William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language

Stephen G. Alter

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Alter, Stephen G.
William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60328

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2151762

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
In the early 1870s, only a few years after the publication of his first book, W. D. Whitney added a subtle new element to his linguistic writings. Although he continued to teach that linguistics belonged with the “moral” sciences as a whole, he now emphasized the field’s special kinship with anthropology. Whitney drew this connection partly as a way to underscore themes that had been present in his work all along. He also used anthropology as a reference point as he elaborated his views on a number of important topics. Among these were race and ethnology, culture and human nature, myth and religion, and the idea of scientific “law” as applied to language. A further issue linked to anthropology was Darwinian evolution. Where exactly did Whitney stand on this crucial question? Did he accept an evolutionary explanation of human origins, and if so, what was his response to Darwin’s ideas about the origin of language specifically? By exploring these various themes, we further situate Whitney in relation to the human sciences in that day. At the same time, we lay the groundwork for a fuller assessment of his ties to Continental linguistics.
W. D. Whitney made no original contributions to ethnological research, yet he did take a keen interest in ethnological theory. This interest on his part was all but inevitable. In the early nineteenth century, ethnologists often used linguistic data to aid them in their main task—tracing the ties of blood kinship among the earth’s peoples. The field’s overarching question was this: Did humanity’s racial groupings all share a common ancestry, as the Bible apparently taught, or had they each emerged from a separate act of creation? The two sides in this debate were known as “monogenesis” and “polygenesis,” respectively.

The expectation that linguistic evidence would decide this issue was based on two long-held assumptions. First, traditional ethnology taught that the family tree of nations and the family tree of languages were essentially one and the same. Language therefore provided a reliable index of blood community. The second assumption was that human history spanned a relatively short period of time. The estimate as of midcentury stood at a little less than 10,000 years—only a modest extension of the 6,000 years suggested by a literal reading of Genesis. This brief time scale gave ethnological researchers the confidence they needed. With such a short period to cover, it seemed probable that research would eventually show whether or not the world’s languages, hence peoples, had derived from a single tongue and tribe. In this way the biblical affirmation of human unity would be confirmed or denied by “scientific” language study.

By the end of the 1850s, however, this heroic quest had to be abandoned because of the collapse of its founding assumptions. First, the language-race identification came under attack; a majority of thinkers now agreed that a person’s mode of speech did not necessarily indicate his or her ethnological descent. Soon the brief human time frame was overthrown as well. Excavations in England’s Brixham cave and elsewhere revealed manmade implements commingled with the fossil remains of extinct animals, proving that humanity had existed far longer than was previously thought. This revolution in ethnological time, it should be noted, was separate from the revolution in geological time publicized most famously in Charles Lyell’s writings in the 1830s.

Even by itself, the new chronology proved fatal to traditional language-based ethnology. For while the length of humanity’s existence was now vastly
extended, the linguistic data still went back only so far. The common ancestor languages such as proto-Indo-European were revealed to have originated far more recently than the period of human origins. (Linguists have long held that proto-Indo-European emerged around 4000 B.C.E.) Accordingly, researchers gave up hope of tracing the ultimate historical source—or sources—of language. And this conclusion led them to abandon the expectation that linguistic evidence could ever uncover the origins of ethnic diversity.

W. D. Whitney’s conversion to this new perspective was absolute. In 1856, near the beginning of his career, Whitney declared that scholars looked to the ancient Oriental texts in order “to read the early history of the human race.” The assumption was that humanity had appeared on the scene not much earlier than the oldest Eastern writings. When he gave his Smithsonian lectures eight years later, he remarked on the change that had taken place: “Recent discoveries are proving that man’s antiquity is much greater than has hitherto been usually supposed.” The implication for the monogenesis debate was clear: “The evidence of language can never guide us to any positive conclusion respecting the specific unity or diversity of the human races.”

Especially important is the way Whitney deployed the other half of the new ethnological thinking—the formal distinction between language and race—in a way that served the interests of his own discipline. His aim was to head off a challenge from anatomically based ethnology, which constituted a further threat from the “physical sciences.” Linguistic ethnology and physical ethnology had coexisted for decades, yet the latter began assuming an increased prominence around midcentury. Its most extreme advocates were members of the “American school”—researchers who compared cranial types in order to champion polygenism and teach racial inequality. Not surprisingly, this school of ethnology became popular among the southern slaveholding aristocracy in the 1850s, the decade prior to the Civil War. Yet it also had representatives in the northern states, chief among them Louis Agassiz, director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard.

Like most educated New Englanders, W. D. Whitney was dismayed at this racialist use of ethnology by a celebrated Harvard naturalist. In part, no doubt, he regretted the comfort it gave to the southern regime. Yet the moral issue of slavery was not what provoked Whitney in his capacity as a language theorist. Rather, he deplored the way racialist thought suggested a further encroachment by physical science on his discipline. We saw this concern earlier in Whitney’s disgust with the emphasis on craniology at Harvard’s Peabody Mu-
seum of American Ethnology and Archaeology. Significantly, he expressed that opinion at the time of the Museum’s founding in the fall of 1866—after the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment had put an end to American slavery. However momentous, that development did not stop Whitney’s worries about physicalist ethnology.

Whitney never named Louis Agassiz in this connection, although he hardly needed to. Clearly he was referring to the famous zoologist in his 1867 book when he deplored the idea “put forth and defended by certain authorities, . . . that language is the immediate and necessary product of physical organization, and varies as this varies; that an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Chinaman talk unlike one another because their brains and organs of articulation are unlike.” Whitney recoiled from this kind of explanation. He did so, moreover, for what to him was the most important of all possible reasons: “Doctrines akin with these are more or less distinctly and consciously implied in the views of those who hold that language is beyond the reach of the free-agency of men, and can be neither made nor changed by human effort. All who think thus virtually deny the existence of such a thing as linguistic science, or reduce it to the position of a subordinate branch of physiology.” For Whitney, then, the racialist theory of language was problematic mainly because it compromised the autonomy of linguistics as a discipline.

Yet what were his ideas about “race” itself? Like many nineteenth-century thinkers, Whitney understood racial phenomena to be a blend of biological, historical, and cultural factors, with considerable ambiguity as to the relative importance of each. He apparently believed in a quasi-Lamarckian combination of inherited and acquired characteristics—a commonplace viewpoint at that time and one that left unclear the extent to which biological inheritance figured in the mix. He also followed prevailing practice by using the terms “race” and “nation” nearly interchangeably.

Whitney did share the prejudices of most Euro-Americans of his day: he held that there were “differences in the mental endowment of races” and that some races were “exceptionally endowed.” He specifically believed that dark-skinned Africans were, on average, cognitively inferior to northern Europeans. But at least he thought that the median capabilities of these groups were not very far apart. As he once declared, “There are plenty of English blockheads who fall below the average African, and whose store of ideas and signs for them no average African need envy.” Whitney thus denied that race invariably determined an individual’s mental rank relative to the members of other ethnic
groups. He suggested, rather, that the particular community in which a person was brought up played the larger role in shaping that outcome. In sum, Whitney’s ideas about race, although manifesting prejudice, were nevertheless cautious and were only in part reductionistic.  

