



PERGAMON

Language & Communication 18 (1998) 181–204

LANGUAGE
&
COMMUNICATION

Back to Blavatsky: the impact of theosophy on modern linguistics*

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Keywords: Ethnicity; Ethnolinguistic classification; Chinese; Nuns; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Academic disciplines, like nation states, write their histories first and foremost for themselves. These histories offer the reassurance of continuity, or record triumphant revolutions and seizures of power. They set out in sequence key dates and discoveries, and are a source of orientation and encouragement for future investigations. Each scholar toils to make their own entry in the book of the life of the discipline, and this scholarly labour gains meaning and purpose from a sense of history and progress. It has been fashionable in recent decades, however, to analyse such narratives as shaped by evasions and silences, as vain attempts to unify the disparate and impose order and progress on what is dislocated and fragmentary. Following Derrida's critical praxis, what is marginal has been equated with what is repressed, and what is repressed has been seen—in a psychoanalytic inversion—as constitutive of that very order which established the relationship of centrality and marginality in the first place.

Where does this leave the history of linguistics? What should we make of founding fathers such as William Jones, Franz Bopp and Ferdinand de Saussure? For Derridean history there is no problem. They are constructs of the disciplinary myth, they offer reassurance that language has order. Jones and Bopp stand for historical order, for continuity and the reconstruction of lost unities. Saussure invokes for us the unity that we live now in our speech communities. Thus these father figures give us myths of origin, of continuity and of community.

While this disruptive reading of the history of linguistics may seem radical, or even plausible, it can be achieved effortlessly and glibly. As a critique, its structure and

* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented to the North American Association for the History of Language Sciences, Annual Meeting, San Diego, 6 January 1996. The authors would like to express their thanks to Erika Archer for her assistance in gathering materials for this paper, to René Amacker for kind assistance in obtaining a photocopied material and to Konrad Koerner.

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trajectory are given in advance. What we wish to achieve in this paper is something less radical, but—arguably—more interesting. We wish to suggest that the history of linguistics and of linguistic ideas needs to be researched without the prior imposition of a sense of progress (Whig history), but also without simply slaying the disciplinary fathers. This involves an open-minded attempt to understand the intellectual context within which scholars of language were working, and a commitment to take seriously the ideas and views that those scholars espoused, however much we may find them laughable, bizarre or objectionable.

While this may seem like little more than the statement of honest historical method, we would argue that the history of linguistics would be utterly transformed by such an approach. The disruptive, alternative history of modern linguistics which we offer in the following pages is centred on an interest shared by some of the best-known linguists of the 19th and 20th centuries in the movement known as theosophy, the deeply mystical nature of which has undoubtedly deterred earlier historians of the field from looking into it. Another disincentive is that at the intersection of theosophy and linguistics we also encounter certain theories of language, mind and race which are repulsive to modern readers, particularly in the light of what we know their political consequences would end up being. But it is also a place where science and fantasy blend into one another in a way that is both disturbing and illuminating, and which invites us to consider why it is that some of the greatest theoreticians of language have found considerations of mysticism and race to lie within their purview.

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in the autumn of 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and William Q. Judge (1851–1896). It was devoted to the study of spiritualism, mesmerism, and the occult, but also spirituality. Madame Blavatsky, the intellectual leader of the group, held that the Sanskrit texts of Ancient India embodied the spiritual principles which lay behind all religions. Theosophy was offered not as an alternative religion, but as an adjunct to every existing religion. One of its early popularizers, A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921), gave his best known presentation of the principles of theosophy the title *Esoteric Buddhism*, and that is exactly what it was: a kind of Buddhism stripped to its ethical essentials, and disdaining such later accretions as the Indian caste system. The Theosophists declared themselves from the beginning to recognize no distinctions of race, creed, sex, caste, or color in their quest for a 'Universal Brotherhood'. A spate of recent scholarly books have appeared on the Theosophical Society and its impact on modernism, in areas ranging from literature, art and music to politics, national and international. These books include Surette (1993), Washington (1994), Godwyn (1994), and Prothero (1996). None of them deals in any depth with the movement's involvement with linguistics, which was considerable. It is the outlines of this story that we lay out in the present paper—all too briefly, not because there is so little material to discuss, but because there is so much.¹

¹ The links are impossible to ignore, as we found out when we wrote to John Algeo, retired professor of linguistics at the University of Georgia and until recently editor of *American Speech*, asking for copies of his articles listed in the bibliography. He kindly obliged, answering us on the letterhead of the Theosophical Society of America. We had had no idea that he was its current president.

Madame Blavatsky was a controversial figure from the start. She produced voluminous treatises like *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* which are the core of Theosophical teachings to the present day, and are available in any New Age book shop. She claimed to receive her inspirations astrally from two Brahmin 'masters' in the Himalayas. When, as sometimes happened, she was accused of plagiarism, she responded with a laugh that the Himalayan masters could hardly be bothered to provide bibliographic references. She was also fond of producing 'phenomena' such as rappings and bells, which apparently accompanied her wherever she went, as well as mysterious 'letters' from the masters which would appear out of the blue. Yet she was a tremendously charismatic woman, and the poet W. B. Yeats, who was for a time her protégé, does not exaggerate in his *Autobiography* when he says that in the late 1880s when he was part of her inner circle, she was the most famous woman in the world.

In December 1878 Madame Blavatsky received instructions from her masters to move the Theosophical Society from New York to India, and she obeyed. Some think that the persistent knocking of creditors may have underscored the masters' message, but in any case the Society's world headquarters continues to be at Adyar, north of Madras, to the present day, with branches in dozens of major cities worldwide.² In 1879, the journal *The Theosophist* was founded, the first of many journals that would be launched by Blavatsky or the various factions into which the Society began to split after her death.

