William Dwight Whitney and the Science of Language

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In the mid-1870s the long-simmering antagonism between William Dwight Whitney and F. Max Müller finally boiled over into a sensational public quarrel. The substance of the affair was nothing new: the two philologists again aired their opposing views on the origin of language and the explanation of language change. What was special about this period was the level of rancor now openly expressed, something for which both parties were responsible. Whitney had criticized Müller’s work for years, and when Müller finally fought back, he did so through increasingly devious means. These tactics, and the outrage they elicited from Whitney, eventually converted the philologists’ dispute into an international cause célèbre. In the process, the linguistic questions themselves were all but obscured.

Even so, the period of heightened controversy did bring forth two new features of substantive interest. First, it produced surprising repositionings on each of the main issues: Max Müller now appeared to accept elements of Whitney’s voluntarist theory of language change, and Whitney now gave the impression that he actually agreed with Charles Darwin’s explanation of the origin of speech. The second new feature was the forging of an alliance between
Whitney and Darwin himself. The Whitney-Müller controversy thus brought to a dramatic climax the Victorian era’s interweaving of linguistics and natural science.

A Mixed Reception in the Old World

W. D. Whitney had long sought scholarly recognition in Europe, and in pursuing that goal, he inevitably made himself obnoxious to Max Müller. This effect derived in part from Whitney’s increasing stature in the Orientalist world. First, the Royal Asiatic Society elected Whitney a member in recognition of one of his papers on Indian astronomy—a work critical of Müller’s views on that subject. Then the Russian Imperial Academy awarded him one hundred rubles for his contributions to the St. Petersburg Sanskrit Lexicon. Next, in 1870, the Berlin Academy of Sciences made Whitney the first-ever recipient of the Bopp prize, given in honor of the most significant contribution to Sanskrit studies made during the previous three years. The work selected was Whitney’s translation of an Indian phonetic treatise, the Tāttirīya-Prātiśākhya. Finally, a London publisher commissioned Whitney to prepare an annotated edition of H. T. Colebrooke’s essay On the Vedas (1805), a classic of British Indology. Whitney thus took precedence over Britain’s best-known Sanskritist-in-residence.

The bad blood between the two men also had more direct sources. Whitney wrote reviews faulting the slow progress of Müller’s Rg Veda edition. Although its first volume had appeared in 1849, the work would not be completed until 1874. Whitney also noted that Müller’s assistant, Theodor Aufrecht, had done much of the actual labor. Of course, Whitney antagonized his rival on general linguistic matters as well. In his first book, he belittled Müller by describing him as a “recent popular writer” on language. And throughout that work, as he privately admitted, he took every opportunity to discredit Müller’s ideas.

C. E. Norton had encouraged Whitney to compose shorter writings in this same critical spirit, and Norton’s successor at the North American Review urged this even more. That successor was Henry Adams, the historian, cultural critic, and descendent of the country’s greatest political dynasty. As the North American’s new editor, Adams requested from Whitney a review of the sixth edition (1871) of Müller’s Science of Language. Here Whitney repeated familiar themes, pointing out Müller’s illogic, his failure to reply to his critics, and his frequent
use of arcane examples. Referring to one of Müller’s lengthy etymologies, he remarked: “Very interesting, doubtless, but what has it to do with the argument? It seems almost as if the author were afraid of the latter, and wanted to break up the concentration of our attention upon it by a little harmless by-play.”

Although he wrote for American journals, Whitney intended his review articles mainly for overseas consumption. He always requested extra offprints to distribute among scholars in Europe—except for Max Müller. Some of his correspondents found these writings overly combative. Yet Whitney felt that he had little choice but to go on the attack. Lopsided sales figures for his first book testified to the problem. It had done well in the United States—Charles Scribner sold almost 900 copies in the first year and soon issued a new printing. Yet in thrice the amount of time, the house of Trübner had sold fewer than half that number in England. Indeed, by that point Trübner had sold more copies of the Roth-Whitney edition of the Atharva Veda.

The overseas reviews of his book also brought disappointment on the whole. Although the classicist Wilhelm Clemm praised the work for its “thoroughly sensible judgment,” the more prominent German reviewer, Heymann Steinthal, did not (as we saw) deign to acknowledge Whitney’s critiques of his own views. In Britain the initial response was more positive. The Westminster Review gave his book a strong commendation: “If the Americans go on writing so many excellent treatises on philology, we shall soon have to call English the American language.” Favorable reviews also appeared in the Edinburgh Scotsman and the London Athenæum, the latter even including an anti-Müller slant. The only other response, however, was distinctly hostile, albeit indirectly. This unsigned piece, written by Max Müller himself, ostensibly was about a new book by a French linguist: of this work, Müller approved. Yet he contrasted this with other recent (unnamed) works, one of which included superficial denials of linguistics’ true status as a “physical science.” In private, Whitney dismissed this attack as “highly naive and Müllerish.” Still, it confirmed what his friends in Britain had warned of: although Müller rarely engaged in open controversy, he was still a dangerous opponent.

After this the British reviewers fell silent, prompting Whitney to complain that his book “could not be more generally and completely ignored if it were written in Russian.” Was there some impediment? His friends in London thought so. The expatriate American Sanskritist Fitzedward Hall reported in 1872: “You have no notion of the attempts I have made to get a favorable notice
of your Lectures into print. Wherever I have applied, I have been rebuffed by worshippers of M. M.—Minimus Maximus being in the field."

Whitney saw his worst fears confirmed a year later, after he republished a number of his shorter writings as a volume entitled *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* (1873). He presented a copy of this work to the London Philological Society, and the organization’s secretary, Frederick J. Furnivall (1825–1910), sent his hearty thanks. He added, however, an unfortunate postscript: "But we shouldn’t be content with your producing essays only: some day you must give us a solid big book. You lead America, and have responsibilities accordingly.” Whitney’s response was swift, and Furnivall soon corrected himself: “Your reproach to us about neglect of your book is too well deserved.” Happily, he was able to report that one of the Society’s members had read Whitney’s lectures and had found them superior to Max Müller’s. Furnivall added: “As to M.M., at our Society he is not set very high. All along, Goldstücker [Professor of Sanskrit at the University of London] took care to prevent that, and used to quiz [mock] him and his works, and stick pins into him in the most refreshing manner. But M. has a nice style, and writes books that young ladies and easy-going people read with pleasure, fancying themselves thereby enlightened, and so they are, which results in M.M. being greatly glorified in society. But behind the scenes he’s not much thought of.”

The London philologists did what they could for Whitney: they elected him to their Society in 1874, and that same year, their old stalwart, Thomas Hewitt Key, publicly rated Whitney’s origin-of-language theory above Müller’s. This was welcome recognition. Moreover, the publication in Britain of *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* would likely increase Whitney’s visibility even more. These shorter writings could appeal to a British readership in a way that Whitney’s big book could not—competing as it did with Müller’s hugely popular volumes of lectures. The change showed when a London literary weekly, the *Academy*, printed a review of Whitney’s new book.

The review’s author was the respected Leipzig Sanskritist Bertholdt Delbrück, a professional friend of Whitney’s. Delbrück had only good things to say about the essays on Orientalist topics. Like others (such as the French linguist Michel Bréal), however, Delbrück found the items on general linguistic topics needlessly abrasive. (The collection included not only Whitney’s reviews of Max Müller’s lectures but also his articles on Schleicher and Steinthal.) Delbrück surmised, rightly enough, that Whitney’s truculence sprang from a desire to capture some of the limelight these famous European schol-
ars enjoyed. Yet Delbrück was even-handed, for he also noted that many of Max Müller’s theoretical views were idiosyncratic—even though Müller had implied, and his readers apparently believed, that they reflected the scholarly consensus.\footnote{16}

In sum, while Delbrück had only partial praise for Whitney, he was even less favorable toward Müller. Also, the mere fact that the Academy reviewed Whitney’s new volume served to advertise the existence of Whitney’s anti-Müller writings: Oriental and Linguistic Studies included no less than six essays that were critical of Müller’s efforts either as a Sanskritist or as a language theorist. It was the kind of publicity Max Müller could not leave unchallenged, and he quickly moved to counteract it.