Whitney was especially against the idea that the structural complexity of a language mirrored the mental capacity of the nation that spoke it. Although he held that the “present state of perfection” of language was “greatly different in different races,” he attributed this phenomenon to a complex blend of historico-cultural factors; it was by no means a measure of cerebral inheritance. As he said late in his career, “To account for the great and striking differences of structure among human languages is beyond the power of the linguistic student, and will doubtless always continue so. We are not likely to be able even to demonstrate a correlation of capacities, saying that a race which has done this and that in other departments of human activity might have been expected to form such and such a language.” In short, Whitney concluded that “mental power is not measured by language-structure.” Again, the point was to separate language and race as causal variables.

And yet, having said these things, Whitney added a twist. Although he joined others in rejecting speech type as an indication of ethnos, he distinguished between the formal separation of those variables and their general historical correlation. In the formal sense, the identification of language type with blood inheritance led to obvious absurdities. It would mean that orphaned infants from Shanghai, even if raised in Paris, would show an inborn propensity to speak Mandarin. Even so, Whitney noted, history did tend to keep language and ethnicity together: over the centuries, most languages had been spoken by the peoples with whom they were historically identified. In this sense, he said, “upon the whole, language is a tolerably sure indication of race.”

Whitney thus showed that the formal distinction between language and race was fully compatible with the historical tendency of these factors to coincide. Indeed, he argued, the lengthened human chronology suggested that the identification of language and race became increasingly the norm the further back in time one looked, especially in the period before empires began to bring entire peoples under new linguistic regimes. The implication was that linguistic evidence continued to make a unique contribution to our understanding of the distant past, even taking precedence over palaeontological evidence. For even after the revolution in ethnological time, the oldest linguistic
data still predated the known anatomical or other physical remains of ancient peoples. Whitney therefore urged the continued use of linguistic research for “tracing out . . . the actual connection and genealogical history of human races.”

Did this mean that he accepted traditional ethnology’s boldest claim, that historical linguistics could resolve the dispute about monogenesis? He did not believe that it could do this directly, for linguistic evidence could no longer be regarded as reaching back far enough. Yet he did not, like some, abandon the question itself. Quite the contrary, Whitney argued that the discovery of prehistoric time actually tipped the balance in favor of original human unity. This was because, henceforth, while there could never be conclusive evidence proving polygenesis, it also would never be possible to disprove monogenesis. Moreover, the addition of abundant time only increased the possibility of gradual divergence from a common ancestor. As Whitney said, “We cannot presume to set any limits to the extent to which languages once the same may have grown apart from one another.”

And so, even as he embraced the formal separation of language and race as well as the lengthened human chronology, Whitney came close to reviving the traditional ethnological paradigm those new ideas had undermined. He reaffirmed not only the paradigm’s monogenetic conclusion but also its language-centered methodology. These arguments probably had little influence on actual ethnological research, yet they are significant for what they tell us about Whitney’s own agenda. The point, again, was to bolster the standing of his discipline within the ethnological household, yet another effort to keep the rising tide of physical science from engulfing language study. Whitney thus tailored his linguistic ethnology, like other aspects of his linguistic theory, to fit a professional disciplinary agenda.

It is important to see, however, that he pursued this goal with arguments that could stand on their own merits. As with his voluntarist theory of language change, Whitney’s ethnological opinions were motivated by partisan interest, yet at the same time they served as a convincing “scientific” interpretation of the available evidence. (That combination is, after all, a possibility one must always admit.) Later we will note the dogmatism of certain other aspects of Whitney’s “anthropological” language theory. Yet his views on ethnology, like most of his other arguments for the autonomy of linguistics, consisted of ideas that, although self-serving, were generally compelling in themselves.
Problems of Indo-European Ethnology

In addition to the monogenesis debate, nineteenth-century ethnology also addressed a number of issues concerning the Indo-European peoples. Here again, researchers traditionally assumed that these nations were identified historically with a distinct set of languages. In fact, the whole idea of an Indo-European linguistic family was ethnological in character. August Schleicher codified this outlook in the late 1850s when he began depicting the relationships among the Indo-European languages on the model of a Stammbaum, or “family tree.” According to this theory, as the once-unified Indo-European community subdivided via successive out-migrations, the original common tongue would have subdivided as well, thus producing new dialects and eventually whole new languages.

W. D. Whitney heartily endorsed this traditional theory. He declared that the similarities among languages of the same family “constitute an identity which can only be explained by supposing those who founded those tongues to have been members together of the same community.” Accordingly, Whitney believed in “the Stammbaum-connection of Indo-European races.” He also affirmed, along with Schleicher, the primacy of classifying languages genealogically, that is, according to common historical descent.

The main rival to genealogical classification was the grammatico-structural scheme of classification formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century. Humboldt had discerned four basic types of languages—isolating, agglutinative, inflective, and polysynthetic—each having its characteristic type of word construction. In isolating languages, such as Chinese, words were compiled from indissoluble roots: the Chinese word for “twenty,” for example, was a juxtaposition of the words “two-ten.” Agglutinative languages, such as those of the Semitic family, added a distinctive class of words that fused their constituent elements more closely. Inflective languages, found mostly in the Indo-European family, contained many words of which no part remained in its original root-form. The fourth type, polysynthetic, consisted mainly of American Indian languages, in which “words” expressive of a cluster of ideas were formed from strings of dependent syllables.

Whitney thought that this morphological scheme of classification had been overrated and that it ought to be kept subordinate to the genealogical ap-
proach. This stance amounted to a de facto privileging of the Indo-European family, for which genealogical investigation had proved especially fruitful. Still, Whitney conceded that the Humboldtian taxonomy was useful for those classifying families of languages about which little historical information was available due to a scarcity or absence of written records.15

Along with Schleicher and many others, Whitney was convinced that there once had been a single Indo-European (or “Aryan”) tribe. And like most writers on the subject, he held that a series of out-migrations from the Aryan homeland accounted for the peopling of India, Iran, and Europe. Could linguistic evidence reveal anything about these matters? Whitney conceded that it was of no help in locating the Indo-European homeland, whether in Europe or Asia. Nor could it determine the time of the tribe's origin.16 Yet Whitney suggested that linguistics was still valuable in other ways. He endorsed the work of the Frenchman Adolphe Pictet, who was piecing together a description of life among the Aryan mother-tribe by reconstructing the Indo-European proto-lexicon, especially the names of plants and animals. Already Pictet and his followers had shown that the first Indo-Europeans engaged in agriculture, organized themselves into clans, and practiced a simple polytheistic religion.