Since the 1850s the writings and lectures of Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) had made the significance of the Vedic texts widely known, notably through a pair of articles published in the *London Times* of 17 and 20 April 1857, just before the outbreak of the first War of Indian Independence in May of that year.³ In these early articles Müller is surprisingly disparaging of Buddhism. He holds to the Enlightenment view of it as atheistic, and characterizes its aspiration to a Nirvana of utter annihilation as a kind of collective madness, though admitting that 'individual Buddhists, though not understanding it properly, had triumphed over the "madness of its metaphysics"'.⁴ By the time Madame Blavatsky appeared on the scene 20 years later, many things had changed. The politics of Indian colonialism had temporarily stabilized, the popularity of *Zanoni* and other novels by Edward Bulwer-Lytton had shown that the English reading public had a thirst for esoterism. Perhaps most importantly, as Washington (1994) points out, the middle-class reading public had grown tremendously through the introduction of universal education, and felt spiritually undernourished by traditional religion. Moreover, this large public was not academically indoctrinated enough to sort out why the theosophical treatises offended the scholarly sensibilities of the more highly educated.

Blavatsky claimed to have access to thousands more Sanskrit texts than Max Müller, thanks to her Himalayan masters. As Crewe (1996: 26) puts it, 'For sheer

²The original Indian headquarters was at Bombay, with the move to Adyar occurring in 1882. The 'universal brotherhood' aspects of the Theosophical Society actually date from that move to India. Cleather (1992: 83–84) actually quotes Colonel Olcott to the effect that 'the T. S. founded at New York in 1875 was only a "Miracle club"', as Colonel Olcott says, with no "brotherhood plank"'.
³See further Godwyn (1994: 262–264).
⁴Godwyn (1994: 262, 324, 376).

chutzpah, there has never been anyone quite like Madame Blavatsky'. Max Müller's name crops up continually in early theosophical work, because the obvious thematic connection with his views lent that work a certain scholarly legitimacy, and because of his very public anti-evolutionary stand (see further below).

For his part, he distanced himself from the movement, but only slowly and rather quietly, perhaps because he did after all benefit from the attention it was drawing. His most cunning move in this regard may have been to entitle his 1892 Gifford Lectures, including their published version, *Theosophy; or, Psychological Religion*, and then only at the end of the Introduction indicate that his book was not part of the movement that by then was universally associated with the word. Privately, he repeated to anyone who asked him about theosophy the story of what Colonel Olcott had said when Max Müller asked him about Madame Blavatsky's transparently phony 'phenomena'. 'All religions,' Olcott was reported by Müller as having responded, 'have to be manured.' Prothero describes Olcott's own religious belief as a 'creole faith', combining and simplifying Protestant and Buddhist elements (1996: 7–8).

Other linguists figure more actively in the early numbers of *The Theosophist*, including John Wesley Powell and Garrick Mallery of the Smithsonian Institute, whose enthusiastic correspondence with Olcott about 'the parallels between the N. A. Indians and the real Indians, in psychology, philosophy & c.' (Mallery to Olcott: 18 November 1879) was published in *The Theosophist* in 1880. The same journal ran for a number of years a regular column entitled 'Puzzles for the Philologists', with both European and Indian contributors.

The *summa* of Blavatsky's theosophy, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), includes a theory of language development which in some respects is eerily similar to much academic theorising of the time. In particular, the idea of a developmental line from monosyllabic, isolating languages to agglutinating languages to inflecting languages had been around for at least a century, usually associated with an evolutionary view of history. Indeed it can be seen from the following extract that Blavatsky takes very much an evolutionary view of language history *within* the human race; her anti-evolutionism is directed specifically against the notion that the first humans evolved from apes.

...[T]he first Race—the ethereal or astral Sons of Yoga, also called 'Self-Born'—was, in our sense, speechless, as it was devoid of mind on our plane. The Second Race had a 'Sound-language,' to wit, chant-like sounds composed of vowels alone. The Third Race developed in the beginning a kind of language which was only a slight improvement on the various sounds in Nature, on the cry of gigantic insects and of the first animals, which, however, were hardly nascent in the day of the 'Sweat-born' (the *early* Third Race). In its second half, when the 'Sweat-born' gave birth to the 'Egg-born,' (the *middle* Third Race), and when these, instead of 'hatching out' (...) as androgynous beings, began to evolve into separate males and females; and when the same law of evolution led them to reproduce their kind sexually, an act which forced the creative gods, compelled by Karmic law, to incarnate in *mindless* men; then only was speech devel-

oped. But even then it was still no better than a tentative effort. The whole human race was at that time of 'one language and of one lip.'...Speech then developed, according to occult teaching, in the following order:—

