3. ‘Dutch Language and Literature’ (and other ‘national philologies’) as an example of discipline formation in the humanities

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Abstract

Around 1800, at a number of European universities, the discipline of national philology was introduced. The history of the Dutch national philology, Dutch Language and Literature (*neerlandistiek*), demonstrates that some of the prevalent ideas on discipline formation, often based on the model of the modern exact sciences, are inadequate. The motives for the institution of the first chairs were not so much academic in nature, but rather political and nationalist. Moreover, from the very beginning, this discipline was not a specialization of existing disciplines, but rather an expansion, to form an amalgam of linguistics, literary history or literary criticism and applied linguistics/rhetoric. After a phase of far-reaching specialization around 1850 (under the influence of the German philological school of Grimm and Lachmann), by the end of the nineteenth century, Dutch Language and Literature had once again assumed the interdisciplinary expanse that the discipline had occupied at the beginning of the century. Furthermore, it is interesting that right from the start, the practitioners of the discipline catered to social needs for orthography, language and literature education, national dictionaries, etc. All these characteristics make that national philologies such as Dutch Language and Literature seldom meet the image of a discipline predominantly determined by scholarly specialization, autonomy from other disciplines and a guarded stance towards social expectations. For that reason, humanities such as the national philologies are sometimes designated as no more than would-be

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Disciplines. This article argues the opposite. The exact sciences have become atrophied disciplines: little more than temporary connections between zealous hobbyists.

Introduction: four starting dates

What was the starting point of Dutch Language and Literature as a scholarly discipline? For years now, historiographers of the discipline have opted for one or several of the following possibilities.

Some situate the beginnings around the middle of the eighteenth century. Point of departure is obviously the eighteenth century ‘discourse of decline’. Since the glorious seventeenth century, the ‘Golden Age’, the Netherlands had been in decline. In popular opinion, this decline primarily concerned moral standards. Moral corruption and ‘Frenchification’ had weakened the ancient Dutch virtues. Restoration could be achieved by fortifying national culture. Central importance was attributed to the mother tongue. The Dutch language was ‘the bulwark of the nation’. On the basis of such opinions, the Society for Dutch Letters, springing from several national-activist student societies, promoted the scholarly study of the national language and literature. 1766, the founding year of the Society for Dutch Letters, is therefore an obvious choice as the starting point of Dutch Language and Literature. This was indeed the time when an institutional focus came into being for research into several central themes, which still constitute the most prevailing directions of Dutch Language and Literature as practised at most Dutch universities around the year 2000: linguistics, literature and communication sciences or rhetoric.¹

Initially, the Society was intended to be the Dutch equivalent of the Académie Française, a forum of the preeminent scholars in the field, supported and directed by the government. In practice, the Society took the form of a private organization heavily dependent upon the financial contributions of its members and donors, and therefore severely marked by fragmentation of forces and ‘dilettantism’. In this phase, moreover, the discipline had yet to become academically embedded, although it seems that some classical scholars had started teaching informal classes in the Dutch language.²

¹ The Society also had an interest in history and national ‘relics’. Also in the teaching commitments after 1815, to be discussed, history was included. Only in 1921 was this subject separated from Dutch Language and Literature. I do not consider this aspect here. Concerning this, see: Johannes, ‘Nationale filologieën’.
² Noordegraaf, ‘Waartoe hij eene uittremende bevoegdheid had’, p. 50.
A second, frequently used option is therefore the year 1797. In that year, the young clergyman Matthijs Siegenbeek was appointed in Leiden as *professor eloquentiae Hollandicae extraordinarius* (‘extraordinary professor in Dutch Eloquence’). Menno Liauw and Leon van de Zande (among the few who have attempted an approximately comprehensive history of the discipline) state: ‘With the appointment, in 1797, of this first professor in Dutch Eloquence, the academic practice of Dutch Language and Literature starts’.3 In doing so, they neglect Everwinus Wassenbergh, professor of Greek in Franeker, whose teaching commitment had been extended with the ‘Low German Philology’ earlier that year.4 In any case, it is usual to let the history of Dutch Language and Literature start with the first chair(s) at the end of the eighteenth century. Apparently, the criterion for discipline formation here was not only institutionalization but more particularly academization.