His purpose was well served by the fact that Oriental and Linguistic Studies reprinted Whitney’s attack on Steinthal. The tone of that essay had been unusually caustic. For instance, Whitney said near the article’s conclusion: “Here, for the first time, Professor Steinthal is seized with a slight misgiving. May not his conclusions strike some persons as paradoxical? . . . We seem to hear from his readers one universal cry of assent. But it does not reach his ears; and he proceeds to reason down his misgiving, after his peculiar fashion.”\footnote{17}

When the North American Review first printed this piece, Whitney sent copies to nearly thirty correspondents in Europe, hoping, he said, “for some effect from it.” This he got, although not the kind he wanted. It provoked bad feeling in Germany, especially among younger scholars who greatly admired Steinthal. Whitney admitted that the review had not received “as many good words as usual; indeed, I hardly know of any.” Even Josiah said that he had gone too far. Writing to Albrecht Weber, Whitney defended himself: “In judging my Steinthal article, you must remember that I do not deny the great ability of much that he has done and does (any more than of Schleicher’s work), but hold that his fundamental philosophy of language is false, and irreconcilable with the historical work that he does.”\footnote{18}

Whitney’s intentions notwithstanding, once reprinted in Oriental and Linguistic Studies, the article drew a response from Steinthal himself in the form of a scorching pamphlet published in Berlin. (Henry Adams told Whitney: “I wish I could get someone to write a pamphlet against me, but that, I suppose, is the last and highest crown of science.”)\footnote{19} What mainly concerns us is not Steinthal’s response itself but rather the unsigned reviews of that work that appeared in London’s Academy and Atheneum. A number of Max Müller’s
supporters were connected with these periodicals, both of which now did an about-face. They took Müller’s side against Whitney, who thus got a taste of the danger his friends had warned him about.

As a first step, the London papers deplored the fierceness of Steinthal’s rebuttal. At the same time, however, they also suggested that such a reply was just what the occasion called for. After all, said the *Atheneum*, “Prof. Steinthal is not the only scholar whom Mr. Whitney, presuming too much on the ignorance of his American audiences, has either misrepresented or abused.” The *Academy* took up the thought:

For years it has been a matter of surprise to many people that Mr. Whitney should have been allowed to pursue his extraordinary course with impunity. He evidently imagined that the easiest means of gaining a reputation was to attack other scholars, and to challenge them to a pugilistic combat. He apparently did not understand why they shrank from an encounter with the American champion. He became more defiant and offensive with every year, and he has now at last obtained his heart’s desire. We do not defend the tone which Professor Steinthal has adopted in his reply, though there seems to be but one opinion among unprejudiced persons, that the extraordinary behavior of the young American scholar would have been an excuse for almost any reprisals.20

Counseling a more high-minded engagement, the *Academy* suggested that Steinthal might have satisfied himself merely with demonstrating the “shoddiness” of Whitney’s views. And as examples of the kind of thing that ought never to appear in print, the *Academy* quoted Steinthal’s descriptions of Whitney himself: “the scolding flirt,” “the tricky attorney,” “the man who barks against the spirit of our [German] classics in poetry, philosophy, and philology. What he writes, we are told, are empty bubbles, jesuitic insinuations, full of impudence, deserving a flagellation. A climax is reached in the following sentence: ‘Everywhere when I read him, hollow vacuity yawns in my face, arrogant vanity grins at me.’” Again, the *Academy* could only deplore such attacks.21

But of course, putting Steinthal’s remarks on display was a way to undercut Whitney by proxy and to do so without calling attention to Whitney’s other reprinted articles, the ones critical of Max Müller’s work. Devious and malicious, the *Academy* notice made it nonetheless clear that Whitney had left himself vulnerable. Even a writer in the *North American Review* warned that
his attacks on foreign scholars were “possibly too sharp and too likely to provoke animosity, rather than to correct errors.”\textsuperscript{22} Whitney finally got the point, and he resolved to be more tactful in the future.

At this juncture, European discussion of Whitney’s views subsided, and the first phase of the Whitney-Müller controversy came to a close. Two more phases would follow, although first there would be an interlude of nearly a year. During the interlude, Whitney found time for a much-needed vacation, albeit a strenuous one. In the summer of 1873, the forty-seven-year-old philologist explored the wilds of Colorado as part of a geological expedition led by Ferdinand V. Hayden. Whitney later summed up the trip: “It has all been one of the greatest frolics I ever had in my life; it will help to enliven my memory until my dying day.”\textsuperscript{23}

Unlikely though it would seem, this kind of activity—the scientific exploration of the American West—played an important role in the dispute between Whitney and Max Müller. The first half of the 1870s brought to a climax the Whitney brothers’ bitter ten-year campaign against the Yale geochemist Benjamin Silliman, Jr. At issue were Silliman’s optimistic reports on California’s oil and mineral wealth, which differed significantly from the assessments made by Josiah, who was director of the state geological survey. The Whitneys charged Silliman with purposely inflating these reports, which earned him substantial consulting fees. Still, W. D. Whitney had advised his brother to avoid a public quarrel over the matter. Then he changed his mind and led the effort that forced Silliman to quit his post at the Sheffield Scientific School in 1869. (Silliman stayed on at Yale’s Medical School until his death in 1885.) Whitney also spearheaded an attempt to have Silliman ejected from the National Academy of Sciences, although in this he found himself repeatedly thwarted.\textsuperscript{24}

In part the result of the Academy’s reluctance to take sides, this outcome owed as much to Josiah’s failure to send his brother sufficient documentation to back his charges. Said Whitney in a typical plea: “You had better be getting your own evidence at least on some one case (say the Bodie Bluff mine) into detailed readiness, and let it be here when his [Silliman’s] answer is handed in.”\textsuperscript{25} But Josiah, who was then in California, failed to supply what was needed. When the NAS dismissed the dispute in 1874, the embittered Whitneys quit that organization, and for several more years they pursued other efforts to have Silliman censured by the American scientific community.
These events affected the quarrel with Max Müller in three ways. First there was a coincidence in timing: both episodes built slowly during the second half of the 1860s and reached a climax toward the middle of the next decade. Second, Whitney found Silliman and Müller to be of similar character. Both, he believed, had sold themselves to gain popular success and had thereby overshadowed scholars of greater integrity—such as the Whitneys. The remaining connection between the two situations was more complex. Josiah's delinquency in pressing his case left W. D. Whitney exposed—and no doubt embarrassed—in his dealings with the nation's most prominent scientists. Yet Whitney appears never to have blamed Josiah. Rather, the solidarity he maintained with his brother was paid for through psychological displacement: he directed his frustration elsewhere. Mainly he demonized Silliman, yet Max Müller made a useful secondary target. Indeed, Whitney used almost exactly the same language in describing the two men. Coming when it did, the Müller controversy thus provided Whitney with an additional means by which to vent his sense of aggrievement and to vindicate, as he saw it, the honor of disinterested scholarship.

Darwinism Reassessed

The second phase of the Whitney-Müller controversy centered around the philologists’ contrasting responses to Darwinism. As we have seen, those responses did not divide along simple lines of support versus opposition; the situation was more complex—and more interesting—than that. Max Müller had fashioned a two-sided argument, and he emphasized one side or the other according to the need of the moment. After the *Origin of Species* appeared, he rejected that book's implications concerning human ancestry. He also denied that natural selection could have converted the cries of animals into meaningful speech.

At nearly that same time, however, Müller enthusiastically applied the idea of blindly occurring selection to the problem of language change. He reaffirmed this outlook in 1870, describing how Darwin’s theory offered a useful model by which to understand the classic antinomy between individual freedom and social constraint: "It is by supplying a new point of view for the consideration of these world-old problems, that Darwin's book 'On the Origin of Species' has exercised an influence far beyond the sphere for which it
was originally intended. The two technical terms of ‘Natural Selection’ and ‘Struggle for Life,’ which are in reality but two aspects of the same process, are the very categories which were wanted to enable us to grasp . . . the inevitable limitation of spontaneous action by the controlling influences of social life.”

Müller never gave up this notion of a conceptual parallelism between Darwinian evolution and the long-term “evolution” of language. He did shift his priorities, however, after the appearance of Darwin’s Descent of Man (1871). Now he placed his emphasis back on the antimaterialist theme. In a new set of lectures in 1873, delivered under the title “Mr. Darwin’s Philosophy of Language,” Müller again drew on Herderian linguistic theory and Kantian epistemology to argue for the transcendent origins of human consciousness. Language, he said, was the outward sign of humanity’s unique ability to engage in abstract thought—which suggested that the difference between animal and human mental life was one of kind, not just of degree. Again pushing this argument to an extreme, Müller concluded: “If the Science of Language has proved anything, it has proved that conceptual or discursive thought can be carried on in words only. There is no thought without words, as little as there are words without thought.”