1. Monosyllabic speech; that of the first approximately fully developed human beings at the close of the Third Root-race, the 'golden-coloured,' yellow-complexioned men, after their separation into sexes, and the full awakening of their minds. Before that, they communicated through what would now be called 'thought-transference'... Language could not be well developed before the full acquisition and development of their reasoning faculties. This monosyllabic speech was the vowel parent, so to speak, of the monosyllabic languages mixed with hard consonants, still in use amongst the yellow races which are known to the anthropologist.
2. These linguistic characteristics developed into the agglutinative languages. The latter were spoken by some Atlantean races, while other parent stocks of the Fourth Race preserved their mother-language... (**Language* is certainly coeval with reason, and could never have been developed before men became one with the informing principles in them—those who fructified and awoke to life the manasic element dormant in primitive man. For, as Professor Max Müller tells us in his *Science of Thought*, 'Thought and language are identical.' Yet to add to this the reflection that *thoughts which are too deep for words, do not really exist at all*, is rather risky, as thought impressed upon the astral tablets exists in eternity whether expressed or not. Logos is both reason and speech. But language, proceeding in cycles, is not always adequate to express *spiritual* thoughts...) While the 'cream' of the Fourth Race gravitated more and more toward the apex of physical and intellectual evolution, thus leaving as an heirloom to the nascent Fifth (the Aryan) Race the inflectional, highly developed languages, the agglutinative decayed and remained as a fragmentary fossil idiom, scattered now, and nearly limited to the aboriginal tribes of America.
3. The inflectional speech—the root of the Sanskrit, very erroneously called 'the elder sister' of the Greek, instead of its mother—was the first language (now the mystery tongue of the Initiates, of the Fifth Race). At any rate, the 'Semitic' languages are the bastard descendants of the first phonetic corruptions of the eldest children of the early Sanskrit... The Semites, especially the Arabs, are later Aryans—degenerate in spirituality and perfected in materiality. To these belong all the Jews and the Arabs. The former are a tribe descended from the Tchandalas of India, the outcasts, many of them ex-Brahmins, who sought refuge in Chaldea, in Scinde, and Aria (Iran), and were truly born from their father A-bram (No Brahmin) some 8,000 years B.C. The latter, the Arabs, are the descendants of those Aryans who would not go into India at the time of the dispersion of nations... (Blavatsky, 1888, vol. 2, pp. 198–200).

In light of statements like these, of which her work contains many, Blavatsky's declarations about racial equality ring utterly hollow. Further on she again invokes

Max Müller in defence of her antievolutionism, referring specifically to Müller's highly publicised debate with Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919):

Haeckel's theory that 'speech arose gradually from a few simple, crude animal sounds...' as such 'speech still remains amongst a few races of lower rank' (*Darwinian Theory in Pedigree of Man*, p. 22) is altogether unsound, as argued by Professor Max Müller, among others. He contends that no plausible explanation has yet been given as to how the 'roots' of language came into existence. A *human* brain is necessary for *human* speech... Haeckel, among other things, often comes into direct conflict with the Science of languages. In the course of his attack on Evolutionism (1873, 'Mr. Darwin's Philosophy of Language'), Professor Max Müller stigmatized the Darwinian theory as 'vulnerable at the beginning and at the end.'... Languages have their phases of growth, etc., like all else in nature. It is almost certain that the great linguistic families pass through three stages:

1. All words are roots and merely placed in juxtaposition (Radical languages).
2. One root defines the other, and becomes merely a determinative element (Agglutinative).
3. The determinative element (the determining meaning of which has longed [*sic*] lapsed) unites into a whole with the formative element (Inflected).

The problem then is: Whence these roots? Max Müller argues that the existence of these *ready-made materials of speech* is a proof that man cannot be the crown of a long organic series. This *potentiality of forming roots* is the great crux which materialists almost invariably avoid (Blavatsky, 1888, vol. 2, pp. 661–662).

In the citation before last, Blavatsky referred to 'the inflectional speech—the root of the Sanskrit' as being 'now the mystery tongue of the Initiates, of the Fifth Race'. This 'root of the Sanskrit' is presumably Ur-Aryan, or what we would now call Proto-Indo-European. Elsewhere she describes Sanskrit as the language 'of the Gods' (vol. 1, p. 269). When, in Book I, Part II of *The Secret Doctrine*, entitled 'The Evolution of Symbolism in its Approximate Order', she elaborates on the mystery language, it acquires an Egyptian heritage as well:

Recent discoveries made by great mathematicians and Kabalists thus prove, beyond a shadow of doubt, that every theology, from the earliest and oldest down to the latest, has sprung not only from a common source of abstract beliefs, but from one universal esoteric, or 'Mystery' language. These scholars hold the key to the universal language of old, and have turned it successfully, though only *once*, in the hermetically closed door leading to the Hall of Mysteries. The great archaic system known from prehistoric ages as the sacred Wisdom Science, one that is contained and can be traced in every old as well as in every new religion, had, and still has, its universal language—suspected by the Mason Ragon—the language of the Hierophants, which has seven 'dialects', so to speak, each referring, and being specially appropriated, to one of the seven mysteries of Nature...

The proof of this lies, to this day, in the extreme difficulty which the Orientalists in general, the Indianists and Egyptologists especially, experience in interpreting the allegorical writings of the Aryans and the hieratic records of old Egypt. This is because they will never remember that all the ancient records were written in a language which was universal and known to all nations alike in days of old, but which is now intelligible only to the few. Like the Arabic figures which are plain to a man of whatever nation, or like the English word *and*, which becomes *et* for the Frenchman, *und* for the German, and so on, yet which may be expressed for all civilized nations in the simple sign &—so all the words of that mystery language signified the same thing to each man of whatever nationality. There have been several men of note who have tried to re-establish such a universal and *philosophical* tongue: Delgarme [i.e. Dalgarno], Wilkins, Leibnitz; but Demaimieux, in his *Pasigraphie*, is the only one who has proven its possibility. The scheme of Valentinus, called the ‘Greek Kabala,’ based on the combination of Greek letters, might serve as a model (Blavatsky, 1888, vol. 1, p. 310).

Such mixing of Indian and Egyptian elements would remain a characteristic feature of twentieth-century theosophy. The casual dispensing with Dalgarno, Wilkins and Leibniz in favour of the obscure Demaimieux is managed with typical Blavatskian panache.