It should be noted though that neither Wassenbergh’s nor Siegenbeek’s teaching commitment included ‘Dutch Language and Literature’ as a whole. The present Dutch term – *neerlandistiek*, which by the way only came into use at the end of the nineteenth century – comprises something like ‘Dutch Language and Literature, including Eloquence’. Wassenbergh and Siegenbeek had a much more concise commitment: linguistics, respectively rhetoric. But it is remarkable that, in no time, both professors were teaching the whole of the national language and literature (including eloquence). Moreover, in 1799, Siegenbeek was appointed full professor *Litterarum Belgicarum* (of Dutch Literature). In 1811, his commitment was supplemented with the history of recent literature.5

This course of events offers a third option for a starting date of Dutch Language and Literature. The broader teaching commitment was further formalized by the Royal Decree on the layout of higher education of 1815. On the restoration of the monarchy, after Napoleon’s downfall, the legislator showed a way of centralism quite untypical for the Dutch. For instance, the Decree called for the establishment of obligatory chairs for the discipline along the lines of Siegenbeek’s chair at all universities in the Kingdom (of which Belgium would remain part for some time), and *athenaea* in the provincial capitals (in practice, this was limited to the Athenaeum of Amsterdam, the later University of Amsterdam). The new discipline was

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4 This was pointed out by Noordegraaf, ‘Het begin van de universitaire neerlandistiek’ and ‘Waartoe hij eene uitnemende bevoegdheid had’.
situated in the newly founded department of Philosophy & Letters and was primarily intended as an introductory discipline for students in Theology and Law. Apart from using such terms as ‘Dutch style and eloquence’, the legislator now also spoke of ‘Dutch literature and eloquence’, ‘Dutch
language and literature’ and ‘Low German language and literature’. From this perspective, the academic discipline that would later be called neerlandistiek (‘Dutch Language and Literature’) only came into being in 1815.

The discipline had now been firmly ‘established’: a process had taken place of institutionalization and academization, and the result would prove to be permanent: from 1815 on, the Dutch universities have always had chairs in Dutch Language and Literature. This permanence also appears from the fact that (most of) the chairs were occupied, not by ‘extraordinary’, but by ‘full’ professors. On the other hand, the discipline would for a long period maintain its introductory character. Only in 1876 did Dutch Language and Literature become an independent discipline. That is why, according to some authors, we should consider a fourth date, to wit the year 1876, as the starting date of the discipline of Dutch Language and Literature. As a speaker at the bicentennial of Siegenbeek’s first chair remarked: ‘As a main discipline, the study of Dutch Language and Literature exists only from 1876 – instead of two centuries, we are only one century old’.6

A limited view of philology

The abovementioned dates are often quoted in the historiography of Dutch Language and Literature. Especially the establishment of Siegenbeek’s chair in 1797 is generally considered to be the starting date of the discipline. But curiously, the same authors who keep proffering the same date or dates, also keep a very different date at the back of their minds as the ‘proper’ start of Dutch Language and Literature.

In 1846, Willem Joseph Andries Jonckbloet published his notorious review of a manual of the early flowering of Dutch Literature, written by the Groningen professor Barthold Henrik Lulofs.7 In this review, Jonckbloet wiped the floor with Lulofs, in a very extensive treatise with numerous examples of presumed mistakes. His opponent, he wrote, knew nothing of particularly medieval language and literature. In itself, this is not significant. Theoretically, it was very well possible that Lulofs was not knowledgeable in the field. But it is interesting that Jonckbloet criticized the author for being a representative of an ‘Old School’. Not only Lulofs, but also all the other Dutch Language and Literature scholars of the first generation, were

7 Jonckbloet, ‘Handboek van den vroegsten bloei der Nederlandsche letterkunde’.
bunglers and dilettantes. He himself, on the other hand, belonged to a ‘New School’, which held no dilettantes but only true scholars. It is not entirely clear who else belonged to the ‘New School’, but it soon appeared that he counted Matthias de Vries among its members. De Vries would later gain fame primarily as a lexicographer.

