William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language

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Although Orientalist matters dominated the early part of his career, William Dwight Whitney did not ignore the wider discussion about language taking place at this time. Victorian thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic were giving considerable attention to linguistic study, a subject that touched on some of the central intellectual issues of the age. It bore particularly on the mystery of human origins and on the related question of humanity’s status within the natural order. As that question famously presented itself in the wake of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), was mankind closer to the angels or the apes? Indeed, even before Darwin’s book appeared, religious writers were looking to “scientific” philology for aid in their fight against the increasingly naturalistic worldview of the sciences themselves.

Our eventual goal is to see how W. D. Whitney responded to this popular linguistic debate and how others, in turn, responded to his views. Yet in order to pursue that story, we must first place Whitney temporarily into the background, making him but a single figure on a larger canvas. We pause, then, to take an interpretive sounding of Victorian-era linguistic debate, beginning with its remoter sources.
Locke’s Essay on the Meaning of Words

The seventeenth-century founders of British empiricism took a decidedly practical interest in language. Experience—especially the rancorous theological battles of post-Reformation Europe—had shown that words themselves often gave rise to intellectual disagreements. The solution, these thinkers insisted, was clarity of expression. Plain and precise word definitions were essential to learned discourse—especially, as the charter members of England’s Royal Society pointed out, to the collaborative labors of science. John Locke supplied the philosophical underpinning of this outlook in Book III, “Of Words,” in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690).

A word, said Locke, stood for nothing other than an idea in the mind of its speaker. Hence, the same word used by different speakers did not necessarily mean the same thing. Although the surrounding community agreed more or less on the relationship between a given word symbol and its referent, each individual had his or her unique understanding of that relationship. Word definitions were characterized, therefore, by a significant degree of subjectivity. Here already, Locke said, language betrayed inherent “imperfections” as a medium of communication.

A related theme was that the linkage a speaker did create between a word and its definition was purely arbitrary: it was not something given by Nature. This point was not original with Locke. Plato had famously considered it in his dialogue Cratylus. More recently, Francis Bacon had characterized words as merely “the tokens and signs of notions,” and Thomas Hobbes had said much the same. Following in this tradition, Locke declared that certain words stood for certain ideas, “not by any natural connexion . . . for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea.” Because the connection between an idea and its verbal representation was not inherent, Locke concluded that that connection had to be voluntarily re-created with a speaker’s every utterance.

These notions about the subjectivity, arbitrariness, and voluntariness of word definitions were unsettling, for they suggested that shared knowledge was highly problematic. Indeed, Locke’s philosophy of language called into question the very notion of mutual intelligibility. Still, Locke offered this analysis, not as a body of truth to be contemplated, but as a survey of obstacles to be
overcome. To help his readers surmount those obstacles, he recommended the use of words that were literal rather than figurative in meaning. This practice, he suggested, would lead to more consistent definitions and would thereby create a more communal mode of “human understanding.”

In this context, Locke made what he hoped would be a helpful observation. Wanting to encourage a greater attentiveness to word definitions, he declared: “It may also lead us a little towards the Original of all our Notions and Knowledge, if we remark, how great a dependence our Words have on common sensible Ideas.” The emphasis here was on “sensible ideas,” that is, those got through the five senses. Locke noted that even “abstruse” terms, such as “to Imagine, Apprehend, Comprehend, Adhere, Conceive, Instill, Disgust, Disturbance, Tranquillity, &c.,” were based on physical, sense-based metaphors. (W. D. Whitney later built on this assumption when he insisted that the concrete definition of a word, as with the Sanskrit Naksatra, always appeared prior to its abstract definition.) Locke went on to suggest that this metaphorical basis of abstract terms pointed toward a program of etymological research: “I doubt not, but if we could trace them to their Sources, we should find, in all Languages, the Names, which stand for Things that fall not under our Senses, to have had their first rise from sensible Ideas.”

Although scarcely more than a passing observation, this insight into the “sensible” metaphors underlying abstract terms would profoundly affect Western linguistic theory during the 150-year period after Locke’s essay appeared. It did this, moreover, in a number of different ways. Later writers interpreted Locke’s analysis each according to his own philosophical point of view. As a result, a principle that was intended to promote community of understanding would actually lead to new rounds of controversy.