2. Dilemmas of historiography

In attempting to trace the links between theosophy and other intellectual tendencies one is faced with a dilemma. There is the temptation to enlarge the phenomenon of theosophy and to label many tendencies and forms of scholarly inquiry theosophical in spirit, making analogies between the quest for the original religion and for a reconstructed human mysticism with historical and comparative linguistics, the various forms of psychoanalysis, primitive modernism, etc. A narrow approach would be confined to tracing links between members of the theosophical society and those directly influenced by it and linguists such as Benjamin Lee Whorf and Heinz Kloss (see below). A figure like Carl Gustav Jung, for example, had links with theosophy, with linguistics (in his early psycholinguistic experiments) and with Nazism (Noll, 1994). None of these links are straightforward, and, on a narrow reading of the history of theosophy, Jung might not count as a theosophist at all. Should we however define theosophy in part negatively, by its lack of recognition within mainstream academia? We must also take account of the fact that the profession of general linguist was not widely institutionalized before the Second World War; in Germany for example a *Germanist* might be involved in history, literary studies, archaeology and pre-history, and linguistic reconstruction. Other ‘linguists’ were involved in the psychological sciences or in folklore studies, anthropology or race theory.

Linguistics had of course been the key discipline in the postulation of Indo-European and in the reception of Eastern texts and philosophies in the West. As we

can look back through the history of linguistics, we can find an anxiety about the line between fact and fantasy, history and myth. When Franz Bopp published his *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* in 1816 it was accompanied by a preface from Karl Joseph Windischmann, a philosopher and romantic historian. The contrast between the sober Bopp and the fanciful Windischmann (the author of a work on the 'self-destruction of time and the hope of reincarnation', 1807) is emblematic for the divorce between academic linguistics and the speculative imagination. For while Windischmann and Bopp are together within the covers of a single book, it is evident that Bopp's volume marks a parting of the ways between speculative history and the historical comparative method. When the comparative philologist and New Testament scholar John Allegro published his *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in 1970, a work which argued on the basis of etymologies that Judaism and Christianity were the expressions of a mushroom-based fertility cult, fifteen academics signed a letter to *The Times* proclaiming that the work was 'an essay in fantasy rather than philology' (Allegro, 1973: 9). Defending his work, Allegro argued that '[i]n the sphere of comparative philology, particularly, deeper studies from the point of view of each family of tongues are needed to determine the full possibilities of the discoveries made' (1973: 10). Allegro saw himself as using the methods of historical linguistics to break down 'dogmatism' and 'bigoted obscurantism' (1973: 10); his academic opponents classified him as a crank.

These dilemmas of perspective are particularly acute when we study a movement such as theosophy, one which was highly influential in a particular period, but is no longer institutionally significant as The Theosophical Society. Theosophy can be understood as part of Orientalism, and can be seen as the particular institutionalization outside universities of a body of texts and a set of interpretive techniques. Alternatively one could see Orientalist scholarship as the academic branch of the wider phenomenon, Theosophy. What about the contemporary New Age movement? Should it count as a form of theosophy? Given that the periodical *New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage from May 1907, published writers such as Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, John Middleton Murray and Herbert Read (Webb, 1980: 196), what should one make of the links between literary modernism and theosophy?

What about the links between primitivism, fascism and Orientalism? Where does theosophy fit in? The editorial mission of the *New Age* was set out as follows (cited in Webb, 1980, p. 206):

Believing that the darling object and purpose of the universal human will of life is the creation of a race of supremely and progressively intelligent beings, the NEW AGE will devote itself to the serious endeavour to co-operate with the purpose of life and to enlist in that noble service the help of serious students of the new contemplative and imaginative order.

Among those associated with Orage and the *New Age* at various times were Katherine Mansfield, G. K. and Cecil Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, Hilaire Belloc, Arnold Bennett, the philosopher T. E. Hulme and the Imagist poets. Furthermore, the rhetoric of progress and human improvement found in the manifesto

looks less progressive today, with its echoes of vitalism and a hint of cultic elitism. These aspects of New Age thought shade off into eugenics and are part of the broad base of fascism within European thought. The links between Fabianism, vitalism, eugenics and fascism are manifest in D. H. Lawrence, who might now be classified as an English 'national' 'socialist'. Summarizing Washington (1994), Crewe (1996: 38) writes of 'an affinity between Gurdjieffian cruelty and the ethos of purgative primitivism that led D. H. Lawrence among others—and the later Yeats could have been mentioned in the same connection—to flirt with proto-fascist authoritarianism as an alternative to bourgeois soul-death'.

While theosophy is part of a nexus of 'isms' (Monism, modernism, primitivism, vitalism, occultism, esotericism, fascism, socialism, Orientalism, vegetarianism, etc.) and cannot be clearly delineated in isolation from these, one key to its definition is the rejection of Darwinism, of materialism and positivism. As Webb (1980: 536) remarks: 'Mme. Blavatsky was in one sense the protest of the religious conscience against Darwinism'. Theosophy was the re-assertion of meaningfulness in the world in the face of the marginalization of institutionalized religion and the rise of Darwinism. It clung to a mythical 'timeless history' of lost or hidden truths, and a sense of the 'miraculous' (Ouspensky, 1950: 3). This was a vision at odds with the impersonality of Darwin's vision of time as a one-way sequence of changes. It opened vast vistas of interpretation though its adoption of numerology, astrology, graphology, phrenology, characterology, etc., and offered reassurance that the world or the universe was not a closed mechanistic system. The universe was a symbolic entity full of resonances and 'correspondences' in which the conscious operations of the human will and human intelligence could allow human beings to progress to greater levels of insight and enlightenment—a kind of evolution foreign to Darwin's theory.