Jonckbloet’s review is an especially beautiful example of the kind of phenomena which in science sociology is known as demarcation and boundary work: the often very polemic activities through which new disciplines or paradigms attempt to acquire a position within established science, or through which they try to shield the world of science from the world of incompetent ‘laymen’. This boundary work necessitates the creation of an enemy image, casting competing scholars or laymen in the role of ‘charlatans’, ‘bunglers’ or ‘dilettantes’. Proper scholarship only begins with the rise of the new direction, represented by the polemists themselves.

Said direction was, as already appears from Jonckbloet’s style of polemic, highly unusual for the Dutch scholarly world. His style was the spitting image of the style of the direction in language and literature then known as the ‘German philological school’. This was a direction in research which arose in the years 1820-1850 in Germany under the influence of scholars such as Jacob Grimm and Karl Lachmann. Originally, this school intended to broaden its research field and not only study the national language and literature. The researchers also considered oral myths and artefacts in their research – initially with the ambitious objective of penetrating the ‘German soul’ or the ‘pure’ primeval forms of German culture. In practice, this form of philology quickly developed into a more limited vision on the discipline than the study of language and literature in the broadest sense. The activities of the ‘German philological school’ amounted to critically editing and annotating – first and foremost linguistically – medieval texts, and to the development of the thereby required tools, such as dictionaries of the medieval languages. To this aim, insights and methods from the comparative (Indo-European) philology and from classical philology (in the rather limited sense of ‘scholarship of critical text edition’) were employed. According to this approach, the medieval texts were not so much forms of literature but rather Sprachdenkmale (‘Language Monuments’).\(^8\) This already indicates that what took place was a severely restricting ‘philologization’ of the

Deutsche Philologie, the discipline which as from the middle of the nineteenth century was also known as ‘Germanistik’.

Whereas around 1800, Deutsche Philologie still included Deutsche Sprache und Literatur in general, this term now began to denote primarily the critical editing of medieval texts, using methods from historical comparative linguistics. First and foremost, this involved strict requirements concerning an ethos of ‘philological precision’, ‘scholarly meticulousness’, ‘indefatigable investigation of language forms’, and more generally the Andacht zum Unbedeutenden (‘Attention to the insignificant’) so characteristic of the German school.

The term ‘Germanistik’ originally did not mean research into language and literature, but research into old legal sources. Cf. for the term ‘philologization’ and the consequences of this phenomenon: Kolk, ‘Liebhaber, Gelehrte, Experten’.

Old Matthijs Siegenbeek quits the scene, taking with him his presumably outdated spelling rules. Enter Matthias de Vries and Eelco Verwijs, self-proclaimed representatives of a New School (Amsterdam University Library).
Finalism without a finale

This narrowly conceived form of philology was enormously successful, not only in Germany but also in other countries. All over Europe, the ‘national philologies’ now took shape, not as the study of the national language and literature in the broadest sense, but as scholarship concerned with the critical editing of the earliest medieval texts, for which the principles of historical comparative linguistics were a determining influence. In the Netherlands, the success of this limited view of philology appears from the requirements for the bachelor and graduate exam for Dutch Language and Literature according to the legislation on higher education of 1876–1877. A very prominent place in the requirement package is taken up by disciplines such as ‘basics of Sanskrit’, ‘basics of comparative Indo-German philology in general and of the German language in particular’ and the ‘Anglo-Saxon or Middle High German, at the discretion of the candidate’. Compared to the early Middle Ages, other periods received scant attention, and for literary-historical, literary-theoretical or cultural-historical activities there was virtually no opportunity, nor was there for eloquence, originally the core of the discipline.