The Materialist Strain in Enlightenment Linguistics

Locke’s Essay contributed significantly to each of nineteenth-century Europe’s three main branches of linguistic theory. These we may label Common Sense, idealist, and materialist. In our next chapter we will see how W. D. Whitney embraced the first of these, the Common Sense tradition, even as he fought against the second; that struggle will be a focus of our story. The immediate concern, however, is with the third and most radical of these viewpoints, which would cast a shadow over the whole of Victorian language debate.
The materialist tendency in modern linguistics began with the writings of the English barrister, philosopher, and political gadfly John Horne Tooke (1736–1812). Horne Tooke had been deeply impressed by Locke’s insight into the metaphorical basis of abstract terms, including the notion that all such words derived from the name of some physical condition. Yet he pushed this teaching to an unwarranted conclusion: he argued that by tracing word histories in this way the etymologist arrived at the only real meaning a word had ever had. For example, “A RIGHT line is that which is ordered or directed, the shortest between two points. . . . A RIGHT conduct is [likewise] that which is ordered. . . . To do RIGHT is to do that which is ordered to be done.” Similarly, “TRUTH” was merely what one “troweth,” or promised, to do. Horne Tooke devoted the bulk of his two-volume *Diversions of Purley* (1786, 1805) to etymologies such as these. His point was to show that inherited ideals of truth and good conduct were really only names and that those names registered strictly sensory impressions upon passive minds. His conclusion: the so-called operations of the mind, humanity’s noblest sentiments among them, were “merely operations of language.”

Horne Tooke’s views became surprisingly popular in the early part of the nineteenth century, despite their obvious radicalism as well as the often fanciful character of his etymologies. This popularity stemmed from the way his theory apparently furnished a “scientific” mode of analysis applicable to language. As one admirer said, Horne Tooke “treated words as the chemists do substances; he separated those things which are compounded from those which are not decompoundable.” Even some religious thinkers were impressed by this procedure.

Nevertheless, a substantial body of criticism was aimed at Horne Tooke’s philosophical impiety. According to one writer, *The Diversions of Purley* espoused nominalism—the doctrine that general conceptions are names only—“in its lowest and worst form, as an instrument in the hands of materialism.” The two most eminent critics of that outlook represented two distinct philosophical viewpoints. The Scotsman Dugald Stewart hailed from the Common-Sense tradition, while the English poet and religious thinker Samuel Taylor Coleridge taught a version of Continental idealism. Each of these alternatives to Horne Tooke’s materialism would soon gain a significant following, yet one of them was clearly ascendant. Although German in its origin, the idealist strain of linguistic thought would become by far the most popular in Victorian-era Britain and North America. And especially important for our
purposes, the idealist writers opposed not only their real enemy—linguistic materialism—but also the far more moderate Common Sense perspective. For in their calculation, the three branches of nineteenth-century language theory increasingly boiled down to only two.

**Linguistic Natural Theology**

Surely the best-remembered exponents of linguistic idealism in America have been the New England Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson set the pattern in his book *Nature* (1836) by offering a new response to John Locke’s analysis of conceptual terms. While it was true that words expressing abstract concepts were based on physical metaphors, those metaphors were more than mere conventionalized mental associations. For the world itself, said Emerson, was “emblematic.” Every natural fact symbolized a spiritual fact, with the result that appropriate sense-based metaphors sprang up readily in the minds of language users. Emerson’s friend Henry David Thoreau suggested a similar thesis in *Walden* (1854). Here already one sees how Locke’s insight was shared alike by materialists and idealists.