Within this framework one can understand how linguistics might seem to be antithetical to theosophy, since linguists sought a role as a thoroughly modern science fit for the modern university. But equally one can see in the linguist's sometimes obsessive hunt for pattern and order a quasi-mystical quest for restoration (in the case of reconstruction and etymology) and for hidden patterns and concealed categories. Saussure's *Cours* might be seen, from one point of view, as a sober methodological treatise on the objective description of languages. It has, after all, at its heart the key methodological postulate of the arbitrary nature of the sign. That postulate serves to restrain the relationship between form and meaning, and to rule out any form of magical semantics and unconstrained etymological speculation. Yet Saussure might also be viewed as affirming a mystical collectivism, in which the speakers of a language are joined as one in a virtual community created by the meanings they share. The linguist is the one with the key to that common social essence and alone is able to stand outside that collectivity and reflect back upon it.

It is thus perhaps less surprising than it might be otherwise to discover that Saussure's sole publication during the time of his first course on general linguistics was 'Brahmanic Theosophy', a review article on a book about 'the history of theosophical ideas in India' written by Paul Oltramare, his colleague at the University of Geneva (Saussure, 1907). The article begins by situating this historical tome in the

context of the 'fashionable' theosophy of the time, with Saussure mildly criticising Oltramare for excessive scrupulousness in trying to distance himself from the followers of Blavatsky.

Les études sur l'Inde intéressent un public de plus en plus étendu, et la théosophie a été mise presque à la mode, au milieu de nous, par les adeptes d'un certain occultisme occidental. Toutefois, si l'auteur de cette belle et savante Histoire est loin de vouloir faire une œuvre réservée à quelques lecteurs spéciaux, il aurait des objections graves, dont témoigne sa préface, à ce que nous prenions le mot de théosophie au sens qui a pu lui venir de cette secte ou de cette mode.

Les scrupules qui l'ont fait hésiter, même à se servir du mot, se conçoivent: ils sont peut être excessifs en ce sens que l'emprunt ne sera pas ici du côté des indianistes. Quelles que soient les aventures que la théosophie de Mme Blavatsky a pu faire courir à ce nom, il ne fait en somme, avec le titre où nous le lisons, que rentrer au bercail de l'indologie, d'où on l'avait d'abord détourné. Il est vrai que ce terme est repris par M. Paul Oltramare avec une intention précise, qui lui donne dans ce livre un rôle bien différent de celui qu'il pouvait avoir, pour venir, ça et là, sous la plume de quelque critique.

Au sens qu'il sera possible désormais de leur assigner, les idées théosophiques deviennent un cadre extrêmement important et précieux, qui manquait à la nomenclature régulière de l'Inde, pour classer certaines idées qu'on ne saurait faire rentrer sans autre ni dans les religions, ni dans la philosophie, au moins d'après la conception que nous nous formerions de cette dernière. . . (Saussure, 1907, p. 1).

Studies on India are of interest to a wider and wider audience, and 'theosophy' has almost been made fashionable among us by the adepts of a certain brand of Western occultism. Still, even if the author of this fine and scholarly History is far from wishing to write a work reserved for a handful of special readers, he would have strong objections, as his preface indicates, to our taking the word 'theosophy' in the sense which has come to it from this sect or this fashion.

While one can understand the scruples which made him hesitant even to use the word, they are perhaps excessive inasmuch as the borrowing here is not on the side of the Indianists. Whatever adventures the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky may have had under this name, the title of this book effectively restores the name to the fold of Indology, from which it was first abducted. It is true that this term is taken up by Mr Paul Oltramare with a precise intention which gives it a very different role in this book from the one it might acquire upon coming here and there under the pen of some critic.

In the meaning which it will henceforth be possible to assign them, theosophical ideas become an extremely important and precious framework which was missing from the regular nomenclature of India, for classifying certain ideas which otherwise could not be put under the heading either of 'religion' or of 'philosophy', at least in our usual conception of the latter... (our translation).

According to Parret (1993), Saussure wrote extensive manuscript material on Oltramare and theosophy. Earlier drafts of the beginning of Saussure (1907) can be found in Parret (1993, pp. 196, 216), with the latter stating that ‘La théosophie du jour, celle qu’ont mise à la mode les écrits de Mme Bl. (*sic*) s’est réclamée toujours, à tort ou à raison, de l’Inde’ (‘Today’s theosophy, the one which the writings of Mme Bl. have made fashionable, has always, rightly or wrongly, harked back to India’). What Saussure learned of Blavatsky may have cleared up for him at least one mystery of some years’ standing: the inspiration for the ‘Sanskritoid’ utterances of the medium Héléne Smith, which Saussure had observed and studied at first hand, as related in Flournoy (1900) (see also the references listed in Joseph, 1996a, p. 119). If at the turn of the century it had seemed incredible to scholars like Saussure and Flournoy that an uneducated middle-class woman could have had exposure to Sanskrit, it can only be that in Geneva, as in many other places, the publications of the Theosophical Society were a middle-class phenomenon well before coming to such general attention that even university folk could not ignore them. Héléne Smith’s whole act as described by Flournoy is a pure pastiche of the entranced Héléna Blavatsky reading ancient Sanskrit texts off her astral tablets.