This success hugely impressed the historiographers of Dutch Language and Literature. In the opinion of many, only with Jonckbloet and De Vries, Dutch Language and Literature began as a proper discipline. We can find both these men, separately or brotherly united as comrades in arms, regularly represented as the ‘ancestors of Dutch Language and Literature’.

More or less the same applies to the history of the sister disciplines in Germany and England. Regularly, German authors point out the fact that, only from the 1860s on, after the rise of the Deutsche Philologie in its more restricted sense, many of the temporary chairs in Germany were transformed into permanent chairs. At a number of universities, where they had been absent before, these chairs were only then instituted. Impressed by this, German historians are inclined to let the discipline ‘proper’ only start with the institution of the first Seminar (a kind of research school) for Deutsche Philologie in 1858. They do indeed extensively discuss the institution, throughout the whole of the eighteenth century, of chairs for German Language, German Eloquence and such, comparable to the early teaching commitments of Wassenbergh and Siegenbeek of 1797. They also

10 Groen, Het wetenschappelijk onderwijs, II, p. 133.
show that around 1800, several broader teaching commitments for Deutsche Sprache und Literatur were granted to universities, largely comparable to the Dutch chairs after 1815. But subsequently, it appears that all of that is regarded as nothing more than ‘preliminary history’. The discipline proper seems to start only in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the prestigious Seminars where the ‘truly scholarly’ methods of the German philological school were taught. Similarly, several English authors pay ample attention to all sorts of eighteenth-century societies for the study of the national language and literature, and to the different chairs for English Language and Literature that were instituted, not at the traditional twins Oxford and Cambridge, but at several new universities during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. But they are still inclined to let the ‘proper’ history of the subject as scholarly discipline start only at the moment when, at the end of the nineteenth century, the latter universities opened a prestigious English education, modelled on the German philological school.12

As already stated, historiographers of Dutch Language and Literature are similarly inclined. At first view, this method strongly reminds us of that of traditional history of science, which often had the form of a story told ‘backwards’. Departing from the current state of affairs, the search was for ‘precursors’ in the past. Scientists, whose contributions did not immediately prove fruitful to the current state of affairs, were written out of its history or were typified as ‘failures’. More recent history of science often reproaches traditional history of science with ‘triumphalism’ and ‘finalism’ (and does this, by the way, rather triumphant or finalistic). The standard argument about Jonckbloet and De Vries as the ancestors of Dutch Language and Literature and about the triumph of the German philological direction in the Netherlands inevitably brings to mind this ‘finalistic’ manner of reasoning. But not only do some historians still copy Jonckbloet’s boundary work, with the accompanying opposition between an ‘old school’ of dilettantes and bunglers versus a ‘new school’ of true scholars, in a finalistic argument. It is even more remarkable that this ‘finalistic’ argument has never been challenged, even though it became clear, ever since 1900, that the success of the German philological school was by no means ‘final’.

In historical surveys, it often appears as if the ‘final destination’ of philology in the broader sense consisted in its evolution into a philology in the restricted sense of ‘critical editing of medieval texts on the basis of the

methods originating from historical comparative philology’. (It is striking that in treatises about the members of the ‘New School’ as ‘ancestors of Dutch Language and Literature’, not Dutch Language and Literature as a whole, but Middle Dutch Language and Literature, is central.) But at the time when, elsewhere in Europe, the principles of the German philological school were preeminent, they already came under severe criticism in Germany itself. An example is the so-called Nibelungenstreit. The fierce polemic about the proper way of editing early texts such as the Nibelungenlied – critically or diplomatically, with cultural historical explanations or solely with linguistic annotations, etc. – had important social repercussions. In this, the Gretchenfrage was whether the Deutsche Philologie should venture beyond the university walls and edit the national classics in a more ‘popular’ way to make them accessible also to the non-academically educated and to the larger public. Another question was whether the restriction to medieval literature was really sound: ‘Surely, for us the study of Goethe is not just equally important, but even more important than the study of the Nibelungen’. And was not the contemporary literature even more interesting and important for students? Philology’s striking lack of interest in this sort of practical matters met with sharp criticism.