So while acknowledging the “imperfection of speech as an historical record,” Whitney argued that linguistic evidence still was as good as any other kind for investigating the prehistoric Indo-Europeans.17 In this way he again pushed the explanatory efficacy of his own field as far as he could, continuing his campaign to show that linguistic ethnology was at least equal, and in many ways superior, to physical ethnology.

Americanist Ethnology

Ethnology in North America mainly concerned the origin and kinship of the Native American peoples, the key question being whether the migrations that first populated the continent had come from Europe or from Asia. In his Notes on the State of Virginia (1787), Thomas Jefferson had called on investigators to compile vocabulary lists from the various American Indian languages and then to compare these with similar lists from other parts of the globe.18 (This followed the model set by Catherine the Great, who sponsored research of this kind on the nearly two hundred languages spoken within the Russian empire.) A handful of scholars in the early national period pursued Jefferson's
project under the auspices of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia; many of those who came later were connected with the Smithsonian Institution.

As a Sanskrit specialist, W. D. Whitney moved in a different world, Europe-centered and collegiate, from that of Americanist researchers such as Lewis Henry Morgan and John Wesley Powell. Still, Whitney did have links to these figures. He supplied Morgan’s request for Sanskrit terms to be used in comparing vocabularies gathered from North America and the Indian subcontinent. He also helped prepare a standardized phonetic alphabet for an ethnology handbook published by the Smithsonian. That work, written by the geologist George Gibbs, came out in 1863. (Thus was the way paved for Whitney’s Smithsonian lectures on linguistic science the following year.) Ideally, construction of an alphabet involved a partnership between trained philologists and amateur ethnological field-workers, the explorers, soldiers, and missionaries who had routine contact with American Indians and needed a system for observing and recording their unwritten languages.

Whitney’s efforts in this line proved abortive, however, as shown by his subsequent collaboration with the geologist-explorer J. W. Powell. Whitney and Powell first met when the latter visited New Haven in 1876. The two men spent several days together discussing American Indian languages and mythology. Whitney reported afterward: “I liked him much. It is astonishing how many geologists take to collecting language, etc., and what a good fit they make of it.” Whitney then helped devise a new phonetic alphabet (a revision of the one for the Gibbs volume) for the first edition of Powell’s *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages* (1877). Yet his schema did not work well in practice, for laymen needed something that could be learned and remembered more easily. Whitney bowed out of the project, at the same time affirming his commitment to the pragmatic orthography the task demanded. He told Powell: “You have no good reason for regarding and treating me as an authority on these matters. . . . Questions of alphabetizing are questions of expediency and compromise.” Whitney did not contribute to the new alphabet included in the second (1880) edition of Powell’s *Introduction.*

Despite this occasional involvement in Smithsonian work, Whitney had long criticized the Institution’s approach to Americanist ethnology. Joined by his Hartford friend J. H. Trumbull, he called on the Smithsonian to shelve its plans for a general treatise on the subject. Trumbull and Whitney wanted more data, arguing that it would be premature to address the ethnological issues be-
fore the internal genealogical relationships among the languages themselves had been worked out. As Whitney said in his published lectures, “What we have to do at present . . . is simply to learn all that we possibly can of the Indian languages themselves. . . . If our studies shall at length put us in a position to deal with the question of their Asiatic derivation, we will rejoice at it. I do not myself expect that valuable light will ever be shed upon the subject by linguistic evidence: others may be more sanguine; but all must at any rate agree that, as things are, the subject is in no position to be taken up and discussed with profit.”

This pessimism arose from the view—standard at the time—that unwritten languages had a propensity for rapid change. As Max Müller once put it, the languages of most Native American and African peoples were in a state of “continual combustion.” This meant that any traces of a proto-lexicon bearing witness to the original unity of those languages would be long past recovery. Whitney urged that, instead of gathering word lists, the Smithsonian should sponsor detailed studies of Indian grammars, since grammar was presumably more stable over time. Nevertheless, the “salvage” method prevailed. The Institution wanted at least a compilation of vocabularies before the native populations were much further reduced.

In practice, then, Whitney operated only at the periphery of Americanist linguistics. Still, he did what he could to promote that field: he tried to encourage research in the American Philological Association, chiefly by showcasing J. H. Trumbull’s work in the annual Transactions. And as the APA’s first president, he declared that “the philology of the American aboriginal languages . . . demands, as it has already begun to receive, the most hearty encouragement. Circumstances, and our duty toward the races whom we are dispossessing and destroying, make American philology and archaeology our especial responsibility, and it is our disgrace as a nation that we have been unfaithful to it.”

This last comment suggests Whitney’s attitude toward the native peoples themselves. Apparently he had no sense of the colossal irony of invoking a scholarly “duty” toward peoples whom Euro-Americans were “dispossessing and destroying.” The implication was that a scientific interest in the native American languages would demonstrate the white man’s regard for Indian culture and that this would afford a kind of compensation to people who were being robbed of their land and often their lives. Beyond this, Whitney showed no particular concern for the fate of the Indians. This attitude was typical of American ethnological writers of that era. From Jefferson to J. W. Powell, all
were resigned to the ultimate necessity of Indian removal—something they regarded as tragic yet inevitable. Still, they worried about the scholarly loss this process would entail.  

In his first book, Whitney lamented that no academic institution in the United States had taken up the investigation of the native languages. Yet he did anticipate a change: “This reproach, at least, is about to be removed, by the establishment of a chair of American archaeology at Cambridge.”26 Whitney wrote this in the early days of Harvard’s Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, still under the impression that the related professorship would soon be initiated and that the position would go to a language specialist. (Or perhaps by mentioning this expectation in print, Whitney hoped to prod Harvard into making it a reality.) As it turned out, American Indian linguistics became a university subject only after the anthropologists made it one of their main subfields in the 1890s.

**Darwinian Nature versus Social Nurture**

Despite his strong interest in ethnology, Whitney had a much greater theoretical affinity for “evolutionist” anthropology. The differences between those fields will become apparent as we proceed. As a preliminary, however, we need to examine Whitney’s views on the related question—or rather questions—of actual biological evolution. There were four distinct issues in this regard.