The “Emersonian” style of language theory was actually commonplace in mid-nineteenth-century America, yet the Transcendentalists played only a small part in making this so. Much more influential were orthodox religious writers, chiefly from the evangelical mainstream. For that group, the embrace of linguistic idealism was a part of their involvement in a much larger intellectual trend—the creation of a new kind of natural theology. Traditionally, works in this genre were of the sort W. D. Whitney was assigned as a college undergraduate: they focused on physical nature, examining the cosmos, the earth, and the biological sphere for marks of intelligent design. When spokesmen such as William Paley dealt with humanity, they again pointed to physical features, especially to finely adapted organs such as the human eye. These, said Paley, were difficult to account for without invoking an all-wise Creator.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, a number of writers began to supplement this approach by focusing on humanity’s unique moral and intellectual faculties—including the faculty of speech. These too revealed supernatural origins, they argued, only in a deeper way, suggesting a more profound spiritual significance than could be inferred from mere anatomy and physiology. The language-oriented version of this new outlook we will call **linguistic natural theology.**
Almost all writers who embraced this perspective ultimately drew from the works of Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, respectively, from the 1770s and the 1830s. Herder championed the idea of language as a spontaneous growth from within the soul; it was not just something the speaker acquired from the surrounding community. Herder also taught that language and reason were inextricably connected, each being dependent on the other. Words, therefore, did not merely serve as labels for preexisting ideas; rather, they molded ideas from their very inception. Humboldt added the corollary that language functioned primarily as the handmaid of Bildung, or self-formation; its communicative role was only of secondary importance.

Yet what of the more “scientific” aspect of linguistic natural theology — was there anything here corresponding to the traditional natural theologian’s study of nature? The key lay in the intertwining of the life sciences and philosophical idealism in Europe in that era. The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries saw the vogue of Naturphilosophie, the transcendentalist biological thought associated with Goethe and Geoffroy, and later, in Britain and America, with Richard Owen and Louis Agassiz. These figures were interested, not in mere physical anatomizing, but in discovering the ideal principles on which living things were constructed. They wanted to imbue the life sciences with more penetrating insights than those of the Enlightenment, which had been infatuated with Newtonian mechanism. This fusion of idealism and empirical science had its parallel, in a general sense, in German philology, for language scholars in that country were renowned for their “scientific” methods. This linkage in turn buttressed the scientific aura of linguistic natural theology.

The idealist perspective on language was not necessarily religious in character, yet it could easily be adapted to religious purpose. A number of American thinkers took this step, having been inspired by S. T. Coleridge’s Aids to Reflection (1825). That work served as an all-important conduit, bringing a somewhat mystical version of German philosophy to the English-speaking world. In America, Coleridge’s Aids influenced not only the avant-garde writers of Concord and Brook Farm but also the conservative religious academics who held forth in New Haven. The key figure there was Josiah W. Gibbs, Yale’s longtime professor of sacred literature and the college’s chief language theorist until his death in 1861.

Up to a certain point, Josiah Gibbs was thoroughly Lockean in outlook. Borrowing directly from the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, he de-
clared that language “has no immediate expression for intellectual ideas.” He also affirmed that this need was supplied by metaphors based on sensory experience.\(^\text{10}\) Gibbs went on, however, to apply this teaching to the study of religious concepts, noting that the word *spirit* originally had meant “breath” or “wind”; *heaven*, likewise, was something “heaved” or “arched.” He offered these illustrations, not in the debunking mode of Horne Tooke, but rather to emphasize the necessity of sense-based language for describing the unseen realm. Figurative terms like these were indispensable, Gibbs argued, because religious concepts such as “spirit” simply could not be named in any other way. To this Gibbs added a further observation: once part of routine speech, words like *spirit* constituted “faded metaphors.” The original derivation having been forgotten, their literal sense was no longer apparent to the average speaker.\(^\text{11}\)

Gibbs’s arguments show once again how Locke’s insight into word origins supplied the basis not only of Horne Tooke’s linguistic materialism but also of the nineteenth century’s idealist language theory. What made these outlooks distinct from one another was the divergent ways in which they built on their common Lockeian foundation. Gibbs added an idealist superstructure—like Emerson’s, only more elaborate. How, he asked, did sense-based figures of speech, such as *spirit*, convey the intended concept to the mind of the hearer? His answer: “In the organic process of language, the person addressed is not a passive recipient of thoughts and ideas from the speaker, but by an independent activity of his own he reproduces the thoughts and ideas out of what is presented to him.” Gibbs characterized this activity as the “reproduction of ideas by spontaneous action”—a classically Herderian notion.\(^\text{12}\)