Over time, this criticism led to a much broader view of the discipline, in Germany and elsewhere. More room was created for the study of other periods than the Middle Ages, for literary history, for literary criticism and several forms of theoretical and practical rhetoric. Obviously, many of the achievements of the German philological school have been retained by the different national philologies. Some of the practitioners of the discipline still show a stunning capability for Andacht zum Unbedeutenden. And yet, as regards their fields of attention, the national philologies – the disciplines concerned with national language and literature – in countries such as Germany, England and the Netherlands show more similarities with how they were practised in the first decades of the nineteenth century than with

13 Striking is for instance the confusion in the article by Van Dalen-Oskam on Matthias de Vries. The first sentence is: ‘Matthias de Vries has regularly [...] been characterised as the “ancestor of Dutch Language and Literature”’. The last sentence is: ‘Rightly, he [De Vries] is called one of the ancestors of the (Middle) Dutch Language and Literature’ (italics GJJ). See Van Dalen-Oskam, ‘De idealistische lexicografie’.
14 Foehrman, ‘Einleitung’.
15 Quoted from Kolk, ‘Liebhaber, Gelehrte, Experten’, p. 103.
16 Kopp, ‘(Deutsche) Philologie und Erziehungssystem’, p. 705.
their occupations during the second half of the nineteenth century.17 The days when every student of modern language and literature was supposed to acquire extensive knowledge of Sanskrit, Gothic, Anglo-Saxon and Old Icelandic are long gone.

**Discipline Formation in Humanities**

I now return to the specific case of Dutch Language and Literature. I wish to explore what this case can teach us about the process of discipline formation in scholarship.

A first remarkable point is the view of scholarly discipline formation as a process of specialization and differentiation. Discipline formation is often seen as a form of *Innendifferenzierung* (‘Inward Differentiation’) – to use Rudolf Stichweh’s term – within the system of scholarship as a whole.18 This internal differentiation is supposed to have steadily advanced in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, until – in the period after the Second World War – there was a reaction in the form of ‘interdisciplinarity’. The case of Dutch Language and Literature (and the other national philologies) shows that within the process of discipline formation, phases of specialization and ‘generalization’, of ‘narrowing’ and ‘broadening’, can occur, and that the process does not inevitably go in one direction.

Siegenbeek’s teaching commitment, for instance, was much more limited than ‘Dutch Language, Literature and Eloquence’ in the broadest sense. Initially, his task comprised only eloquence. But he did not take advantage of this opportunity to turn his field into a specialized discipline; he immediately started to extend it by teaching much broader. In other words, the breadth of the discipline during the time of Siegenbeek and his peers was not a kind of primeval state, a phase in which all kinds of divergent ‘hobbies’ of ‘dilettantes’ were waiting for the moment when the

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17 In the Netherlands, the academic fortunes of eloquence form an interesting example. Through the influence of the German philological school, the component of eloquence – once the total teaching commitment of Siegenbeek’s – disappeared from the teaching commitments and the curriculum, to make space for subjects such as Gothic and Anglo-Saxon. After the Second World War, it was reintroduced and at the end of the twentieth century it formed – in combination with linguistics and literature, and now in the form of ‘communication sciences’ or ‘new rhetoric’ – one of the main subjects within university education and research for Dutch Language and Literature.

18 In referring to the terms ‘Innendifferenzierung’ and ‘Ausdifferenzierung’, I do not wish to imply that Stichweh’s views are as unsophisticated as the use of his terminology by others sometimes suggest.
philologists-after-German-model such as Jonckbloet, would turn it into a ‘proper’ discipline. The breadth of the discipline was a characteristic actively acquired by Siegenbeek and his peers during what I consider an early phase of discipline formation itself.