There was little new in all of this, except that Müller now directed his argument specifically against Darwin’s theory of mental evolution set forth in Descent. That fact made these lectures of particular interest to science-oriented readers: a respectful review, for instance, appeared in the journal Nature. This intertwining of linguistics and the question of human evolution would soon grow even stronger because of the unlikely events that followed: within the year, Max Müller, Charles Darwin, and W. D. Whitney entered into a complicated three-sided debate.

“Mr. Darwin’s Philosophy of Language,” soon published as a series in Frazer’s Magazine, struck Whitney as providential: it gave him a new excuse to try to push his own views into notice. He did not act on this impulse immediately. It was the death of his son Roger a number of months later and the need to distract his mind afterward that led him to put pen to work. The result was his article “Darwinism and Language,” which appeared in the North American Review in the summer of 1874.

Whitney struck a pose of official neutrality on this subject. As he said, “So far, linguistic science has not been shown to have any bearing on Darwinism, either in the way of support or of refutation.” Whitney concentrated, how-
ever, on the latter error, devoting all but a few pages of his new article to picking apart Müller’s argument. Müller had said that even the simplest nouns actually represented general ideas and that language therefore demonstrated a highly sophisticated mental capacity that never could have evolved from animal brains. Whitney countered by denying that general ideas depended on the use of language. People—and the higher animals too, apparently—formed such ideas routinely, through abstracting and then generalizing from an object’s distinctive qualities. Müller’s fallacy, Whitney added, was “the assumption that, if general ideas were formed, they could not help finding expression in words; and that I can see no good ground for.”

We have already seen Whitney’s views on the trickiest question of all—the issue of evolution in relation to the origin of language. In *Descent*, Darwin suggested that the rudiments of speech began among humanity’s ape-like ancestors. Whitney had already rejected this idea and he reiterated his case in his 1874 article. Even assuming human descent from an animal ancestor, he said, the beginnings of speech could have taken place only *after* humanity’s full mental stature had been reached. That stature could not have evolved “through and by means of” the invention of language because “speech, like the other elements of our civilization, is the result of our human capacities, not their cause. . . . Man was man in *esse* and in *posse*, when the development of speech began.”

Still, on this one occasion, Whitney gave this viewpoint a distinctive twist. First, he faulted Max Müller alone for trying to bring linguistics to bear on the evolution question. Second, when he spoke against the idea that language and the human mind had evolved in tandem, Whitney avoided acknowledging the fact that Darwin himself had been the chief purveyor of that idea. Indeed, he mentioned the famous naturalist by name only in the final paragraph of his article, and there he made only the vaguest reference to what Darwin had written about the origin of speech. Choosing his words carefully, Whitney said that Darwin had shown “a remarkable moderation and soundness of judgment in his treatment of the element of language. . . . *Very little exception* is to be taken by a linguistic scholar to any of his statements.” Here Whitney not only downplayed his substantial disagreement with Darwin on the issue of speech origins, but he also left the impression that he generally approved of Darwin’s views on that subject. To a degree this was fitting, because in *Descent* Darwin had hinted at his own respect for the imitation theory taught
by Hensleigh Wedgwood and F. W. Farrar, writers Whitney admired. Whitney could therefore conclude his article by declaring that Darwin’s views were “far truer” than Max Müller’s. He thus suggested solidarity with Darwin against their mutual opponent.  

A Hearing in England

After completing “Darwinism and Language,” Whitney said that he felt “almost ashamed” to have produced yet another polemical work. This did not stop him from engaging in a bit of self-promotion, however, for he immediately sent a copy of the article to Charles Darwin himself. What Whitney did not then know was that Darwin was already making use of his *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* in preparing a revision of *Descent*. (Darwin used a copy of that work that Whitney had sent him the previous year.) Darwin wanted to rebut Max Müller’s recent lectures, and to accomplish this, he quoted from Whitney’s critique of the linguist W. H. J. Bleek’s teaching—similar to Müller’s—about the interdependence of thought and speech. Said Whitney: “He would fain make thought absolutely impossible without speech, identifying the faculty with its instrument. He might just as reasonably assert that the human hand cannot act without a tool. With such a doctrine to start from, he cannot stop short of Müller’s worst paradoxes, that an infant (infans, not speaking) is not a human being, and that deaf-mutes do not become possessed of reason until they learn to twist their fingers in imitation of spoken words.”

After quoting these remarks, Darwin appended Max Müller’s aphorism, “There is no thought without words, as little as there are words without thought,” to which he added a comment: “What a strange definition must here be given to the word thought!” (Darwin chose to ignore the fact that Whitney’s piece was chiefly a refutation of Bleek’s bio-evolutionary explanation of the origin of speech.) Darwin quoted this passage as well as another passage from Whitney’s essays in two newly added footnotes in *Descent*, thereby including the American among his acknowledged authorities on language.

Whitney was not aware of this use of his earlier writings when he mailed his latest article to Darwin’s home in England. Hence, he was still trying to spark Darwin’s interest in his ideas. A public acknowledgment from the famous naturalist, even if only mildly approving, would be one sure way to match Max Müller’s influence in that country. And such help appeared to be needed more than ever. Fresh proof arrived in letters from F. J. Furnivall of the
London Philological Society. Furnivall liked the way Whitney’s “Darwinism” article cut Müller down to size, but he warned that Müller enjoyed strong public support. He noted that the Society’s president, Richard Morris, held Müller to be “at bottom a hearty good fellow, not cocky.” And Furnivall himself declined to confront the Oxford scholar: “I can’t answer M. M. for you: and, as I said, all our men are too busy for that, and no doubt too ignorant. You must chaff him yourself, or cut him up. He must be pretty open to attack, as you’ve already shown.” Finally, Furnivall admitted that Müller’s past kindnesses to himself and his friends made them reluctant to challenge him. 39

Darwin, however, would not be bound by such constraints. And Darwin showed real interest in the new article Whitney sent. Rather than reply with a perfunctory note of thanks, he first penned a request to James Knowles, editor of London’s Contemporary Review: “I fear that you never republish articles which have appeared in foreign journals. But one on Language has just been published in the North American Review for July, by a distinguished philologist, Prof. Whitney, who has sent it to me. In this he answers in a very able manner, as it appears to me, Max Müller’s views which were published [illegible]. As a writer in the July number of our Quarterly has abused me in strong words, ‘amazing ignorance’ etc. for what little I have said on the development of language, I much desire to see Whitney’s article republished in England.” 40 Darwin even offered to pay for the printing. Yet Knowles sent his regrets, for editorial policy (and “a considerable American circulation”) made it impossible to republish. He quickly added, however, that an article on the same subject by Darwin would be more than welcome. And he suggested that Darwin might quote from Whitney to any extent he pleased. Darwin graciously accepted Knowles’ refusal to republish. At the same time, he turned down Knowles’ counteroffer: he would write no article on language or on any other subject, as he was on vacation and was badly in need of rest. He added: “I am also at all times very unwilling to enter on any controversy.” 41

Having made this effort, Darwin then wrote to thank Whitney for sending his article:

It seems to me most clearly reasoned, and by far the best argument against Max Müller’s views which has ever appeared. I heartily wish I had read it two or three months ago, as I’d have quoted several passages with great advantage in a new ed. of my Descent of Man; but the part in question has been printed off. I have however quoted from one of your previous works, your judgment on the main
question, and have added a few remarks of my own, but they are quite feeble compared with yours. I have been the more gratified by your article, as in the July number of our Quarterly there is an abusive attack on my short discussion on language; and your essay is so splendid an answer to it, that I have tried to get it reprinted in the Contemporary, but the Ed. is unwilling to break through his decided rule of not republishing anything.42

Two things should be said about these remarks. First, Darwin valued Whitney’s “judgment on the main question,” the notion that language and rational thought were inseparable. Hence, Darwin did not suggest that he agreed with everything Whitney had said in his article; obviously, he did not accept the idea that only fully evolved humans could have developed language. Second, the source of the “abusive” essay Darwin mentioned was not Max Müller but rather the English zoologist St. George Mivart (1827–1900). Still, Mivart’s piece had included an attack on Darwin’s account of the origin of speech, and against this, Whitney’s comments aimed at Müller would have served as a useful rebuttal.43 Darwin was sorry, therefore, that Whitney’s article could not receive wider exposure in England. Yet he had tried and had failed, and there the matter would have to rest.