Continuing in this vein, Josiah Gibbs flatly rejected Locke’s other main teaching about language, that the connection between a word’s form and its meaning was a purely arbitrary matter. Instead, he declared that words enjoyed “natural significancy.” First writing on this subject in 1839, Gibbs said that this thesis, although neglected of late, was assuming its place once again as “one of the deepest and most important doctrines in philology. . . . In order to explain the existence of language, it is not enough that man has the organ of speech, that he has sensations and ideas, and that he has a desire to communicate them to others; but it is also necessary that sounds should have a natural adaptedness to express the particular sensations and ideas.” Language was therefore “not entirely arbitrary or conventional.”\(^\text{13}\) This theme neatly reinforced the perspective of linguistic natural theology. For as Gibbs suggested, there was in language a deep psychological dimension, an element that brute
sense perception and improvised mental associations by themselves could not readily explain.

Josiah Gibbs’s most famous student extended these lines of thought. A member of the Yale class of 1827, Horace Bushnell was the Hartford theologian who attracted so much attention among the New Haven academic community by virtue of his provocative writings and lectures. In his “Preliminary Dissertation on Language” (1849), Bushnell set forth a theory of religious rhetoric emphasizing imagination and intuition. Revisiting Gibbs’s question, he again asked how it was that different minds could agree so readily in their metaphoric leaps, rendering mutually understandable even those words denoting abstract concepts. He answered by positing a “hidden analogy” or “Logos” in the world of physical nature resonating with the inner logos of abstract thought. Nature itself constituted a “vast dictionary and grammar” that supplied all the material the mind needed for purposes of representation. If this was almost exactly what Emerson had said, it was because Emerson, Gibbs, and Bushnell all had drawn from the same source: German-idealist language philosophy as interpreted by Coleridge.

Yet Bushnell parted company with Emerson (and to a degree with Gibbs) in that he made his case in order to affirm the mystery of the Trinity, the cornerstone of orthodox Christian faith. (His “Preliminary Dissertation” served as an introduction to his treatise *God in Christ.*) Bushnell held that Trinitarian doctrine, being so far removed from any physical reality, simply did not lend itself to precise description. He argued, therefore, that the believer’s apprehension of the divine was more a matter of poetic insight than of theological exactitude. Although directed toward orthodox ends, this conclusion proved unsettling to mainstream evangelical thinkers, and it embroiled its author in controversy for many years.

A lesser-known yet complementary theme in Bushnell’s “Dissertation” was its endorsement of linguistic natural theology. Borrowing Josiah Gibbs’s phrase, Bushnell declared that the “natural significancy” of words offered unmistakable proof of a universe suffused with divine intelligence. And it did a better job of this, he said, than did a stack of books on traditional natural theology “piled even to the moon.” How did William Dwight Whitney respond to this idealist and religiously tinged strain of language theory? The full answer will have to await our next chapter, for his initial reaction was silence. He appears to have had no personal contact with the Transcendentalists, even though R. W. Emerson was a
nominal member of the American Oriental Society. He also rarely mentioned Josiah Gibbs, although he could hardly have been unaware of his language theory. After all, Gibbs was still teaching and publishing during Whitney’s first five years on the Yale faculty. Finally, Whitney apparently never commented on Horace Bushnell’s linguistic teaching, although he surely must have been familiar with it as well. His reticence is not surprising. In Bushnell’s case especially, to have spoken out would have involved Whitney in a religious debate he naturally thought it best to avoid. Also, as we have seen, Whitney sincerely admired Bushnell for his role as a courageous “disturber of the modern church.” Still, he could not have missed—and he could not have liked—the romanticist philosophy of language that was growing so popular in this period. Whitney’s response to that tendency would eventually form the core of his own system of language theory.

The Challenge of Evolutionism

By the time Horace Bushnell published his “Preliminary Dissertation on Language,” many lesser-known writers had already embraced the philosophy underlying that work. They did this in order to address the Victorian-era challenge to theism that was implicit in the growth of scientific naturalism. The threat arose especially from naturalistic explanations of humanity’s mental and moral capacities.