Secondly, there is the opinion that discipline formation, apart from a matter of *Innendifferenzierung*, is also a matter of *Aeusdifferenzierung* (‘Outward Differentiation’), to use another term of Stichweh’s. The assumption is that discipline formation is partly a process in which the field or the system of scholarship increasingly differentiates itself from other social fields or systems, such as those of politics, arts or education. The example of the national philologies such as Dutch Language and Literature shows that this assumption is insufficient. For the highly specialized and autonomous national philologies after the German model felt obliged, around 1900, to take the interests of the other fields into account again. Especially the role of extra-academic education is interesting here. From the moment the national language and literature acquired an important position in secondary education, a significant job opportunity for philologists arose. But in secondary education, there was little use for Sanskrit, Anglo-Saxon or Old Icelandic. Literary history and simply command of the language were much more relevant, and the academic discipline naturally directed itself more to this kind of subjects.

And so it appears that the prevailing assumption, that a discipline is fully formed within the academic world and subsequently proliferates (‘top-down’) through extra-academic education, is not always valid. For the national philologies, discipline formation was no doubt strongly influenced by the demands of secondary education (‘bottom-up’), and this influence can still be felt strongly.

As far as the *Aeusdifferenzierung* is concerned, it might also be enlightening to point out the fact that the practitioners of the national philologies often show strikingly little zeal to cut themselves loose entirely from the literary field. For Dutch Language and Literature, a number of researchers are also known as poets, novelists, literary critics and in other literary capacities. Moreover, they have always shown a willingness to give even their scholarly contributions a ‘readable’ character, from the idea that one should not write exclusively for one’s own circle. (This does not only concern contributions to ‘popular scholarship’ but the opinion that the practice of scholarship itself should not depart too much from the generally accessible.)

Within this framework, lastly, I wish to point out the fact that linguists among the scholars of Dutch Language and Literature have always been willing to collaborate on spelling regulations, language counselling, etc.
And this even though, ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, these same linguists have professed their pride in their 'properly scientific' position that not the written, but the spoken language should be central to linguistic research, and that linguistics does not concern itself with normative description but only with the study of the actual use of language. Here also, Ausdifferenzierung and disciplinary autonomy are never absolute.

A third point concerns the opinion that the motivation for discipline formation is always an internal scholarly process. This opinion assumes that a new discipline arises when certain scholarly questions and problems cannot be adequately solved within an existing discipline. The new discipline is born in an effort to create a framework within which these questions can find their proper context. As we have seen, chairs in Dutch Language and Literature were instituted in 1797, and in 1815 Dutch legislation made such chairs obligatory for all universities in the Realm. There is no reason to suppose that this happened in 1797 because the legislator wished to see certain pressing problems within the existing (classical and eastern) philology solved, or because in 1815 the legislator thought that Siegenbeek and Wassenbergh had reached such sensational scholarly results that a strong stimulus for their discipline was urgently called for. Rather, it seems that all manner of political considerations – such as the wish to forge the kingdom into a truly unitary state with a uniform language and uniform spelling – gave rise to the thought ‘that something should be done about the national language and literature’. The priority was clearly in politics, and not in scholarship. Whereas in research and the theories on discipline formation, the dominant picture is of ‘a research question in search of chairs’, the formative period of Dutch Language and Literature yields the picture of ‘chairs in search of a research question’. In the Netherlands (and this seems to apply also to England) the first professors often were not academic philologists of origin. They constituted a diverse company of preachers, lawyers and sometimes even mathematicians, who were rather ‘called to the profession’ than in pursuit of their own ambitions.

Would-be disciplines?

I have argued that, in several aspects, the history of Dutch Language and Literature (and mutatis mutandis this also applies to other ‘national philologies’ and many other humanities disciplines and social sciences) does not accord with the prevailing picture of discipline formation in science. There is striking heterogeneity as regards fields of attention, methods and research
questions. The field shows relatively little autonomy, both in respect to other disciplines and to other social fields. And the genesis of the discipline cannot solely be explained from internal scholarly motives: the initiative rather lay in politics.