Or rather, it would have but for the intervention of one of Darwin’s sons, George H. Darwin, who was an instructor in mathematics at Cambridge University. Without asking Whitney’s permission, although doubtless with his father’s, George Darwin paraphrased material from Whitney’s latest article in his own published refutation of both Müller and St. George Mivart. His essay, entitled “Professor Whitney on the Origin of Language,” appeared in the November 1874 Contemporary Review—thus bringing the linguistic debate into that journal after all. This was the beginning of a three-part exchange, with follow-ups from Max Müller and from Whitney himself.

George Darwin applauded Whitney’s critique of Müller’s position, thereby treating Whitney as an ally in a common cause. Yet he also saw that Whitney’s own views were not in keeping with his father’s, and he spent the final pages of his article airing that difference. Whitney had argued that linguists would never be able to discover the steps leading from “the wholly instinctive expression of the animals” to “the wholly conventional expression of man.” The younger Darwin respectfully disagreed. “Does Professor Whitney mean that it is impossible to track the Aryan languages higher [that is, earlier] than their roots, or to discover the imitational and interjectional sources of those
roots?" Whitney would have answered yes: as far as tracing the historical origins of specific roots, he did mean that.

Yet George Darwin considered this conclusion overly pessimistic. Like his father, he heard what he thought were echoes of the transition from instinctive to conventionalized vocal behavior. He knew, for example, of a terrier that had "a particular bark, like 'wuff!'" — used only when it wanted the door opened. Certain animals, he reasoned, could thus select from a range of instinctive sounds—in this case, various kinds of barks—to produce a signal having a specific meaning. George Darwin scolded Whitney for not seeing the force of such evidence—even as he used Whitney's arguments to club Max Müller and St. George Mivart. The result pleased his father. With both of these battles in mind, Charles Darwin told his son: "You have defended me nobly."

It was surely no accident that the Darwins singled out Whitney for censure on this point, even though their cousin Hensleigh Wedgwood had held virtually the same view concerning the origin of language. Indeed, Wedgwood had been the teacher and Whitney the student. As we have seen, it was Wedgwood who first argued that speech could have been developed only by beings with the same inborn mental capacities found in modern *homo sapiens*. The senior Darwin had kept silent about this difference between his cousin's outlook and his own, especially since his own views were not yet on record when Wedgwood's *On the Origin of Language* (1866) appeared. But when Whitney made the same case in 1874, after the publication of *The Descent of Man*, the Darwins saw both the need and the opportunity to make a response. Using Whitney as a distant target, they could state their objections without embarrassing a close family member.

Yet at the same time, the Darwins also were willing to treat Whitney as a valued friend. They accepted his *North American* article chiefly for what it was—a blow against their mutual enemies. Indeed, as we have seen, Charles Darwin was so pleased with that article that he strongly desired to see it reprinted in its entirety in England. Whitney adopted a similar attitude. He knew that George Darwin's *Contemporary Review* essay, despite its criticisms, was mainly an endorsement of his own position, and he therefore gave that piece his post hoc blessing. It was, after all, by far the most conspicuous appreciation his ideas had received anywhere abroad up to that point. Whitney and the Darwins were thus sincere allies; yet it was an alliance based on convenience. Each party pursuing its own agenda, they downplayed their differences and
jointly fought against the linguistic doctrines they both rejected. It was, by its very nature, a temporary arrangement.

For years Max Müller had avoided direct confrontation with Whitney—that is, as long as the latter’s challenges attracted only limited notice in England. Even after the publication of *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* (1873), he thought it safest to let his friends at the *Academy* respond to that work. Yet how could he ignore this latest eruption of Whitneyism, linked as it was to the name of Charles Darwin’s son? Müller now presented an open rebuttal in the *Contemporary Review*, under the attention-getting yet strictly accurate title, “My Reply to Mr. Darwin.”

He began with a characteristic blend of flattery and sarcasm. Although he described George Darwin’s article as a “defense of Mr. Darwin’s philosophy, so ably and chivalrously conducted by his son,” he added that it came from “one who writes if not in, at least with, Mr. Darwin’s name.” This last phrase contained an intentional ambiguity: did “Mr. Darwin” here refer to Charles or George? That is, was Müller accusing the younger Darwin of using his father’s name in order to get a hearing, or was he accusing Whitney of doing essentially this same thing, only using George Darwin as his representative? In any case, Müller then turned to Whitney directly. First of all, he declared that his labors on the *Ṛg Veda* edition had thus far kept him from reading Whitney’s published lectures. (According to Whitney’s friends in England, Müller actually had finished that work twenty-one months prior to writing his “Reply to Mr. Darwin.”) Müller therefore thanked George Darwin for having brought Whitney’s work to his notice, “for I have seldom perused a book with greater interest and pleasure — I might almost say amusement.” Entire passages in Whitney’s volume, said Müller, presented the “*ipsissima verba*” of his own 1861 lectures, “though immediately after they seemed to be changed into an inverted fugue.” Even though Whitney had acknowledged in his book’s Preface that he had borrowed illustrations from Müller, here he stood accused of stealing (and then distorting) Müller’s essential ideas.

Müller then appealed to his British readers in time-honored fashion: “Of course, we must not expect in Professor Whitney’s lectures, anything like a systematic or exhaustive treatment. They touch on points which were most likely to interest large audiences at Washington, and other towns in America. They were meant to be popular, and nothing would be more unfair than to blame an author for not giving what he did not mean to give.” Indeed, said...
Müller, he had discovered in Whitney’s book “whole chapters where by keep-
ing more on the surface of his subject, he has succeeded in making it far more
attractive and popular than I could have hoped to do.” Müller followed up
these backhanded jabs by charging that Whitney had claimed himself superior
to the leading German language scholars and by asking why other American
philologists, such as George Perkins Marsh and Francis Andrew March, felt no
need to resort to invective as Whitney did.

Next Müller rehashed the Steinthal affair. He allowed that Steinthal had
gone too far in his pamphlet against Whitney, and to prove this, he paraded
once again Steinthal’s epithets (“that tricky attorney,” etc.). His commentary
on these remarks, moreover, was filled with calculated obfuscation: “Surely,
mere words can go no further—we must expect to hear of tomahawk and
bowie-knife. Scholars who object to the use of such weapons, whether for
offensive or defensive purposes, can do nothing but what I have done—remain
silent, select what is good in Professor Whitney’s writings, and try to forget
the rest.” Here Müller was supposedly lamenting Steinthal’s overreaction, yet
what stood out in this passage were the tomahawk and bowie-knife, the ar-
chetypal weapons of the violent American. Müller also tried to exploit the dis-
agreement between Whitney and the Darwins. He said, accurately enough: “If
I may judge from Professor Whitney’s lectures, ... I doubt whether he would
prove a real ally of Mr. Darwin in his views on the origin of language. Towards
the end of his article, even Mr. Darwin, jun., becomes suspicious.”

In the most inventive part in his “Reply,” Müller pointed to the complaint
in Whitney’s first book about the attempt by some modern thinkers to “ma-
terialize all science.” Whitney had warned of the recent tendency to elimi-
nate the distinction between the physical and “moral” realms, explain away
human volition, and “resolve the whole story of the fates of mankind into
a series of purely material effects.” Müller described this passage as a “ser-
mon,” in which Whitney’s “theological bias, long kept back, breaks through
at last.” It was true that Whitney agreed with those religious thinkers who
worried about materialist encroachment in the human sciences. Yet as Müller
was fully aware, Whitney’s point had been to defend linguistics’ disciplinary
autonomy—hardly a “theological” agenda. Even so, he cynically portrayed
Whitney as an advocate of religious idealism. It was another attempt to dis-
credit him with the Darwins.

Müller then turned to the question of human agency in the production
of language change. He reiterated his own position by quoting from his sec-
ond (1863) series of Royal Institution lectures: “The process through which language is settled and unsettled combines in one the two opposite elements of necessity and free will. . . . The individual, as such, is powerless, and the results, apparently produced by him, depend on laws beyond his control.” Müller elaborated this thesis in his Contemporary Review article, however, by incorporating a distinctly Whitneyesque theme. He said that, in the process of language change, “the individual does not act freely, but under reciprocal restraint.” Müller actually had used a similar formulation several years earlier when he referred to the “implied co-operation” between speakers. He thereby narrowed the distance between his and Whitney’s formulations, and he did this by using phrases suspiciously reminiscent of Whitney’s own.

