of 60, he retired. For thirteen years Uhlenbeck and Van Wijk were colleagues, but there was no close contact between them. After 1907, when the effort to learn Eskimo had proved too much of a strain for his weak constitution, Uhlenbeck felt obliged to abstain virtually completely from publishing⁵ and he had even come to disapprove of scholars who published much. He cannot, therefore, have felt much congeniality with the more extravert

Van Wijk, who had no inhibitions in this respect. But when, in 1941, I informed Uhlenbeck, then living in Lugano, of van Wijk's death, his reaction was "He has gathered an excellent karma." It was the background against which he had come to view human life. (Kuiper 1988:1-2)

As stated above, Uhlenbeck's monographic contributions to Sanskrit studies did not continue into the 20th century. He did, however, keep responding to requests for reviewing work in Sanskrit philology for various journals right through the early 1940s. His motivation throughout must simply have been his passion for the Sanskrit language and the associated culture. In one of the last reviews that I have seen, he describes himself as one of those "denen das alte Indien lieb ist, auch wenn wir keine Spezialforscher auf indologischem Gebiete sind" (Uhlenbeck 1940-41:457-458). His love for Sanskrit culture is revealed by the sanskritisms that he enjoyed using in his correspondence (see Eggermont-Molenaar 2009), as also in his very positive review of B.E. Buiskool's work in a highly technical domain of Sanskrit philology, that of Pāṇini's grammar:

It is not only *dharma* that is *sūkṣma* [subtle], and he who would broach Pāṇini's motivations without sharp wit and inexhaustible patience, would surely consider incongruous what is carefully wrought; random, that which was wanted and chosen, after careful deliberation, *mahato 'nurodhāt*, by the most respectable of *vaiyākaraṇas* [grammarians]. (Uhlenbeck 1933-1934a:198)

The same review, written in Dutch in a generalist Dutch journal, of a work itself also written in Dutch, reveals another of the Dutch reviewer's passions. Uhlenbeck praises the author:

We rejoice that he has chosen his mother tongue, which he handles with a mastery that is rare in our times, as a vehicle for his intricate, but for the attentive reader always comprehensible, arguments, although his results may thereby take longer to affect foreign Indologists than they deserve for their intrinsic value. (Uhlenbeck 1933-1934a:199)

Let me conclude by evoking Uhlenbeck's complete set of reviews (1896, 1906, 1930, 1931) of the three volumes (I, II.1, III) of Wackernagel's (and Debrunner's) *Altindische Grammatik*, that appeared during his lifetime, in the years 1896, 1905, 1929–1930 – a period corresponding rather closely with that of the reviewer's scholarly activity. A clear reflection is visible in these reviews of Uhlenbeck's personal intellectual development. The first two reviews show him well informed about the relevant recent literature, and entering into several details of *Laut-* and *Wortlehre*. Already in the second, of 1906, he starts to adduce non-Indo-European data (e.g. Finno-Ugrian and Basque), but remains basically focused on the Sanskrit data. By 1930, however, his attitude has fully changed. He has grown impatient with "outdated remarks [...] on the structure of Indogermanic in

comparison with that of other languages”, especially the limitation of comparative scope to Semitic-Hamitic, and asks rhetorically:

Has then the work of Boas, Sapir, Kroeber and so many others really been for naught? But Prof. Debrunner [who was responsible for this volume of the *Alt-indische Grammatik* – A.G.] is Indogermanist and most Indogermanists, after all, are people who do not like to take note of what is being accomplished in exotic language areas [*taalgebieden*]. (Uhlenbeck 1929-1930:62)

The next year, Uhlenbeck had energy only for a very short review of two paragraphs. It seems that the work, which has certainly stood the test of time in the field, could simply no longer appeal to his own changed preferences. He therefore allows his entire second paragraph to drift into a general expression of despair only tangentially connected with the work under review:

This is not the place to expand upon details. I only want to report with pleasure that Wackernagel has not let himself be seduced, in discussing the pronoun *ya-* (pp. 551-558) by the odd attempts of linguists who may be clever, but hardly look beyond Indogermanic, to call into question the original relative character of this pronoun. Indeed it is a reprehensible prejudice, repudiated by the facts in many language areas, that *relativa* would always have to develop from *demonstrativa*.

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NOTES

¹ The Dutch (and English) words are extracted from Uhlenbeck's words on pp. 3 and 8 of his lecture: "The words in which my appointment as extraordinary professor at this University has been phrased have a broad, very minimally circumscribed meaning. For I am given the assignment to give instruction in Sanskrit and related fields [...]." I have no more direct information as to the precise wording of the *leeropdracht* ['teaching assignment'] with which he had been entrusted. All quotations from Uhlenbeck's writings in this contribution are my own translations from his Dutch.

² Besides the items mentioned in the bibliography, Uhlenbeck's Sanskrit-related publications only involve reviews. I have perused the relevant reviews listed in Bakker and Hinrichs 2009 under the years 1893, 1896, 1897, 1898, 1900, 1906, 1930, 1931, 1933, 1934, 1940, 1941.

³ For the latest on Wüst's career and his direct affiliation with Nazism, see Grünendahl 2006.

⁴ Another Uhlenbeck student, Barend Faddegon, also made no more than passing mention of his guru in his inaugural lecture, held at the University of Amsterdam in 1919 (Faddegon 1919:23). Uhlenbeck would later review Faddegon's Dutch translation of Jayadeva's poem *Gītagovinda* and his (invented) dramatization of Jayadeva's life in very positive terms (1932-1933; 1933-1934b).

⁵ The bibliography in this volume (Bakker and Hinrichs 2009) amply documents that Kuiper was ill informed in this respect.