From all of this, one might draw the conclusion that disciplines such as Dutch Language and Literature are not ‘proper’ disciplines. To this kind of humanities disciplines (and also to some social sciences) Stephen Toulmin’s term ‘would-be disciplines’ might be applicable. The big objection against such a conclusion lies simply in the continued existence, for one and a half or even two centuries, of the disciplines concerned. They show all the usual institutional characteristics of scholarly disciplines: they are embedded in universities and research centres, they have their own professional journals and professional societies and supply job opportunities for various educational formats, etc. The practitioners also consider themselves the representatives of a certain discipline (‘Dutch Language and Literature’, ‘German Language and Literature’) and are accepted rather effortlessly by others in society as representatives of a scholarly discipline. Therefore, it might be advisable to follow the opposite course here. These disciplines should be considered as fully fledged variations of the discipline formation process. It is not the humanities disciplines that are deficient for not meeting the standards of the established theories concerning disciplines. It is rather the other way round: the established theories concerning disciplines, based on the situation in the modern sciences, are seriously deficient as regards historically grown ‘broad’ and flexible disciplines such as the national philologies.

The existing theories pay lip service to the idea that disciplines are not ‘natural kinds’ but are historically developed and actively built up in open exchange with society at large by the institutions for research, education and job formation concerned. But in practice, the research into discipline formation loses perspective on the historical and political dimensions and attempts to establish general laws and evolutionary patterns in discipline formation. A typical example is a recent publication by A.M. Schneider. The author states that every discipline develops through the same four phases of rise and fall.  

19 Schneider, ‘Four stages of a scientific discipline; four types of scientist’, p. 217. Although the author speaks of science, he gives no indication of supposing any difference between science and the humanities or the social sciences.
already past its prime. ‘Wars, political repressions, cultural superstitions, power struggles within the scientific community in addition to funding policies and pledged rewards’ – all these factors never cause more than ‘temporary deviations’ in the ‘natural’ evolutionary stages of development. From this perspective, disciplines are absolutely autonomous units, whose rise and fall comes about through fixed evolutionary patterns. And the political dimensions determining the boundary work do not amount to more than a kind of academic ‘office politics’.

We can find similar ideas in many theories about discipline formation. They can supply a useful explanation of how new sub-disciplines or paradigms (temporarily) conquer the scientific world, but they are found wanting as regards broader humanities disciplines (and probably social sciences) that have maintained themselves over one or two centuries.\footnote{A very positive and highly interesting exception is the work by Heilbron, for example ‘The Tripartite Division’.} If we really wish to honour the idea that disciplines are not ‘natural kinds’ but historically developed and actively, in interchange with society, constructed edifices, we need an approach that does not make the smallest research units central. In such an alternative approach, all manner of broad humanities disciplines are not deficient or would-be disciplines, which might one day develop into ‘real’ disciplines. From my perspective, it might be the other way round: the sciences could be perceived as ‘atrophyed’ disciplines, which have lost important characteristics proper to ‘real’ disciplines. They have degenerated into rapidly fluctuating clubs of temporarily autonomously operating researchers, with reduced viability in the long run: so defined, disciplines actually are often identical to paradigms. The fact illustrated by the national philologies such as Dutch Language and Literature is that the features that characterize them as would-be disciplines in the eyes of many researchers, might well be the characteristics that help a discipline to survive in the long run: the ‘lack’ of focus and the ‘lack’ of differentiation in respect to other sciences enhance scholarly flexibility. And the ‘lack’ of autonomy in respect to society enhances public support.

All of this amounts to a plea not to seek the identity of humanities disciplines, as opposed to the sciences, in a specific kind of object, method or objective, but in a specific kind of historic discipline formation. In this perspective, the question is how these disciplines – probably not coincidentally developed in the era of nationalistic strivings – have been able to survive this long, even in periods when chauvinistic ideologies were considerably less popular than in the first half of the nineteenth century.
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