A milestone in that trend came with the publication of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844)—the anonymous work on biological evolution that W. D. Whitney read in the summer after graduating from college. *Vestiges* devoted a chapter to the subject of human origins, including the question of the origin of language. Here the writer suggested (in an argument likely borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau) that the earliest humans uttered spontaneous and inarticulate cries, their vocal cords functioning like an “Eolian harp placed in a draught.” To these random sounds the community gradually would have attached conventional meanings. Language was thus “no new gift of the Creator to man”; it was essentially the same as animal vocalisms, only enhanced by long practice so as to produce symbolic communication.17

This passage prompted a redoubling of the emphasis on linguistic natural theology. Already by this time American journals were combining reports on the latest developments in technical philology with touches of idealist language theory. The number of these articles shot up dramatically, however, in
the wake of *Vestiges*. The Congregationalist *Bibliotheca Sacra* and the nonsectarian *North American Review* both decried the notion of a mere “outward and mechanical connection” between language and thought; they also rejected the idea of speech as an “arbitrary, artificial, and gradual invention.” Language, they said, was a spontaneous product of the soul, called forth by something more than the purely practical need to communicate. Even the Presbyterian-run and Scottish-leaning *Princeton Review* embraced the German outlook, praising J. G. Herder’s teaching on “the unity of cognition and language; to speak is to know.”

The response to *Vestiges* also included discussion about how language actually originated. All who spoke from the standpoint of linguistic natural theology rejected the idea that language could have been invented through human ingenuity alone. Although many of these writers did accord some role to human artifice, they insisted that this could have produced nothing without a divinely bestowed language instinct implanted in the first human minds.

A further voice in this chorus came from a distant relative of W. D. Whitney’s. Benjamin Woodbridge Dwight (1816–89) of Clinton, New York, was a clergyman and schoolmaster as well as a grandson of Yale’s president Timothy Dwight. He was also one of the first Americans to discuss knowledgeably the work of Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm. His writings on that subject originally appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra* and the *New Englander* and were collected in his book *Modern Philology* (1859). There Dwight declared, with little supporting evidence, that the most recent linguistic research confirmed the account of human origins set forth in the Bible. This again was a discussion that could hardly have escaped Whitney’s notice, for his friend James Hadley wrote a favorable review of Dwight’s book.

Of course the greatest challenge to this religio-linguistic consensus came from Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). That work did not discuss human evolution, much less the emergence of language, yet its implications were clear enough. In response, long before Darwin addressed those subjects in *The Descent of Man* (1871), an army of writers endeavored to show that human mental capabilities were vastly superior to those of animals. And as part of this effort, they presented a familiar message about language. Articles in Boston’s *Universalist Quarterly*, for instance, affirmed that speech “did not progress from the bellowings of herds to vocal articulations by slow lessons” and that language existed, not just to facilitate communication, “but to originate thought.” And so, in the post-*Origin* decade of the 1860s, the idealist banner continued to
fly high over popular philological discourse in America. This, however, was nothing compared to what was happening in England.

A Victorian Apotheosis

Friedrich Max Müller faded fast from the scholarly pantheon after his death in 1901, and he has since been remembered chiefly as a popularizer. Müller does deserve credit for editing the *Ṛg Veda* as well as for virtually founding the discipline of comparative mythology — achievements that made him the Atlantic world’s most celebrated Orientalist in his day. Yet Müller’s larger popular success actually resulted from the denial of one of his chief ambitions in the Orientalist field: this took place in December of 1860, when he lost his bid for Oxford’s Boden chair in Sanskrit. The university would later create a chair in Comparative Philology expressly for Müller, thus making his position there secure. Yet by then he had long since found his niche in an auxiliary calling. As noted already, his defeat in the Boden election, rather than thwarting his drive, served instead as a creative stimulus. For within a stunningly brief amount of time — just six months after that event — Müller delivered the first of his two lecture series on “the Science of Language.”