3. France

When the Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 it was born in a context in which ‘the French-speaking public were far more aware of esoteric matters than the English-speaking public’ (Godwyn, 1989: 3). There was widespread interest in the ideas of occultism and Western esotericism. In particular, there were four strong currents of belief and practice with which theosophy became ‘intertwined’, but which it ultimately rejected (Godwyn, 1989: 4): Freemasonry, Magnetism (including Mesmerism, Hypnotism), Spiritualism (a movement promoted in France by Allan Kardec) and the Hermeneutic Tradition (astrology, alchemy, Kabbala, magic). As elsewhere, the institutional development of theosophy in France was marked by complex shifts of allegiance within the movement. One key link to theosophy is through Émile-Louis Burnouf (1821–1907), by far the most sanguine of the 19th-century theosophical linguists. Burnouf was a Sanskritist and the younger brother of Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) who had been the leading Sanskrit scholar of the first half of the century.⁵ Émile introduced the Theosophical Society to the French intellectual world in an 1888 article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, the leading journal of the day. His article began with an exposition of the history of Buddhist religious thought, in the adulatory vein of the theosophist, and concluded with a presentation of them as the new reincarnators of the true Buddhist spirit, which he equated with the universal core of all religions. From then on Burnouf’s translations and commentaries on Vedic texts figured prominently on the French theosophical booklists. Indeed his translations of the Rig-Veda was the most expensive book on the list, and must reading for prospective initiates. The benefits were mutual,

⁵ Their father Jean-Louis Burnouf (1775–1844) had also been a Sanskrit scholar.

since having the name Burnouf on their lists lent the theosophists tremendous credibility, even if, as is likely, many people confused Émile with the more famous Eugène.

Émile Burnouf's brand of theosophy made no pretence of respecting the society's goal of a universal brotherhood without the distinction of race. From the beginning a tension had lurked within the theosophical programme: while professing the equality of all religions, theosophists simultaneously located the essence of religion with one particular people, the Aryans. Blavatsky's masters in the Himalayas formed an 'Aryan brotherhood', and we saw examples above of statements from her pen which jar stunningly with her professed antiracism. Burnouf, adapting theosophical thought for an audience raised on Renan and Gobineau, is less ambiguous in his sentiments of Aryan superiority. He was particularly concerned to 'prove' a deep connection between Christianity and Buddhism, for this would mean that Christianity is essentially an Aryan religion that took on some superficial Jewish elements, not the other way around. The evidence he provides is, not surprisingly, largely linguistic, consisting mainly of historical connections among words in the Vedic and Christian texts.

4. Germany and Austria

The impact of theosophy in Germany has been profound, and the most conspicuous of the various incarnations of theosophy today is the Anthroposophical movement, founded by Rudolf Steiner. Goodrick-Clarke (1992), in his account of the development of theosophy in Germany and Austria, argues that the movement should be seen as part of a wider neo-romantic movement known as *Lebensreform*, which involved a middle-class rejection of the problems of modern life. This liberal movement of alternative life-styles ('including herbal and natural medicine, vegetarianism, nudism and self-sufficient rural communities') overlapped in many of its concerns with the *völkisch* or radical nationalists (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 23). The first German theosophical society was established with Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), a civil servant in the German colonial office, as president. He set up the scholarly-occultist monthly *Die Sphinx* in 1886. A more popular form of occultism was promoted by Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), who had become a theosophist after reading *Isis Unveiled*. He published translations of Indian sacred texts in his periodical *Lotusblüthen* between 1892 and 1900. Franz Hartmann's publishers produced a series termed *Bibliothek esoterischer Schriften* (1898–1900), and Hugo Göring edited translations from leading theosophists such as Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater in a series entitled *Theosophische Schriften* (1894–1896). Rudolf Steiner broke with the Besant faction since his Christian mysticism proved irreconcilable with her Hinduism, and set up his own Anthroposophical Society in 1912 (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 26–31).

In Austria, Ariosophy, formed from a merger of theosophy and Aryan *völkisch* ideology, drew largely on German theosophical ideas. The attraction of theosophy for radical *völkisch* ideologues 'consisted in its eclecticism with respect to exotic

religion, mythology and esoteric lore, which provided a universal, non-Christian perspective upon the cosmos and the origins of mankind, against which the sources of Germanic belief, custom and identity [...] could be located'. Further there was the 'implicit élitism of the hidden mahatmas with superhuman wisdom' which was in tune with the longing for a hierarchical social order based on the racial mystique of *Volk* (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 31). The Viennese Ariosophists were anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic occultists bent on restoring to view the glories of the Aryan-Germanic past. In 1905 a List society was founded in Vienna by Friedrich Wanneck, Friedrich Oskar Wanneck and Lanz von Leibenfels. Among the founder members was Hermann Pfister-Schwaighusen, a linguist and folklorist from the Technische Universität, Darmstadt (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 43).

Guido von List evoked a lost social order built around Wotanism, and a esoteric doctrine kept for the elite, the *Armanenschaft*. This philosophy borrowed both from Freemasonry and Rosiocrucianism (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 57), and involved the reconstruction through archaeology, folklore and etymology of a pre-Roman high had been found in Germany. Theosophical ideas reached List through the writings of Max Ferdinand Sebalt von Werth (1859–1916) whose later writings described the *Sexualreligion* of the Aryans which was designed to maintain racial purity (1992: 51), and through Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (translated as *Die Geheimlehre*), identifying the Ario-Germans with the fifth root-race in Blavatsky's classification. Works such as *Die Religion der Ario-Germanen* (1910a) and *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen* (1910b) drew heavily on Blavatsky. One of List's primary interests was in language, and in 1903 he submitted a paper to the Academy of Sciences in Vienna on the Aryan proto-language. The paper was rejected, but set out his basic ideas for 'a monumental pseudo-science concerned with Germanic linguistics and symbology' (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 41). This involved the interpretation of runes, alphabetical writings systems and other ancient symbols.