First of all, some have suggested that Whitney owed much of his linguistic theory to influence from bio-evolutionary writings. Stephen Jay Gould, for instance, described Whitney’s *Language and the Study of Language* as “a standard nineteenth-century work inspired by the Darwinian revolution.”27 This impression is understandable enough, although it fails to take into account the way philology as a whole in that era emphasized language’s gradual historical unfolding—an idea not at all dependent on Darwinism. As Whitney himself pointed out in 1883, Darwin’s writings merely reinforced the notion of civilizational progress that had been current for some time: “That every successive phase of a historical institution is the outgrowth of a preceding phase, and differs little from it, is a truth long coming to clear recognition and fruitful application in every department of historic research, prior to and in complete independence of any doctrine of evolution in the natural world. Only error and confusion have come of the attempts made to connect Darwinism and philologic science.”28
Besides this matter of evolutionary thinking in the broad historicist sense, there were three other issues that Whitney considered: Charles Darwin’s theory as such; Darwin’s views on the origin of humanity; and the question, specifically, of the origin of speech. Whitney first addressed these questions, not in his published lectures, but in a review he wrote for the *Nation* two years later. This 1869 article considered the origin-of-language theory recently set forth by W. H. J. Bleek, a respected German linguist and a cousin of the pro-evolutionary zoologist Ernst Haeckel. Here for the first time Whitney spoke directly to the question of species evolution. Not surprisingly, he affirmed his “great faith in the substantial truth of the central Darwinian idea.” Whitney was still not ready to commit himself, however; and indeed, his main point was to urge caution: “We cannot think the [Darwinian] theory yet converted into a scientific fact; and those are perhaps the worst foes to its success who are overhasty to take it and use it as a proved fact.” He reprimanded those “headlong Darwinians”—Haeckel being the chief culprit—who treated the theory as “already proved and unquestionable.”

Whitney would remain circumspect in public, but he must have become increasingly convinced in his own mind. An essential component of Darwin’s theory was the notion of branching descent from common ancestors, and a mere stroll across Yale’s campus would have shown the latest evidence of this. In 1870 the Peabody Museum of Natural History began displaying fossils from the American West collected by O. C. Marsh. The most talked-about discovery was the remains of an extinct species of bird having teeth and other reptilian features—suggesting an ancestral link between two long-separated biological genera. Such vivid evidence likely informed private remarks Whitney made in 1874. The occasion was the passing of Louis Agassiz, the most vocal opponent of Darwinism among America’s professional naturalists: “Yes, Agassiz’s death is a sad loss—less, so far as science is concerned, than if he had not concentrated all his powers in a fruitless fight with the evolution theories. We shan’t soon see another such grand personality in this country.”

Whitney’s 1869 review article also touched on the two remaining issues—the all-important question of human origins, and the related problem of the origin of speech. More than a year would pass before Darwin stated his own views on these subjects in *The Descent of Man* (1871), yet Whitney, like most observers, saw where he was headed. Whitney again urged caution, faulting those (such as Haeckel) who rushed to draw up detailed genealogies of man’s prehuman ancestry. Still, he gave a strong indication as to his own leanings:
“Now we, for one, must confess that we have not a particle of prejudice against such kindred.” For if it were asked whether humans had originated “by a long and tedious climb upward from a miserable semi-simious state, or by a briefer slide downward from a condition of paradisiacal purity and intuitive wisdom,” he would respond without hesitation that “the former account of our position is the more flattering and gratifying of the two.”

Did Whitney also follow Darwin’s thinking concerning the origin of language? At least one writer thought so. A review of Whitney’s first book appearing in Bibliotheca Sacra criticized its “theory that we came up into the possession of language out of a mute state.” According to the reviewer, that theory made “a weighty contribution to Mr. Darwin’s doctrine”; indeed, he said, Whitney “scarcely disguises his leaning to Darwinism.” This no doubt was the impression many readers came away with, especially those who faulted Whitney’s philosophical “positivism.” Whether this charge was accurate, however, is another matter. Did Whitney in fact believe that the first glimmerings of language had been produced by some ape-like being from which humanity later evolved?

The answer is a clear-cut no. This is surprising on the face of it, because Whitney obviously accepted the idea of human evolution; he also taught that language had developed gradually, beginning with the imitation of sounds in nature. One would think that he ought to have concluded that these two processes occurred in tandem. Yet this was precisely what he denied. Even before Darwin published his own views on the subject, Whitney had rejected the notion that speech emerged in the course of humanity’s evolution from lower animals. In his 1869 article, he insisted that only humans as such, possessing a fully evolved brain capacity, could have invented language:

If the first man had not had a power of analytic apprehension, and a mastery over consciousness, very different from those of other beings, neither hearing nor imitation [of sounds in nature or instinctive cries] would have led him to anything. This power is man’s characteristic, and where he received it, at whatever time and in whatever way, he became man. We object entirely to having his conversion into man treated as the result, rather than the cause, of his cultural development as man. When the process of language-making began, man was man in esse as well as in posse, ready to have his powers drawn out and educated—just as is every human being nowadays at the commencement of its existence.
In sum, Whitney kept his belief in humanity’s evolutionary emergence entirely separate from his belief in gradual and naturalistic speech origins. This stance was demanded by the way he interpreted two widely held principles, each of them fundamental to the emerging human sciences. First, he called for a strict separation between inherited biological nature and sociocultural nurture. By keeping language in the latter category only, Whitney reflected the growing tendency among anthropologists to regard “culture” as an autonomous realm, unaffected by biological influence.

Second, Whitney’s non-Darwinian view of speech origins expressed what he regarded as a consistent uniformitarian methodology, the idea that the explanation of events in the distant past must refer to the kinds of causal forces found operating at present. There was considerable irony in Whitney’s conclusion on this point because Darwin is usually considered one of the early champions of uniformitarian methodology. It is even more ironic in light of who had done the most to inspire Whitney’s uniformitarian-based imitative theory of speech origins. As we have seen, that inspiration came from Hensleigh Wedgwood, Charles Darwin’s cousin and brother-in-law.

Wedgwood put the argument as follows in his *Origin of Language* (1866): “The investigator of speech must accept as his starting-ground the existence of man as yet without knowledge of language but endowed with intellectual powers and command of his bodily frame, such as we ourselves are conscious of possessing, in the same way that the geologist takes his stand on the fact of a globe composed of lands and seas subjected as at the present day to the influence of rains and tides, tempests, frosts, earth-quakes, and subterranean fires.” Wedgwood wanted to emphasize that language was not, even in part, a divine gift to man. It had developed, he insisted, from human powers only. Yet this also meant that language had been invented by full-fledged humans, beings endowed with capacities (as Wedgwood said) “such as we ourselves are conscious of possessing.”

There was, then, a fundamental difference between the way Wedgwood and Whitney, on the one hand, and Darwin, on the other, applied the uniformitarian principle to language. Darwin assumed that, essentially, nothing more could have existed in the distant past than exists at present—whether unknown causal factors within nature or special interventions from outside nature. Taking this logic a step further, Wedgwood and Whitney argued that, if in the past there could have existed nothing more than at present, then there
also could have existed nothing less. A human faculty such as speech must have begun under conditions that lacked none of the basic structures that support language use today, the key elements being the human vocal apparatus and a fully evolved *homo sapiens* brain. On the face of it, it is surprising to find this dissenting viewpoint coming from Wedgwood and Whitney, two pro-Darwinian thinkers who were fully committed to the uniformitarian principle. They ought, one might suppose, to have agreed with Darwin on this point as well. Yet the reality was not as simple as that.