Continuing this campaign of trimming, Müller took an even more surprising tack. He claimed in the Contemporary Review that he and Whitney had fundamentally agreed all along in their views about language change. He suggested, however, that he knew this to be the case, while Whitney did not: “Sometimes, amidst all the loud assertion of difference of opinion on Professor Whitney’s part, not only the substantial, but the verbal agreement between his and my Second Lecture is startling. I had said: — ‘The first impulse to a new formation in language, though given by an individual, is mostly, if not always, given without premeditation, nay, unconsciously.’ My antagonist says: — ‘The work of each individual is done unpremeditatedly, or as it were unconsciously.’” Müller therefore asked: “What is the difference between us?”

In posing this apparently reasonable question, Müller brought the debate about language change itself to an impasse. From here onward, this aspect of the quarrel turned on a separate issue: had Müller kept his position constant over time, or had he adjusted his formulation in an attempt to incorporate Whitney’s best insights? As Whitney would soon point out, some of Müller’s self-quotations actually came from a revised edition of his lectures, where Müller had modified his original wording. Moreover, Müller likely made this change under the influence of Whitney’s lectures—which he claimed not to have read until the latter part of 1874. The result was that Max Müller’s duplicitous dealings, not his ideas about language change itself, became an issue in the dispute.

Whitney received a copy of “My Reply to Mr. Darwin” soon after its publication in January of 1875, and he immediately went to work on a rebuttal.
Communicating via George Darwin, he asked permission to respond in the *Contemporary Review.*[56] James Knowles replied to the elder Darwin, assuring him of his willingness to receive a “substantive paper” from Whitney. Yet with a publicist’s eye, Knowles added a wistful postscript: “I need hardly say that should you yourself be at all persuadable to write a few introductory pages—or even paragraphs. . . .” Darwin forwarded Knowles’ letter to Whitney, with a penciled comment beside its final lines: “This is nonsense. C. D.”[57] Charles Darwin would not presume to steal Whitney’s thunder—which also meant that he would not risk his own reputation by involving it in the philologists’ quarrel.

In any event, Whitney at last had a platform from which to present his views to the British public. As he prepared his rejoinder, he submitted drafts to his friends, who assured him that he was exercising due restraint.[58] In the first two-thirds of this article, “Are Languages Institutions?” Whitney calmly outlined his own system of ideas while mentioning neither Müller nor the Darwins. The final, more polemical section was equally calm in tone. Whitney did defend his practice of critiquing famous linguists whenever they made what he thought were untenable arguments. And he admitted that he had spoken too bluntly on occasion. Yet he maintained—unconvincingly—that he judged arguments rather than men. More on-target with respect to Müller was his remark that “the plainest of plain speaking is far less really injurious than misrepresentation and detraction under the mask of extreme courtesy.”[59]

Whitney’s main challenge was to deal with the balderdash about his holding a “theological bias.” He responded to this charge by revising his categories. Rather than warn about the “materializing” of the human sciences, he now divided linguistic opinion between his own “positive” and “common-sense” viewpoint, and his opponents’ “sentimental” and “metaphysical” outlook.[60] Here Whitney reverted to a simple opposition between his own perspective and that of his adversaries—the latter representing the sentimental-metaphysical camp. Only a few years earlier, he had portrayed himself as fighting a two-front war, against both Humboldtian psychology and the natural-historical (“organic”) tradition—the one represented by Heymann Steinthal and the other by August Schleicher. Now he lumped these together. This was perhaps allowable, because Whitney regarded the extreme version of the organic analogy as more metaphysical than physical. It also made sense because Max Müller, with his genius for synthesis, combined elements of
Schleicherian organicism and Humboldtian psychologism. Still, the fact that Whitney had been forced to use such varying terminology suggests the difficulty he sometimes faced in characterizing the things he was against.

If he did not achieve theoretical precision on this point, Whitney at least had had the final word in the *Contemporary Review* series. Even better, he had been able at last to defend his views in a prominent British forum. After this, he must have felt a burden lifted, confident that his foothold in the Old World would soon be made secure and his enemies put to rout. Events just ahead appeared to confirm those expectations.

**A Cause Célèbre**

The spring of 1875 was fruitful for Whitney. In addition to writing his *Contemporary Review* article, he prepared an abridgment of his original lectures for the British market. Richard Morris of the London Philological Society contributed an Introduction to this volume, which would appear under the title *Language and its Study* (1876). Whitney also finished writing his *Life and Growth of Language* (1875), a more complete condensation of his linguistic thought. That book had been commissioned for the prestigious International Scientific Series, which brought simultaneous publication in New York and in cities throughout Europe. It also meant that Whitney’s linguistics (like his Indology) was coming into heady company. Among the works that had appeared in the series already were Walter Bagehot’s *Physics and Politics* (1872), Herbert Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* (1874), and John William Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1875).

These projects behind him, Whitney departed for a long-anticipated trip to Europe, his first visit there since the journey he made with his wife and sister in 1856, soon after his wedding. This time, however, he went alone. The main purpose of the trip was to do research for the second volume of the Roth-Whitney *Atharva Veda* edition. Whitney wanted to examine additional copies of the text obtained by German universities since the first volume’s appearance twenty years earlier. He also looked forward to renewing old ties and to widening his European acquaintance. First he spent several days in London, staying with Reinhold Rost, librarian of the East India Company Office. (Rost had been appointed to that position on the retirement of Fitzedward Hall.) A highlight of this part of the journey was to have been a visit with Charles Darwin, although this never took place. Whitney received Darwin’s invitation
to dinner at his home in Kent, only to see it revoked the next day by the renowned invalid’s wife. Mrs. Darwin apologized, yet she remarked pointedly that her husband had been ill the previous night “after the exertion of having some friends in the house.” She hoped, she said, that the American professor would be able to call if ever he was again in England.⁶²

Still, there were other things to do: Whitney visited the zoological gardens and the Kensington Museum; he had lunch on one day with the Oxford Assyriologist Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) and dinner the following evening with the Unitarian religious writer Moncure Conway (1832–1907). Conway was an expatriate American with an interest in philology and a knack for cultivating Europe’s famous scholars. After dinner Whitney went as Conway’s guest to a meeting of the London Anthropological Institute. The program included a paper by Conway on the history of mythology, leading, as Whitney described it, to a “most stupid debate.”⁶³

Next, Whitney enjoyed several weeks of triumphal procession through Germany. He visited Berlin, Jena, Leipzig, Munich, and Tübingen, retracing his steps of student days. In Berlin, his old friend Albrecht Weber hosted a reception in his honor. Among the guests were his former teacher Karl Lepsius, plus the eminent classicist Georg Curtius, who was visiting from Leipzig. At Jena, Whitney stayed with Otto Böhtlingk, a co-editor of the Sanskrit Wörterbuch, and he again was honored at a gathering of philologists. As he bragged to his wife, he had been the second person toasted at dinner, “and with a very handsome speech by Delbrück.” In short, he said, “the journey has been quite a festival all the way.”⁶⁴

Proceeding to Leipzig, Whitney again saw Georg Curtius and met a number of his students from the university there. He also met August Leskien, an influential young member of the philological faculty. Along with Bertholdt Delbrück, Leskien would become a particular friend of Whitney’s. During this visit, Leskien asked permission to do a German translation of The Life and Growth of Language, to which Whitney readily agreed. As we will see later, this event reflected the quiet influence Whitney had already begun to exert on Leskien and other like-minded young scholars, many of whom would join the rebellious Neogrammarian movement. What mattered to Whitney at the time, however, was the ready interest shown in his new book.⁶⁵ Leskien’s translation would come out only a year after the English original, a pleasing contrast to the long gap between the publication of Language and the Study of Language (1867) and its German translation in 1874.⁶⁶
Whitney’s visit to Leipzig also brought an even greater honor, and one that was equally unexpected. The publishing house of Breitkopf and Härtel was planning a series of major grammatical studies of the Indo-European languages to be prepared by some of Germany’s brightest up-and-coming scholars. For the volume on Sanskrit, however, they enlisted an American. Immensely gratified by this commission, Whitney told his wife, “What most pleases me in the matter is to see that I am fairly taken into the ranks of the German scholars, as if no outsider or stranger.” A capstone to his earlier successes, this distinction would silence any remaining question as to Whitney’s eminence among European Orientalists.