The National Socialist movement as it developed in Germany drew on almost all contemporary social ideologies, including Ariosophy. However Hitler himself, once he had built up a mass movement, had little time for the dreamers of the *Thule Gesellschaft* and the like. The most direct link between Nazism and Ariosophy is Heinrich Himmler, as the Nazi most in tune with Aryan occultism.⁶ One of Himmler's guides in the occult was Karl Maria Wiligut, who joined the SS in 1933 (under the name Karl Maria Weisthor) as head of the Department for Pre- and Early History at the Race and Settlement Main Office (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt*). Wiligut played a crucial role in the development of SS insignia and ritual, and in the setting up of Wewelsburg castle as a cult headquarters for the SS (Goodrick-Clarke, 1992: 177–191). Himmler's dean of studies, the academic head of the *Ahnenerbe* ('Office of Ancestral Inheritance') was Professor Walther Wüst, of Munich University, editor of the prominent linguistics journal *Wörter und Sachen*. Among Wüst's responsibilities was the 'Seminar für Arische Kultur- und Sprachwissenschaft' at Munich University. In a lecture to a branch of the *Führerkorps* of

⁶Himmler's officials were, however, often intolerant of popular forms of occultism, astrology and the like.

the SS, Wüst made the link between Aryan philosophy, the rejection of the Jewish/Christian vale of tears and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. His argument was reported as follows:

In this context an important set of historical developments were elaborated that stretch out in firm continuity down the millennia between the most ancient Aryan wisdom and the Führer's book 'Mein Kampf'. The fundamental formative force of all this is now as then the common racial make-up, which for example expresses itself in the same way in the life story of the Aryan sun-hero Buddha and that of the Fuhrer.⁷

Wüst's evocation of a world view through etymology, his use of Sanskrit to evoke an organic world of integration and natural growth (in contrast to Jewish abstractness); his view of the Indo-European God as 'father', the father of the racial group, the *Sippe* or clan; his rejection of the idea that Buddhism was nihilistic (Buddha, he says, chose the middle way), all this puts him within Ariosophy, and links Ariosophy, Nazism and linguistics in an unambiguous way. Wüst recorded himself on official forms as a 'believer in God, formerly Protestant',⁸ thereby reflecting his commitment to the Nazi New Age.

Wüst thus represents a concrete link between academic linguistics, Ariosophy and Nazism. These links can also be found—in a different form—in the career of Heinz Kloss. Kloss is known for his pioneering socio-cultural studies of the Germanic language family, for the development of the terminology of *Ausbau* and *Abstand* in language planning and for his advocacy of language rights, particularly mother-tongue rights. In the pre-war period, Kloss was a follower of the 'bio-vitalism' and the Orientalist theories of Ernst Fuhrmann (Kloss, 1929; Fuhrmann, 1921, 1943). In post-war Germany, Kloss published a number of works on Steiner's social and educational policies (Kloss, 1955). Kloss was also a member of the Nazi party and an academic apologist for Hitler's cultural policies (Hutton, in press).

5. B. L. Whorf

The one American linguist until very recently to go public with his involvement with the Theosophical Society was Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941). Whorf, who took his family to Theosophical Society summer camps (see Lee, 1996: 21–22), may have inherited this interest from his father, Harry Church Whorf. As we saw in an extract from *The Secret Doctrine* above, Blavatsky believed that a 'fourth race' of men inhabited the lost continent of Atlantis before becoming the original colonizers of the New World. In the Whorf archives at Yale University Library (B. L. Whorf

⁷ See Berlin Document Center Ahnenerbe archive 8260001745/B-319 V. The talk was held on March 10 1937.

⁸ BDC PK 1210010247.

Papers, Series I, correspondence, microfilm reel 1, frames 343–344) is a letter from the father to the son dated 2 December 1933, urging him to carry on with his research into Mayan hieroglyphs, in the hope that it might prove the existence of Atlantis:

I am sending you today, Parcel Post, Insured, your nine lantern slides, and hope they will be satisfactory. . .

In working on the slides I have been struck very forcibly by an *apparent* similarity between these Mayan glyphs, with their circular or elliptical outer outlines, and the so-called painted pebbles of the remote Azilian culture. According to Wells in the “Outline of History”, the Azilians (named for the cave of Mas d’Azil in the Iberian Peninsula, in which such relics were first found) occupied southwestern Europe at about the beginning of the Neolithic age. . .

I have been thinking that if you, with your familiarity with Maya phonetic characters, could trace a real resemblance in the Azilian pebbles, it would prove the *possibility* of an Atlantis, or at least of a migration across the Atlantic over to America. . .

I daresay this is nothing but a wild dream, but I wish you would investigate it a little. . .

A number of Whorf’s manuscripts in the Yale archives that have puzzled linguists researching him, such as his ‘Why I Have Discarded Evolution’, are in fact pure Blavatsky, not lifted but taking their point of departure, outlook, cues, and sometimes even style from *The Secret Doctrine*. The following extract is from an undated manuscript by Whorf entitled ‘Ancient America and the Evolution of the Coming Race’ (B. L. Whorf Papers, Series II, unpublished writings, microfilm reel 3, frames 557–577, Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives):

At this point some of you may be wondering where Atlantis comes into the story. The Indians and the Asiatic Mongoloids whom they somewhat resemble are differentiated and somewhat mixed survivors of the *fourth* great race. The evolution of races is a very slow affair, and the high tide of the fourth kind of man was over 40,000 years ago and occupied thousands of years at that period, and is said to have taken place chiefly on Atlantis, a continent or rather very large island in the Atlantic Ocean, that has since been submerged. . .

This is the ancient teaching of the Occult Science, as represented to-day by Theosophy. It has not yet been confirmed by modern science. However, nothing is known to science that directly contravenes it, and the present distribution of the Proto-Mongoloids, the *Fourth Men*, is roughly in accord with this scheme. . .