Darwin apparently did not discuss with his cousin the full extent of his bi-evolutionary thinking about the origin of speech, at least not prior to the appearance of *The Descent of Man* (1871). Wedgwood presumably was not aware, writing several years earlier, that his own views on the subject differed significantly from Darwin’s. In *Descent*, Darwin made respectful mention of Wedgwood and a number of other writers who suggested that articulate speech had evolved from a combination of instinctive cries, such as mating calls, and the imitation of these and other sounds from nature. Yet Darwin worded these remarks carefully so as not to suggest that he necessarily agreed with everything Wedgwood said. Then, on the following pages, he argued that the imitative rudiments of speech must have been uttered by man’s prehuman ancestors. Said Darwin: “It does not appear altogether incredible, that some unusually wise ape-like animal should have thought of imitating the growl of a beast of prey, so as to indicate to his fellow monkeys the nature of the expected danger. And this would have been a first step in the formation of a language.” Continued use of this expedient would have made the final stages of humanity’s mental evolution simultaneous and interdependent with the origin of speech.

Darwin’s new book did nothing to change W. D. Whitney’s essential position. Less than a year after the publication of *Descent*, Whitney reaffirmed his opinion that “the rise of language had nothing to do with the growth of man out of an apish stock, but only with his rise out of savagery and barbarism.” He said again, somewhat later: “No steps between the wholly instinctive expression of the animals and the wholly (so far as articulate words are concerned) conventional expression of man will ever be discovered.” The same message would continue to appear in Whitney’s writings in the years following. There was, however, a particular occasion on which he hedged. This once, Whitney made a special point of declaring himself generally in agreement with Darwin’s theory of speech origins. Why he did this, and the surprising results that followed, we will see in our next chapter.
The Template of Cultural Evolution

Writing to his brother Josiah in the spring of 1872, W. D. Whitney offered a revealing glimpse of his home life. At the same time he suggested his growing attraction to anthropology. He reported the following: “I am reading Tylor’s ‘Primitive Culture’ aloud to the girls, with great interest. He is far the soundest and ablest English writer on this general class of subjects, I think: clear-headed, logical, and with no hobbies at all. Lubbock can’t compare with him.” In referring to “the girls,” Whitney presumably indicated all three of his young daughters. This would mean that he read the Englishman Edward B. Tylor’s newly published anthropological treatise not only to his eldest, Marian, who had just celebrated her eleventh birthday, but also to Emily and Margaret, who were seven and five, respectively. (Whitney’s sons, Edward and Roger, were fourteen and nine at this time.) To say the least, this was ambitious reading material for children of their ages. Still, it suggests an aspect of daily life around the Whitney fireside.

E. B. Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871) was the latest product of the evolutionist school of anthropology. Closest in spirit were Tylor’s previous book, his Researches into the Early Condition of Man (1865), and two books by John Lubbock: Prehistoric Times (1865) and The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man (1870). Other works in this vein had been written by J. F. McLennan, Herbert Spencer, and the American Lewis Henry Morgan. Whitney favored Tylor, however, because he found Tylor’s approach to anthropology an especially fitting complement to his own outlook in linguistics. This is not to suggest that Whitney borrowed any of his essential views from Tylor: those were all in place before the appearance of Tylor’s Researches. Rather, the agreement between these writers came from the fact that both drew from the same source: British Enlightenment social thought. We have seen a number of the ideas Whitney borrowed from that tradition, yet there were others as well, ones that reveal even deeper assumptions underlying his theoretical system.

The Whitney-Tylor connection centered on the notion of cultural evolution. Eighteenth-century writers had already described human institutions, language included, as developing from simple beginnings and growing more elaborate over time. By contrast, the romantic generation of the early nineteenth century had offered a vision of historical and linguistic decline. The
comparative philologists approximated the older view with their theory that rudimentary monosyllables had supplied all of the basic materials used to form the inflective languages. The anthropological writings of the 1860s then brought an even greater resurgence of progressivism. This move was inspired not so much by Darwinism as by the lengthened human chronology: the new abundance of time made more plausible a scenario of gradual upward development.\textsuperscript{44}

Reflecting this progressive view of history, W. D. Whitney regarded the “utterly savage state” as humanity’s original condition; he also affirmed that the “wealth” of even the most complex languages had developed from an original “poverty.” The development of words thus paralleled the development of tools and weapons. As anthropologists had recently shown, stones and clubs necessarily preceded hammers, hatchets, and spears. This “law of simplicity of beginnings,” said Whitney, surely had applied to language as well.\textsuperscript{45}

Whitney also embraced the idea of cultural evolution—an emphasis on sociocultural nurture as opposed to inherited biological nature.\textsuperscript{46} In his 1871 book, E. B. Tylor famously defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Already in his published lectures, Whitney had described language as “an institution, as much so as any other body of usages which goes to make up the sum of acquired knowledge and culture.” And when he elaborated this point in 1871, he clearly took his cue from Tylor’s formulation of that same year: “Under the name ‘culture’ we mean all that knowledge and training which comes to each individual from his being born a member of society, who acquires what those about him are able to impart.”\textsuperscript{47}

This theme of acquired behavior has been the enduring hallmark of cultural anthropology—linking E. B. Tylor to all who came after him in that field. More significant for our purpose, however, is the way evolutionists like Tylor and Whitney differed from the relativists who came later. Tylor and Whitney always spoke of culture rather than cultures, suggesting development along a single timeline. Although the world’s peoples all were traveling the same path, different societies had made different amounts of progress thus far. All were capable of advance, yet there was still a single standard of civilization by which their different degrees of progress were to be measured.\textsuperscript{48}

Especially important to Whitney was the linguistic version of this outlook. Like many other nineteenth-century philologists, Whitney believed that the
three main morphological types—isolating, agglutinative, and inflective (here omitting polysynthetic)—represented three successive stages in the universal history of language. This meant that the earliest human speech had consisted entirely of isolating (that is, monosyllabic) root-words. Some languages had then progressed to the agglutinative stage, and some of these had gone on to the inflective. Every inflective language, therefore, had emerged from an agglutinative ancestor, and every agglutinative language had been built on a monosyllabic foundation. As noted earlier, Whitney considered these morphological types as unreliable for classificatory purposes because many languages did not neatly fit into one or another type. Yet this blurring of categories only made the three-stage developmentalist schema all the more plausible, for it confirmed the notion of one type of language gradually evolving into the next.

This evolutionist scenario led Whitney to an all-important conclusion: Indo-European structural principles supplied the interpretive key to language history globally. Many mid-nineteenth-century linguists more or less held this view, but Whitney made it one of his guiding principles. This did not mean that he cared about the Indo-European tongues only. He urged the study of “every existing and recorded dialect, without rejection of any,” and he also disclaimed any “reprehensible partiality for the tongues of our own kindred.” Yet as a practical matter, Whitney assumed that all of the world’s languages could be analyzed via Franz Bopp’s combinatory morphology. Because the inflective tongues appeared at the top of the evolutionary ladder, the principles used in their analysis seemed to enjoy universal validity.