Unfortunately, this warm season in Germany was clouded by the reception Whitney’s Life and Growth of Language was receiving in England. Writing under his own name in the journal Nature, Max Müller suggested that Whitney had borrowed, without attribution, all of that book’s best material:

But who were the first to conceive a Science of Language as different from Comparative Philology, though beholden to it for its most valuable materials? Who first drew the outlines of that science, collected the facts required for its illustration, and established the leading principles of its study? Prof. Whitney could have answered all these questions better than anybody else, whereas, by his reticence, he may now leave on many of his readers the impression, though no doubt very much against his own will, that the science of language had its cradle in America, and that German, English and French scholars have added nothing to it, except “incongruities and absurdities.”

Another effort to kindle European grievance against the American upstart, Müller’s statement ignored the fact that Whitney had long before acknowledged his debt to other linguists. Still, Whitney said that this signed review at least brought a refreshing openness to the conflict.

Meanwhile, Whitney had settled down to his Atharva labors, which took up July and most of August. He also rewrote his Contemporary Review article to prepare it for translation in the Deutsche Rundschau. (G. H. Darwin’s and Max Müller’s articles were reprinted as well.) By the time Whitney completed these tasks and departed from Germany, the European vacation season had begun. He was therefore disappointed when he passed through England en route home; many on whom he had wished to call, including the Darwins and Hensleigh Wedgwood, were unavailable. Another letdown came on the day Whitney sailed from Liverpool: the London Academy published a second hos-
tile review of his new book. Whitney now stood accused of having shifted his position on certain issues. For example, “animals are now admitted to possess no language in the proper sense of the word. . . . What will Mr. Darwin, jun., say to this?”

The anonymous writer had a familiar style.

Whitney composed a short statement while on shipboard, which was duly printed in the next week’s *Academy*. He calmly explained that he had not knowingly changed any of his views and that he certainly had never suggested that animals possess language. There was, at any rate, little doubt as to the source of this latest jab. Arriving home in New Haven, Whitney found a postcard from Furnivall: “You must fight M. Skin him.” His friend Reinhold Rost was similarly enraged by the “insidious remarks” in the *Academy*. “Your temperate reply, keeping strictly to the point—what a contrast!” Whitney would struggle to maintain this dignity of tone, at least in public, even as the controversy entered its most antagonistic phase.

That fall there appeared a new installment of Max Müller’s *Chips from a German Workshop*. Composed mostly of Orientalist studies, *Chips*, volume four, also included two essays aimed at Whitney: an expanded version of “My Reply to Mr. Darwin,” and a new seventy-five-page essay entitled “In Self-defence.” The latter, the final item in the collection, caught the attention of the literary press throughout Europe. Here Müller gave a detailed recital of his grievances, both scholarly and personal, against Whitney. He alleged, among other things, that Whitney had had the effrontery to pay him a visit at Oxford a number of years previously and to ask him for favors—this after having repeatedly abused him in print: “It was because I thought Professor Whitney capable of rendering useful service to the science of language in America that I forbore so long, that I never for years noticed his intentional rudeness and arrogance, that I received him, when he called on me at Oxford, with perfect civility, that I assisted him when he wanted my help in procuring copies of MSS. at Oxford. I could well afford to forget what had happened.” Müller said that he had wanted to avoid a quarrel but had been dragged into it. He accused Whitney of instigating the series in the *Contemporary Review* by getting “possession of the pen of the son [George Darwin], fondly trusting it would carry the weight of the father.” By this means, Müller said, Whitney had hoped to gain the “aura popularis of Darwinism.”

Müller’s “Self-defence” ended with a proposal: a tribunal of arbitration should be set up to judge twenty “principal bones of contention” between
himself and Whitney. “In order, therefore, to satisfy Mr. Darwin, Professor Haeckel, and others whose good opinion I highly value, because I know that they care for truth far more than for victory, I now appeal to Professor Whitney to choose from among his best friends, three who are Professores ordinarii in any university of England, France, Germany, or Italy, and by their verdict I promise to abide.” (Müller named the zoologist Ernst Haeckel because Haeckel was a cousin of the linguist W. H. J. Bleek.) A number of Müller’s disputed points were either trivial or obscure: for instance, “Whether E. Burnouf has written two or three bulky volumes on the Avesta, or only one,” and “Whether the grammatical blunder, with regard to the Sanskrit pari tashushas as a nominative plur. was mine or his.” Yet several of the items had more substance. In particular, were there not “verbatim coincidences” between his and Whitney’s published lectures? And had he, Müller, “ever denied that language was made through the instrumentality of man”?75

Müller still hoped Whitney would do valuable work in the future. A scholar could be in no more useful place than America, he said, for the study of “languages but little known, and rapidly disappearing”—thus suggesting that Whitney really should be investigating the American Indian tongues, not Sanskrit. Yet to this Müller added a caveat: “I admit that America has also its temptations.” In that undeveloped society, he explained, there were few intellectual authorities qualified to gainsay Whitney’s opinions, “and by his command of a number of American papers, he can easily secure to himself a temporary triumph.”76

Müller, of course, commanded sources of his own, as the Academy’s announcement of his new Chips volume showed. According to that statement, “the piquant justice of the last essay, ‘In Self-defence’ will be thoroughly appreciated by every class of readers.” A. H. Sayce, Müller’s protégé at Oxford, wrote an additional review that likewise recommended the book’s final article. (Whitney learned that Sayce had not wanted to write this but had been obliged to “knuckle under.”)77 The result was that Whitney’s reputation in England now hung by a thread. Despite his many triumphs, especially in the Orientalist world, he still could not feel that his victory was complete.

Coming after the warm springtime and summer, the exasperating charges included in Müller’s new article blighted the winter of 1875–76. Indological projects went by the boards as Whitney spent nearly all of his spare time preparing his case. By December he had drafted a letter of response to the Academy. He also consulted with friends about writing on his behalf in Ameri-
can journals. Several of those journal’s editors also pledged to stand by Whitney, and from these most of the local newspapers took their cues.\textsuperscript{78}

Whitney’s friends in England reported that many there were on his side: members of London’s Atheneum Club, for instance, thought badly of Müller’s “Self-defence.”\textsuperscript{79} Yet this was only part of the picture. Reinhold Rost said that Müller, although an outsider to the English social elite, had secured a strong following among the royal family, among a clique connected with the \textit{Academy}, and among a large readership. Under these conditions, even those who disliked Müller thought it best not to cross him. Rost claimed that there was “not a paper in the whole kingdom that would dare to insert an article in any way damaging to him.”\textsuperscript{80} So although many British scholars sympathized with Whitney, this did him little good in public.

As Whitney prepared his response to Müller’s “Self-defence,” friends offered him tactical advice. In a chastened mood after having been burned by Müller in the \textit{Contemporary Review}, George Darwin counseled a cease-fire: “One does not see the end of this kind of polemic.” (He added a post-script: “My father dictates to you as follows: ‘There is a sentence in the Chips in which M. M. expresses great satisfaction at having received a letter from me, and which seems to imply that I had said that I thought that you were wrong in the controversy and he Max Müller right, whereas there was nothing whatever in the letter which could bear any interpretation of this kind.’”)\textsuperscript{81}

Unlike George Darwin, Charles Eliot Norton felt that Whitney needed to respond. Yet he recommended that this be done through “a measured, calm and colourless historic rehearsal of the controversy.”\textsuperscript{82} Norton’s influence showed in Whitney’s “Rejoinder,” which appeared in the \textit{Academy} on New Year’s Day, 1876. Whitney dealt with a variety of points, including the matter of his visit to Oxford. Müller had said that Whitney came to see him and asked for favors, even after having attacked him on linguistic matters. Yet that visit, Whitney noted, had occurred in 1856, which was years “before either of us had ever written a word on the ‘Science of Language.’” Whitney also recalled various favors he had done for Müller. He had “supported heartily” Müller’s candidacy for the Boden Professorship at Oxford, and he had brokered the original agreement between Müller and his American publisher. Imprudently, however, Whitney tried to establish these facts by quoting from Müller’s letters of request, all of which he had kept. The \textit{Academy}’s editor Charles Appleton properly excised this passage from Whitney’s printed “Rejoinder.” (Explaining his action, Appleton chided Whitney: “This is our code of journalistic morals:
isn’t it so in America too?” The result was that Müller could continue to accuse Whitney on this matter with impunity.

