

Seminar SAW
**Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in
the ancient world, 2015-2016**

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**Historiography of comparison and Historiography of circulation, with a
particular reference to the ancient mathematical sciences**

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Oriental languages and the development of comparative linguistics in the 19th century

Abstract – In the historiography of linguistics, the German linguist Franz Bopp (1791-1867) is generally considered as a key figure in the rise of the scientific comparative approach to languages. Basing on this assumption, there is a tendency to make a strong distinction between 18th and 19th century linguistics, but also between the French and the German linguistic traditions. Comparative grammar is described as a conscious alternative to the previously existing French tradition of « grammaire générale ». Given that Franz Bopp demonstrated the existence of the Indo-European family of languages on the basis of his knowledge of Sanskrit, the birth and development of Sanskrit studies in Europe is justly considered as a major cause for this paradigmatic shift. Yet one must not forget that Franz Bopp learnt Sanskrit in Paris, where he was also a student of Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy in Persian. Silvestre de Sacy was both a Persian and Arabic scholar and a prominent representative of “grammaire générale”. He was also instrumental in founding the chair of Chinese and the chair of Sanskrit at the Collège de France in 1814. Against this background, this paper aims to examine some aspects of the role of Oriental linguistics in the development of the comparative method in 19th century Europe. If it meant a shift from the universalizing perspective of “grammaire générale” to the more particularistic approach of comparative linguistics, how do we have to understand the claim of most contemporary Oriental scholars that the various branches of Oriental scholarship aimed at making the picture of humanity complete?