Whitney had been enamored with this universalist quest from his earliest days of philological study, when he had affirmed his interest in “language not languages.” Hence, when he came to formulate his general linguistic principles, he drew these not only from Boppian morphology, but more fundamentally, from Enlightenment social science. Specifically, he drew upon the idea that an essential and unchanging human nature provided the ultimate explanatory factor in human affairs. The classical economists had set the pace by positing an abstract “economic man,” whose propensities with regard to production and exchange applied irrespective of time and place. In this same mode, E. B. Tylor explained similarities between widely dispersed cultural practices by appealing to the “psychic unity” of humankind. Thus we see why Whitney ultimately was attracted less to ethnology, the study of diverse nations, than to anthropology, the study of universal “man.”
Whitney did not, however, anticipate the idea of "linguistic universals," as proposed by Joseph H. Greenberg in the 1950s. For Whitney did not actually believe that such principles adhered in language itself. He made this clear in The Life and Growth of Language (1875) when he declared that the "general laws or general tendencies of language, well enough called by that name if we do not let ourselves be deceived by the terms we use, are really the laws of human action, under the joint guidance of habit and circumstance." A genuine linguistic "law," therefore, needed to take into account "the known and recorded facts of human language, in combination with the known and observable characteristics of human nature."\(^5^3\)

What were those characteristics? One was simply the desire to communicate, something that applied to "every human being, in every stage of culture." In addition, Whitney pointed to "economy of effort" as the fundamental motive behind nearly all changes in linguistic behavior. This idea of conserving effort was grounded in the Utilitarians' hedonist psychology, the notion that people generally are guided by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Whitney likely absorbed this principle from Francis Wayland's Elements of Political Economy (fourth edition, 1841), which taught that one of the economic actor's universal tendencies was to minimize exertion.\(^5^4\) Ease of physical utterance was another idea to which most nineteenth-century philologists acceded at least some importance yet that Whitney made central to his theorizing. As he flatly declared, "The science of language has not succeeded in bringing to light any more fundamental law than this."\(^5^5\)

Coupled with Whitney's universalism was the uniformitarian principle of continuity between past and present, which Whitney employed not only in his discussion of the origin of language but throughout his theoretical system. (That principle, we should add, was rooted as much in Enlightenment social science as in Lyellian geology.) Accordingly, like his theory of linguistic "law," Whitney's uniformitarianism actually applied, not to language itself, but rather to something more basic: "The scientific method requires that no assumption of a different human nature from that which we see and know [today] be made a factor in the inquiry."\(^5^6\)

The most telling manifestation of Whitney's anthropological outlook appeared in his treatment of so-called sound laws — arguably the most significant results of nineteenth-century linguistic investigation. Especially famous was Jacob Grimm's discovery (published in 1819) of a set of correspondences be-
between the initial consonants of cognate words in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and early Germanic. For instance, the stem words for foot in Greek and Latin were pod- and ped-, respectively, while the Gothic equivalent was fotus. The words for heart in these languages were kardia, kor, and hairto. The regularity of these patterns suggested that a general shift from p-sounds to f-sounds, and from k-sounds to h-sounds (among other combinations) had accompanied the emergence of the Germanic tongues from their Indo-European antecedents. This pattern, which became known as “Grimm’s Law,” set a standard for future research in comparative phonological behavior.

As Whitney pointed out, however, this “law” applied only during a particular historical period and in only a portion of the Indo-European language-family. In this sense, it really was not a law at all. Patterns of this kind, Whitney said, resulted from the “more recondite . . . influences which are deep-seated in the individual character of different tongues and the qualities of the people who speak them.” Yet Whitney rejected any notion of a national Sprachgefühl, a linguistic “feel” particular to an entire people that leads them to conform their speech behavior to some unseen design. He therefore characterized Grimm’s discovery as “that greatest of phonetic mysteries,” and as “one of the most remarkable and difficult phenomena of its class which the linguistic student finds anywhere offered him for explanation. Nor has any satisfactory explanation of it been yet devised.” The best a philologist could do, he said, was to “take the differences in national [linguistic] character as ultimate facts, content with setting them forth clearly, [but] not claiming to explain them.”

In sum, Whitney treated phonological correspondences with extreme caution and gave them but a small place in his theoretical system. Boppian morphology he found much more intelligible: truncating, recycling, and recombining bits of lexical material—all expressed the universal tendency to take ad hoc steps toward more efficient behavior.

Constructed on this basis, Whitney’s theoretical system showed impressive coherence and consistency. Yet it also had major shortcomings. Whitney’s purported universalism actually masked an Indo-Eurocentric outlook, in which non-Indo-European languages appeared to be in some sense less developed. For instance, Whitney considered inflective grammar to be the most subtle means for the expression of ideas. Chinese and Japanese forms of word structure, by contrast, he judged as limited in their expressive capability. He also faulted certain languages for their “less elaborate and complete” systems of
color distinctions and enumeration as compared with those used in the Indo-European family. (He was careful to reemphasize, however, that these limitations had nothing to do with a group’s inherent mental ability.)

Over the years, Whitney would become increasingly dogmatic in his commitment to the Boppian view that all purely grammatical (that is, “formal”) elements, such as the -ly in quickly, had derived from a previously independent word (that is, a “material” element). He maintained this view even in the face of mounting historical evidence to the contrary. Similarly, Whitney grappled late in his career with the discovery that some reputedly monosyllabic languages actually had evolved from bi-syllabic roots. Wanting to accommodate this new research with the least departure from Boppian orthodoxy, he insisted that the two parts of any such roots at least must have been grammatically undifferentiated. As he said, to hold that a linguistic family’s initial words had combined material and formal elements was like claiming that man’s most primitive tools had been invented with handles attached. The grammarlessness of roots was thus a “theoretical necessity” on the principle of simple beginnings.

Already at the end of his 1875 book, Whitney had declared that comparative-philological data must be “made to fit” with a right understanding of human nature and cultural development, what he now called “general anthropology.” This cast of mind showed even more clearly in an article he wrote ten years later: “It is evident that what is true of this [Indo-European] family of speech, one of the most highly organized that exist, may also be true of the rest — must be true of them, unless some valid evidence be found to the contrary. The unity of human nature makes human speech alike in the character of its beginnings and in the general features of its after-history.” Here again, Whitney projected Indo-European morphology onto a worldwide canvas by insisting that the rudimentary components of inflective word construction “must,” of necessity, be found in the agglutinative and isolating languages.