As to what Müller had written about language change, Whitney cried foul. He showed in his “Rejoinder” that Müller had subtly shifted his stance over the years and then had quoted from a revised edition of his own lectures while claiming that this represented his original views. In his Chips article, Müller quoted himself as saying: “Though it is easy to show that language cannot be changed or moulded by the taste, the fancy, or genius of man, it is nevertheless through the instrumentality of man alone that language can be changed.” Here Müller tried to show that he had always acknowledged the human role in language change; the implication was that Whitney had attacked him needlessly. Yet as Whitney pointed out, the italicized passage represented, “so far as I know, the nearest approach to be found in Mr. Müller’s works to the doctrine which I have always held and defended, that language is made and changed, not only through the instrumentality, but by the actual agency, of men; but those words do not stand in the edition of the Lectures which I criticized: instead of them we read ‘it is very difficult to explain what causes the growth of language.’” In short, this “bone of contention” arose purely from Müller having declared that he had never changed his view.

Last of all, Whitney responded to Müller’s arbitration proposal: he said that he was willing to go along but would not take responsibility for setting up the tribunal. Instead, Müller would have to pick his own friends as judges.

In reply, Müller ignored the bulk of Whitney’s “Rejoinder” and seized on this last point only: twisting Whitney’s meaning, he charged Whitney with refusing to submit to arbitration. This forced Whitney to send a second letter to the Academy, denying this charge. The Academy, however, refused to print the letter. Instead, Charles Appleton published a statement urging Whitney to accept a tribunal’s judgment rather than write more letters full of “angry recrimination.” Thanks to the intervention of friends, the London Examiner offered itself as an alternative venue. Here Whitney repeated his earlier points while admitting that he had little faith in arbitration as a means of settling scholarly disputes. He reaffirmed his willingness to accept an independent judgment, yet he said that his own role would be purely that of a respondent.

What turned all of this into an international cause célèbre were the reports of the affair that ran in Continental periodicals. One of these, appearing in Florence’s Rivista Europa, clearly sided with Müller. Whitney responded by sending an irate letter of protest to the Rivista’s editor, Angelo de Gubernatis.
This was but one of several such letters he wrote during this period, and it would have remained like all the others except for the fact that de Gubernatis published it. Here Whitney mainly repeated what he had said in the *Academy* and the *Examiner*. What stunned European readers, however, were remarks he added at the conclusion: “In the whole history of religions, I do not think there is a stranger form of idolatry, than Müller-worship. I venture to predict that it will prove transitory, and that the next generation will look back upon it only with wondering curiosity. It is, I am sure, already fast waning; and probably an uneasy consciousness of the fact has led to this last furious but ill-judged outbreak on the divinity’s part.”

Whitney told his friends overseas that he had intended this letter for de Gubernatis only, noting that it was “decidedly more plain-spoken” than anything he would have written for publication. “If I am criticized for its plainness anywhere within your reach,” he implored, “I wish you would kindly make this explanation on my behalf.” Still, even some of his supporters were taken aback.

At this point, a would-be mediator stepped forward. Moncure Conway must have seemed perfect for the job. An American familiar with British scholarly circles, he was acquainted with both antagonists — although more so with Müller. He had visited the United States that January and had been Whitney’s guest at a meeting of the New Haven Philological Society. Later that evening, during a long private conversation, Conway had urged Whitney to go through with the arbitration scheme and had offered his services as a go-between. Back in England that spring, he solicited from Müller a response to Whitney’s complaints. Müller therefore addressed himself to Conway in five extraordinary letters, written during five consecutive days in May.

For the most part, Müller tried to substantiate his charge about Whitney’s presumptuous visit to Oxford. Conway had passed along Whitney’s contention that Müller had got the date wrong, and Müller finally admitted that he might have made a mistake: “How should I remember the exact year? I still believe that his rudeness had begun before he called, for though forgetting the date, I remember a certain feeling of suspicion at receiving his friendly visit. But how does that affect the questions between him and me? Add the date, and yet every word may remain as I wrote it. Besides, if he called on me today, I should receive him, I hope, as a gentleman.”

Müller said that he could still prove that Whitney had sought and accepted favors from him “long after” attacking him in print. But he was evasive about
the favors he himself had requested: “Can you remember what position I wished to be recommended to by Whitney? I ransack my memory in vain. I never stood for anything but the Sanskrit Professorship.” Two days later, Müller grudgingly acknowledged that Whitney had supported him for precisely that post: “No no, these are not the points at issue, nor his testimonial which he gave me when I stood for the Boden Professorship, and which with about fifty others I pursued at the time.”

Müller then returned to his earlier point:

> With regard to his visit in 1856, though I had completely forgotten the date, I had the distinct impression that it surprised me and that I was pleased by it. But why was I surprised? Because in several articles on the Veda which W. had published in 1853, he had, while blowing the trumpet for Roth, Weber and others, carefully avoided any mention of my name. When he could not help mentioning my edition of the Rig Veda, all he says is: a new edition of the Rig, too, with accented text and the native commentary is now in progress at London (J.A.O.S. vol. III, p. 293). I mention this simply as showing his animus at the time, in 1853.

Here, finally, Müller divulged what for him, at least in retrospect, was the original source of the quarrel. His charge was accurate: one of Whitney’s earliest publications, an 1853 article surveying modern Vedic scholarship, had omitted Müller’s name from its reference to the Oxford Ṛg Veda edition. Whitney later (in 1872) admitted that he had intentionally snubbed Müller on this occasion, although he did not explain why. The 1853 article appeared nearly ten years before Whitney’s falling out with Müller during the Indian astronomy controversy. Hence, his slighting of Müller at that early date likely was an expression of partisanship for Albrecht Weber in his own long-running dispute with Müller. In any case, Müller’s explanation to Moncure Conway did not at all fit with the charge made in Chips, that Whitney had attacked him on matters of linguistic science prior to his Oxford visit. Müller concluded his letters to Conway on a note of unintended irony: “I must only repeat again that all this is far far away from the real point at issue.”

Later that month, Whitney wrote his own final letter to Moncure Conway. The latter had appealed for peace and harmony, but Whitney would have these only on the following terms: “Let Müller publicly withdraw his last article, ‘In Self-defence,’ confessing that it is wrong from beginning to end, and the thing will be put well in train.” Whitney also betrayed his growing irritation with Conway himself: “I think you mistake the aspect of the case, as it now stands. I
am not aware of having done anything which I need to retract or to apologize for. . . . I have no 'personal matters to brush away' (to use your expression)."

This last point was, to say the least, not quite convincing, along with Whitney's frequent declarations that he cared only for scientific truth. Still, his conclusion about Müller was accurate enough: "He has now at last answered me [via Conway], but it is with simple misrepresentation and abuse. . . . To me he is simply, with all his ability, one of the great humbugs of the century; he has long shown himself to be as much intellectually; now he has exposed himself as being the same thing morally."95

In his own parting words on the affair, Conway wrote an equivocal paragraph for the London Palladium. He wrung his hands and vouched for the honor of both parties. He also said that Müller still was willing to accept a tribunal made up of any three German scholars known to be Whitney's friends, "and there is every reason to credit him with good faith, because he is himself by no means a favorite with the Germans."96 Considering the ineptness of this remark, Müller must have regretted ever attempting to use Conway as a mouthpiece. Needless to say, the tribunal never was constituted.

The Whitney-Müller controversy had lost steam by midsummer: the principle combatants had had their say, and neither backed down. One unfortunate outcome was the end of Whitney’s once-cordial relationship with the North American Review. Henry Adams felt that the dispute had played itself out, so he discouraged any more contributions on the subject. As he told Whitney's Sheffield School colleague T. R. Lousbury, "The odium philologicum is not a pleasant matter to keep alive." Adams did finally agree to publish a review of the affair that Lousbury had written—which set forth probably the best summation of Whitney’s case.97 But he put off Whitney himself, who had prepared an article on the long-awaited final volume of Müller’s Rg Veda edition. Whitney claimed that he judged this work purely on its "scientific" merits, but Adams and C. E. Norton sensed otherwise from the tone of the piece. As Norton told Whitney, "Anything—any word, any turn of phrase—savoring of sarcasm or indignation, is consequently, in your position, of bad policy and questionable taste."98 In the last letter he would ever write to Norton, Whitney said that he would not allow his article to be bowdlerized. It therefore appeared in full in the New Englander.99

As it turned out, this piece presented a masterful survey of European Vedic scholarship in the mid-nineteenth century. It also contained, as Adams and Norton realized, a devastating portrait of Max Müller’s Indological career.
Others would eventually confirm this judgment. The eminent British phonetician Henry Sweet later told Whitney: “I am no admirer of Müller (except in as far as I consider him an excellent type of the ‘Graeculus evisiens’ — the successful humbug), and consider his influence on English scientific work to be an unmixedly bad one.” A knowledgeable observer from Oxford corroborated this assessment in an article written after Müller’s death in 1901.