The setting of those lectures was the prestigious Royal Institution of Great Britain, a forum established in London in 1799 for the genteel popularization of natural science. Physicists and chemists had been featured there especially, Humphrey Davy and Michael Faraday among them. Securing this venue was a master stroke. Arranged by Müller’s friend Baron Bunsen, sponsorship by the Royal Institution brought court patronage and thus a guaranteed audience made up of England’s social and intellectual elite. Among those who reportedly attended were Prince Albert, F. D. Maurice, John Stuart Mill, and Michael Faraday himself. There were yet further advantages to addressing this forum: it allowed Müller to circumvent the Oxbridge university establishment as well as the socially prominent amateurs of the London Philological Society. In this way he created an entirely new public interested in linguistics, and one that looked to him alone as its guide.

Max Müller set out to mold that public’s understanding of what language study meant for modern civilization — something he accomplished more successfully than any other individual in the nineteenth-century English-speaking world, W. D. Whitney included. It was a vocation for which he was eminently well suited. Handsome, suave, and ingratiating, Müller spoke fluent English
and had a flair for brilliant exposition. He used his talents, on one level, to provide a lively survey of the current state of comparative philology, a field still relatively unknown outside the European continent at that time. His more ambitious goal, however, was to conduct a tour de force of linguistic natural theology.

Like the other writers we have seen, only with infinitely greater scholarly authority, Müller used linguistic data to argue for the uniqueness and supernatural origin of the human mind. The timing of this message was no accident: he turned to these issues just over a year after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, and he took every opportunity in his lectures to combat the materialist views that were already being insinuated in Darwin’s name. Confronting the language issue head-on, Müller denied that speech could have originated through a Darwinian process: “It admits of no caviling, and no process of natural selection will ever distill significant words out of the notes of birds and the cries of beasts.” And, he said, the fact that animals did not speak spoke volumes about the chasm between them and humans, for language was “the one great barrier between the brute and man.” It was the most telling piece of evidence against the idea that humans had evolved from ape-like ancestors.23

What exactly did language reveal about this subject? Drawing on his early training in Kantian philosophy, Müller regarded the ability to use language as but the outward manifestation of the uniquely human capacity for abstract reflection. And that capacity, he argued, could never have developed from something less than itself. Pushing the point further, Müller reemphasized J. G. Herder’s notion that words were necessary for the conduct of reasoning. Or, as he put it in his second lecture series, “Without speech no reason, without reason no speech.”24

Like Josiah Gibbs and Horace Bushnell, Müller rejected the Lockean notion that the connection between a sign and its meaning was purely arbitrary. He acknowledged that the original metaphoric essence of most words had long been obscured by the subsequent growth of conventional definitions. Yet he suggested that the trained philologist could reveal those essences anew. Tracing word derivations would thus form a kind of metaphysical recovery project—only in a sense that was the very opposite of Horne Tooke’s. If etymologies were pursued back far enough, to the earliest glimmerings of human speech, they would reveal a golden age of pristine consciousness, of pure identity between word and thought. Müller thereby presented the philologist as the “scientific” counterpart of the romantic poet. Indeed, he hinted that the philologist, not
the poet or philosopher, was the figure best equipped to recapture humanity’s original paradisiacal state of being. At the same time, he suggested that language study provided the new master key to the human sciences.

Müller thus positioned himself as an ambassador between conflicting Victorian worlds. He aimed his diplomacy at reconciling the contradictory impulses of that age, at reintegrating a culture torn between the claims of religious faith and scientific advancement, between nostalgia and progress. Ironically, much of Müller’s ability to cast himself in this role stemmed from the fact that he was a foreigner, someone for whom German romanticism, including idealist natural science, came as a birthright. It was in serving up this Weltanschauung so learnedly yet attractively to his London audience that Müller excelled all of the other spokesmen for linguistic natural theology. And by so doing, he made himself a mid-Victorian cultural hero.

W. D. Whitney could not have been pleased with most of the popular language writing produced in these years. Still, he did his best to ignore this work, which in any case was largely the product of amateurs rather than the Continental scholars he saw as his legitimate peers. Then, however, Max Müller gave his virtuoso performance, and ideas that had appeared mainly in theological works or denominational journals now came from a highly authoritative source, posing a much greater threat, as Whitney saw it, to the foundations of a genuinely scientific linguistics. In response, his own priorities as a language scholar soon began to shift.