Whitney’s embrace of such a rigidly deductive approach was ironic in light of his vaunted empiricism. It was indeed a major blind spot. It can said by way of partial explanation that the use of deduction per se accorded with the best social-scientific thinking of that era. John Stuart Mill had argued in the 1840s that empirically discovered regularities in behavior could form the basis of a genuinely scientific sociology — but only as long as they conformed to what might be deduced rationally, from the universal principles of human motivation. E. B. Tylor made the corollary point: “When a general law can be inferred from a group of facts, the use of detailed history is very much superceded.”
Even so, Whitney’s reliance on this kind of procedure could not always withstand the empirical test.

We can now take a more comprehensive view of W. D. Whitney’s thought within the development of the modern human sciences—with perhaps surprising results. During most of the nineteenth century, the human or social sciences were torn between two competing methodological models. On the one side stood the universalizing field of political economy, along with its theoretical successor, late-Victorian anthropology. On the other side stood philology, its defining trait being historical particularity. This trait was of course a chief characteristic of traditional philology, which elucidated old writings, in part by relating them to their unique national and literary contexts. Yet comparative philology too dealt with the particular: although it often revealed the unities underlying large and diverse groups of languages, it still grouped these into specific clusters. Other fields based on this model also manifested this quality. The comparative-historical jurisprudence set forth in Henry Sumner Maine’s Ancient Law (1861), for instance, traced the legal traditions of specific nations, an approach developed in contrast to the ahistorical abstractions of Utilitarian legal theory.

By keeping in mind philology’s particularizing impulse, we highlight an important thread of continuity in the history of the cultural sciences. This thread began with the Herderian emphasis on the distinct literary consciousness of each Volk, and it continued in the relativist anthropology of Franz Boas and his students in the early twentieth century. The characteristic throughout was an essentially philological approach to cultural analysis. This continuity is easy to overlook because post-Boasian anthropology has emphasized firsthand fieldwork and cultural praxis—thus downplaying old texts. The underlying spirit showed itself, however, when the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously spoke of “reading” a culture as if it were a complex “manuscript.” Through such readings, each culture-group would yield up its distinctive worldview.

Tylorian anthropology—and W. D. Whitney’s linguistics along with it—thus formed a distinct interlude between two Herderian moments in the development of the human sciences. That interlude saw a resurgence of the Enlightenment’s classical-economic model; it did not follow the philological model. Although himself a practicing philologist, Whitney tried to fit philology (especially comparative philology) into a larger conceptual harness. For this he
looked to a cluster of post-Enlightenment mental and social philosophies, including those that had filtered down into evolutionist anthropology.

A Curious Analogy with Myth and Religion

Whitney always took an interest in the historical study of myth and religion, a rising field in the nineteenth century that was closely connected to ethnology and anthropology. He approved of much of the recent research on the original “Aryan” religion. The idea was to glean traces of that belief system from the Vedas on the assumption that the Indians of the Vedic period had been more or less direct descendants of the prehistoric Aryans. Scholars such as Alolphe Pictet concluded that the Aryan religion had been a simple form of nature worship, for there was nothing in the Vedas to suggest the complex Brahmanism that came later. With this much Whitney agreed. He grew skeptical, however, when Pictet, Ernest Renan, and F. Max Müller, extrapolated from this basis and argued that a pristine revelation, akin to monotheism, could be found in the dim Indo-European past. In taking this stand, they continued the similar speculations of the early Orientalists, including William Jones and Friedrich Schlegel.68

Max Müller did the most to develop this idea and to popularize it among English-language readers. He taught that the polytheistic myths and religions scattered throughout the ancient Indo-European world represented a falling away from the original God-consciousness. He also argued that the multiple gods of myth had been invented only by accident. What began as mere verbal personifications of natural forces—giving names, for instance, to wind, water, and fire—had lapsed over time into deification. Myth-making was thus a kind of forgetfulness as to what certain words really meant. It was, Müller said, a “disease of language.”69

W. D. Whitney acknowledged Max Müller’s preeminent qualifications for pioneering the comparative study of religion. Müller was, after all, the Western world’s foremost expert on the Rg Veda. Whitney also was willing to emphasize the solid aspects of the work Müller had done in this area. When Müller brought out his Chips from a German Workshop: Essays in the Science of Religion (1867), Whitney pronounced it “a capital thing.” He praised the work in print and told Charles Eliot Norton of the North American Review that it gave him “real hearty pleasure to be able to speak almost unqualifiedly well of it.”70

This magnanimous spirit, however, was short-lived, for Whitney soon
learned that one of the essays reprinted in *Chips* had read differently in its original version. As first published, the piece had derided the St. Petersburg Sanskrit Lexicon, charging that the work’s editors (including Rudolph von Roth) and contributors (including Whitney) together constituted a mutual admiration society. (Müller had called them an “International Sanskrit Insurance Company.”) In response, Whitney wrote a second review of *Chips*, now taking a tough new line against Müller’s mythological theories. It was the same duality that had appeared earlier in Whitney’s criticism of Müller’s views on Indian astronomy. While personal animus motivated him, there was still substance to what he said.

Whitney had various complaints, but the main one concerned Müller’s view of myth as a declension from an originally exalted state of religious consciousness. Whitney commented: “Doubtless he [Müller] believes in a general upward progress of mankind since the earliest ages. . . . But his phraseology does not fairly imply this; it seems hardly accordant with any other theory than that of an original paradisiac condition of man, as a being with powers miraculously developed and knowledge stored up by superhuman means.”

There was more at stake here than at first meets the eye, for the religious question actually mirrored a major debate in late-nineteenth-century linguistics. As Whitney pointed out, there was a “curious analogy” between Müller’s theory of myth and religion and his teachings about the history of language: both found “disease,” “degeneration,” and “decay” taking place over time. Whitney was careful to praise Müller to the extent that Müller consistently taught that language underwent “a continuous process of development from elements the most simple and formless.” Yet Müller did this, said Whitney, only “until he gets back to the very beginning; there he assumes a miracle—not precisely a scriptural, but a kind of natural or materialistic miracle; namely, an original instinct, different from anything which men have nowadays, vouchsafed for the express purpose of setting in motion the process of linguistic development, and withdrawn when it had answered that purpose.” Müller had thus offended against the uniformitarian principle.