The Virtues of the Invisible Hand

In terms of intellectual content, the one new feature of the Whitney-Müller controversy was the apparent convergence of the two philologists’ views on the role of agency in language change. Müller’s claim that he and Whitney had basically agreed on that subject all along was of course deceptive: in reality, Müller had revised his own formulation. Yet this still leaves the question of whether, in the end, these verbal changes produced a convergence of outlook. Did the adjustments Müller introduced in the later editions of his lectures amount to an actual shift in explanation, such that he indeed came closer to Whitney’s position? The answer proposed here is that Whitney’s and Müller’s theories were neither convergent nor complementary, but rather were fundamentally at odds; it will also be argued that Whitney’s viewpoint was clearly superior.

In his second (1863) series of Royal Institution lectures, Müller showed that his own perspective was essentially dualistic. The phenomenon of language change, he said, “combined” in unresolved tension the “two opposite elements of necessity and free will.” This perspective did suggest a distinguished intellectual pedigree: Müller often said that the problem of language change mirrored the old theological conundrum of apparent human freedom coexisting with divine sovereignty. For this reason, the Calvinists at Princeton Seminary and at Bibliotheca Sacra sided with Müller against Whitney. Yet this viewpoint, while it suggested the mystery and complexity of language change, did no more than restate the explanatory problem.

Max Müller appeared to moderate his position during the main years of controversy, when he spoke of “implied cooperation” and “reciprocal restraint” among individual speakers. He thereby conveyed superficial agreement with Whitney’s outlook, leading some observers to conclude that the difference between the two philologists’ views was “not so profound as the public
is led to imagine." That difference, however, becomes clear when one looks at their writings as a whole. While Müller left the matter unresolved, Whitney supplied an intelligible explanatory framework via his voluntary-interactionist sociology, which, as we have seen, elaborated Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” concept. It will be useful to reemphasize three interlocking characteristics of this Smithian mode of explanation, all of which would be central to Whitney’s enduring legacy.

First, unlike the dualist outlook, a genuine invisible-hand schema explains the whole in terms of its constituent parts. Whitney made precisely this point in *The Life and Growth of Language* (1875): “It is manifestly absurd to recognize one force in action in the items and another in their sum. If we refuse to examine the items when forming an estimate of the [causal] force, and only gaze with admiration at the great whole, there is no theory so false that we may not for a time rest in it with satisfaction.” Rather, like Adam Smith, Whitney explained concerted social behavior in terms of the freely chosen actions of individuals.

Second, an invisible-hand schema entails not only individual action but also social interaction. It involves mutual influence among a collection of independent selves, each of whom orients his behavior to the behavior of those around him. Individuals act in this manner even as they pursue their own interests—indeed, as the necessary means to achieving those interests. Because of the intrinsically communal nature of speech, the introduction of linguistic innovations was always being counterbalanced by self-restraint and conformity to group practice.

Finally, the emphasis on social interaction necessarily involves a synchronic perspective. When Adam Smith used his “hand” metaphor to explain how the free market induces autonomous individuals to interact, he pictured this taking place more or less at a given point in time; it was only by appeal to this present interaction that he accounted for eventual change. In the same way, Whitney tied the long-term evolution of language back to the constant interface among speakers. Here again, he collapsed two levels into one, not only reducing society to a collection of individuals but also linking the diachronic process to the synchronic moment.

Whitney added nuance to this schema midway through his career, largely in response to critiques of his voluntarist position. These came, not from Max Müller, but rather from various (often American) reviewers of his published
lectures as well as his Oriental and Linguistic Studies (1873). One reviewer noted, with some sympathy, the difficulty caused by the inherent imprecision of words such as “unconscious,” “intention,” and “will”: “The want of fit terms probably explains why Professor Whitney describes the same thing as [both] conscious and unconscious.” Two other writers, however, were more critical on this score. The Pennsylvania philologist Francis Andrew March agreed that individual speakers were the source of all changes in language; that much, he said, was obvious. Yet he questioned whether speakers consciously intended to produce those changes.

The philosopher Chauncey Wright (1830–75) pushed this argument further, producing probably the most incisive criticism of Whitney’s voluntary-agency thesis ever made. A member of the Boston-Cambridge “Metaphysical Club” and a mentor to the American pragmatists, Wright pointed out that speakers normally intend, not to change their language, but rather to conform to customary usage. One could hardly say, therefore, that speakers change their language voluntarily, “for the same wills cannot act from contradictory intentions.” Wright included this argument, along with references to Whitney’s essay on August Schleicher, in an 1873 article on humanity’s mental evolution that appeared in the North American Review.

Whitney did not directly acknowledge his detractors, but he did respond to them. Actually, he had already begun grappling with the problem of unconscious action in his anti-Steinthal essay published the previous year. There, as we have seen, he conceded that the long-term modification of language did involve an element of non-intent. A caveman using a stone to defend himself against a wolf “was not conscious that he was commencing a series of acts which would lead finally to rifles and engines.” Similarly, changes in language were “unforeseen consequences of its use as a means of communication.”

Whitney expanded this thesis in The Life and Growth of Language (1875), no doubt in order to address his recent critics. Every time a speaker took even the smallest articulatory “short cut,” Whitney said, that person “commits thus an addition to language without ever being aware of it; any more than the parents who name their son reflect that they are thus virtually making an addition to the city directory. If he will well understand it to be in this sense, everyone is welcome to hold that alternations of speech are not made by the human will; there is no will to alter speech; there is only will to use [existing] speech in a way which is new; and the alteration comes of itself as a result.” Here Whitney was
probably responding to Chauncey Wright’s argument. To reinforce his point, he added a further illustration: “So it was not by the exertion of his will that the reptile, creeping over the muddy surface of a Permian or Jurassic shore, made a record of himself for the human geologist to study, a few million years later; and yet, if he had not voluntarily taken the steps, under sufficient inducement, there would have been no record.”112

These analogies — involving the caveman, the new parents, and the prehistoric reptile — were limited in the sense that they failed to convey the dimension of social interaction that remained fundamental to Whitney’s theory. Still, they did suggest the crucial distinction between initially voluntary (even if only half-conscious) speech behavior and the long-term outcomes of that behavior, which most speakers never intend or live to see produced. That distinction was represented, for instance, by the gap between the reptile’s movements and the fossilized record those movements left behind. Whitney emphasized this gulf between intent and outcome yet again in an article he wrote in 1886. After affirming that language change lay “wholly within the domain of voluntary human action,” he added the now-familiar qualification: “This does not by any means imply that the will is exerted directly toward the change of language, any more than the will of the fugitive is directed toward his own discovery when by voluntary action he leaves the tracks by which he is followed.”113

Yet how could a synchronic sociology of language bridge this chasm between the immediate and the long-term? Whitney’s ability to remain untroubled by this problem likely stemmed from a lifelong familiarity with the notion of geological gradualism. One could thus imagine miniscule speech innovations acting like wind erosion or silt deposition, that is, accumulating over long periods and eventually resulting in large developments such as the splitting of a single language into a number of distinct dialects. Seen in this light, the long-term aspect took care of itself, and the theorist could legitimately focus on the motivating impulses close at hand. Whitney is therefore to be commended for not falling into his own version of dualism — in this case, an unresolved tension between the synchronic and the diachronic. Keeping within the Smithian tradition, he collapsed the two perspectives into synchronic explanation alone.

Linguists would largely abandon questions about the role of intent in language change by the end of the nineteenth century, and it would be nearly a century more before they again became attracted to Adam Smith’s invisible-hand perspective.114 The latter occurred only after the field of sociolinguistics
became established in the late twentieth century. Then came the realization that Smithian theory provided one of that school’s central intellectual underpinnings. What has not been recognized, however, is the extent to which W. D. Whitney’s sociological perspective has accordingly been put into practice. This we will see better in our final chapter, when we examine Whitney’s legacy in the sociolinguistic school itself.