Later we will return to this notion of separate phases in the universal history of language, a notion that, as we will see, was an intrinsic feature of early comparative philology. Whitney’s puzzlement over this idea, and his severe criticism of it, would soon exert a deep influence on the emerging Neogrammarian movement—and would thereby help shape Western language study down to the present.
A Theoretical Readjustment

When his first book was published in 1867, Whitney had hoped that this event would immediately involve him in debate with the most eminent European linguists of that day. His chief targets were Max Müller, August Schleicher, and Heymann Steinthal; the last of these figures taught at the University of Berlin and was a philosophical disciple of Wilhelm von Humboldt. The direct kind of debate Whitney had wanted, however, did not occur. Schleicher died a year later, and although Müller and Steinthal each wrote reviews of Whitney’s book, neither deigned to acknowledge its critiques of their own theories. Steinthal did predict that Whitney’s volume would prove popular in its own country since it was “easily accessible to the common mind.” And after all, he said, one should not expect from this sort of book the same depth of treatment one would find in a work written for a German audience.74

Whitney saw an opportunity to fight back several years later when Steinthal published his Einleitung in die Psychologie und Sprachwissenschaft (1871), a summary statement of his linguistic psychology. What especially caught Whitney’s attention was a chapter dealing with the mental process by which speakers continually generate new utterances. Using Humboldtian terminology, Steinthal taught that language was not ergon, an object external to the psyche, but energeia, a creative ability inherent in the speaker’s mind. In private, Whitney characterized this as “just metaphysical bosh and nonsense, nothing better; a complete flying-in-the-face of sound science and common-sense throughout.”75

Still, he hesitated before launching a critique. He had begun to feel that this kind of writing was self-indulgent, and he had promised himself to stop “showing up” other linguists after his recent foray against Schleicher. Yet at the same time, he found compelling reasons to give in to his real inclination. Although Steinthal was not a popular figure like Max Müller, he was held in high esteem by his professional peers in Europe. And as in Schleicher’s case, Whitney complained, Steinthal’s eminence as a technical scholar led many to accept his theoretical views as “pure gospel.” The doctrines Steinthal taught were those of an entire school, “the largest and most influential body of writers on the theory of language.” This group, moreover, regarded Common Sense linguistic theory as full of “superficiality and philisterism [sic].” Finally, and
not surprisingly, Steinthal’s sarcastic response to his own book still rankled. For all of these reasons, Whitney could not resist “this one temptation more.”

Remarks made to Josiah as he prepared this new article suggest a growing obsession: “I think I shall make as utter a demolition of him and the metaphysical theory of language as ever was made of anything, and shall perhaps succeed in compelling some attention to the views put forth in my volume of Lectures, which the philologists have hitherto contented themselves with simply ignoring. . . I haven’t for some time enjoyed anything so much as showing him up and arguing him down.” Whitney added a month later: “I shall, I think, give his bones something of a rattling, and shall possibly induce sundry of these stuck-up fellows who despise the common-sense view of language as too low for philosophers to revise their opinions.” This agitated state of mind was reflected in the finished article, which was notably caustic in tone. Later we will see the indignant response that article elicited among philologists in Europe.

The important point for now, however, is the article’s substance, which reflected a subtle shift in Whitney’s theoretical emphasis. Whitney now saw more clearly what he must have suspected all along, that Steinthal’s psychological approach to language was something distinct from Schleicher’s bio-organic perspective. He noted that distinction while preparing the article: “I think it my especial mission to prove, and force people into seeing, that language is not an emanation of the soul, nor a physical organism, but an institution, or part of human culture.” The challenge now was to readjust his own theory so as to address Steinthal’s special emphasis.

Whitney accordingly gave new prominence to three interlocking themes. First, he stressed the limitations of philosophical psychology as an ally of linguistics. “The psychologic method,” he said, relied too much on introspection and tended to ignore “all that has been done by anthropology, in tracing out the history of other departments of human culture.”

Second, Whitney put greater stress on the notion that language is an object that exists independently of speech activity. Here he responded to Steinthal’s declaration that language was “not a something, like [gun] powder, but an occurrence, like the explosion; it is not an organ, like the eye and ear, but a capacity and activity, like seeing and hearing.” In response, Whitney said that language was “an actual concrete possession” of the human community—again, analogous to human-made instruments.
by human minds, language itself was a phenomenon external to the mind’s workings.

Third, Whitney now qualified his voluntarist theory of language change. He said that changes came about “both consciously and unconsciously: consciously, as regards the immediate end to be attained; unconsciously, as regards the further consequences of the act.” As we have seen, Whitney had previously acknowledged that the long-term evolution of language was not something foreseen or intended. Yet he now laid particular emphasis on this point, as in the following illustration:

The first man who, on being attacked by a wolf, seized a club or a stone and with it crushed his adversary’s head, was not conscious that he was commencing a series of acts which would lead finally to rifles and engines. ... All that he himself knew was that he was defending himself in a sudden emergency. We are not loath to admit that all the later advances in mechanics have been made in a similar way, to meet some felt necessity.

Could not the same be admitted in the linguistic arena? Whitney concluded that “all the ... uses and values of language come as unforeseen consequences of its use as a means of communication.” By making this theme of unintended long-term consequences more prominent, he sought to compensate for the rhetorical overkill that sometimes accompanied his insistence on voluntary agency.

We can combine these ideas from Whitney’s Steinthal article with those found in his earlier writings and attempt to synthesize them. This would mean taking his picture of language as an evolving cultural product and superimposing it on his picture of moment-by-moment interpersonal behavior. By offering both of these perspectives in his writings, Whitney attempted to bridge the gap between two fundamentally different ways of analyzing sociocultural change. The first of these (reversing the order just used) focuses on the social interactions from which cultural products arise, while the second focuses on the externalized products themselves—whether tools, artwork, or languages. The first mode of analysis is synchronic in outlook; the second is diachronic, concerned with development over time.

Whitney did his best to balance these perspectives. Yet the history of social theory suggests that these do not blend well in practice, and writers usually find it difficult to give close attention to the one while doing justice to the other. Efforts at synthesis therefore tend to produce an unstable compound
in which one side assumes explanatory predominance. Over the whole of his career, Whitney gave synchronic interaction the more fundamental role in his system, and it was on this basis, ultimately, that he attempted to explain even the phenomenon of long-term and unintended change. As we will see, it was the best solution he could have chosen.

During the period highlighted in this chapter, Whitney and his family experienced two personal tragedies. First, in 1872, came the untimely death of Yale’s James Hadley, Whitney’s closest friend apart from his own relations. Whitney regarded Hadley’s passing not only as a loss personally but as a major blow to American scholarship.

Much worse was to come. Just over a year later, the Whitneys’ eleven-year-old son Roger drowned in an ice-skating accident. They had already lost one child, Willy, in infancy. But this was immeasurably harder. In the aftermath, Whitney sought solace in private. As he later told his friend Albrecht Weber, “In my great grief, I turned to the continuation of my work as a relief.” It is the kind of response one might expect from Whitney. Although a conscientious husband and father, he tended, as he confessed, to bury himself in his books. The result, in any case, within a mere month after the tragedy, was a substantial new piece of polemical writing. This was an article (passages from which we have seen already) dealing with the relationship between language and Darwinian evolution. It was, in fact, the most comprehensive statement on that subject that Whitney ever produced. It would also, as he ruefully noted, serve as “the proximate cause of all this fuss.” That is, the new article would precipitate what had been so long in coming—a major showdown between himself and Max Müller.