It has been stated in Theosophical literature that some time after the sinking of Atlantis and long before our earliest archaeological records there was a colony of Atlanteans in Peru and they had a fairly high civilization. However I

don't think it is specifically stated that they came directly across the Atlantic from Atlantis. From our modern standpoint this might seem the obvious thing, but there are some reasons for thinking that Atlantis was more closely related to the Old World, that it had an Old-World type of culture, that it turned its face to the East, the early home of the *Third Men* or Proto-Australoids. . . (frames 568–570)

Joseph (1996b) has argued that the 'Sapir–Whorf hypothesis' arose from the confluence of two streams of thought about the influence of language on thought and culture. The 'magic key' view (with which Whorf is generally associated) takes language to exert a positive, formative influence on thought, so that the analysis of a language functions as a magic key to understanding the culture of the people who speak it. By the second view, however, language exerts a negative, deforming influence on thought: here thought is identified with universal logic, and language is taken to be strewn with 'metaphysical garbage', which it is the job of the analyst of language to locate and remove. The principal sources of Sapir's and Whorf's magic key and metaphysical garbage views are detailed in Joseph (1996b), see also Joseph, (1997); but to these it could be added that Whorf would have encountered views of both types in his theosophical pursuits. Looking just at the *summa*, Blavatsky (1888), one finds powerful statements in the magic key vein—

As beautifully expressed by P. Christian, the learned author of 'The History of Magic' and of 'L'Homme Rouge des Tuileries,' the word spoken by, as well as the name of, every individual largely determine his future fate. Why? Because—

—'When our Soul (mind) creates or evokes a thought, the representative sign of that thought is self-engraved upon the astral fluid, which is the receptacle and, so to say, the mirror of all the manifestations of being.

'The sign expresses the thing: the thing is the (hidden or occult) virtue of the sign.

'To pronounce a word is to evoke a thought, and make it present: the magnetic potency of the human speech is the commencement of every manifestation in the Occult World. To utter a Name is not only to define a Being (an Entity), but to place it under and condemn it through the emission of the Word (Verbum), to the influence of one or more Occult potencies. Things are, for every one of us, that which it (the Word) makes them while naming them. . . ' (Blavatsky, 1888, vol. 1, p. 93).

. . . *the spoken word has a potency unknown to, unsuspected and disbelieved in, by the modern 'sages' (ibid., vol. 1, p. 307, italics in the original).*

—as well as expressions of a negative sort about language which recall Whorf's famous statements about the inability of 'Standard Average European' to express the worldview contained in American Indian languages like Hopi. The first extract below is a note to this sentence of the main text: 'Those Monads [lunar gods or spirits]. . . are the first to reach the human stage during the three and a half Rounds, and to become men.'

We are forced to use here the misleading word ‘Men,’ and this is a clear proof of how little any European language is adapted to express these subtle distinctions.

It stands to reason that these ‘Men’ did not resemble the men of to-day, either in form or nature. Why then, it may be asked, call them ‘Men’ at all? Because there is no other term in any Western language which approximately conveys the idea intended. . . .

The same difficulty of language is met with in describing the ‘stages’ through which the Monad passes. Metaphysically speaking, it is of course an absurdity to talk of the ‘development’ of a Monad, or to say that *it* becomes ‘Man.’ But any attempt to preserve metaphysical accuracy of language in the use of such a tongue as the English would necessitate at least three extra volumes of this work, and would entail an amount of verbal repetition which would be wearisome in the extreme. . . (ibid., vol. 1, p. 174n.).

The attempt to render in a European tongue the grand panorama of the ever periodically recurring Law. . . is daring, for no human language, save the Sanskrit—which is that *of the Gods*—can do so with any degree of accuracy (ibid., vol. 1, p. 269, italics in the original).

For Whorf, as for the theosophists, there was no necessary conflict between modern science and mysticism. Modern physics had shown that the essentialism of European languages was incompatible with the nature of reality (1956: 269 [1942]):

As physics explores into the intra-atomic phenomena, the discrete physical forms and forces are more and more dissolved into relations of pure patternment. The PLACE of an apparent entity, an electron for example, becomes indefinite, interrupted; the entity appears and disappears from one structural position to another structural position, like a phoneme or any other patterned linguistic entity, and may be said to be NOWHERE in between the positions. Its locus, first thought of and analyzed as a continuous variable, becomes on closer scrutiny a mere alternation; situations “actualize” it, structure beyond the probe of the measuring rod governs it, three dimensional shape there is none, instead—“Arupa.” [formless, without *rupa* (‘form, shape’)].

Western scientific thought needed to free itself from the shackles of linguistic categories, but was not yet ready (Whorf *ibid*):

Science cannot yet understand the transcendental logic of such a state of affairs, for it has not yet freed itself from the illusory necessities of common logic which are only at bottom necessities of grammatical pattern in Western Aryan grammar, necessities for substances which are only necessities for substantives in certain sentence positions, necessities for forces, attractions, etc. which are only necessities for verbs in certain other positions, and so on. Science, if it survives the impending darkness, will next take up the consideration of linguistic

principles and divert itself of those illusory linguistic necessities, too long held to be the substance of Reason itself.

In the Introduction to his collection of Whorf's papers, John B. Carroll plays down the significance of Whorf's mysticism, including his intense interest in Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, taken by the theosophists as one of their many precursors (along, by the way, with another important figure in linguistic history, Antoine Court de Gébelin). Yet the Whorf archives consist mainly of hundreds of pages of speculative inquiry into the secret meaning of Hebrew letters that comes straight from Fabre d'Olivet, along with early work on Mayan that is similarly spirited. Through his Mayan work Whorf developed an interest in contemporary anthropology and linguistics that brought him into contact with Sapir and his students. But Whorf never let go of his theosophical connections and interests. He presented a paper to the Hartford Theosophical Society on 'Language and Magic' in 1940; and one of his best-know articles, 'Language, Thought, and Reality', was written for *The Theosophist*, where it was published posthumously over two issues in 1942. Moreover, in his last months Whorf spent a great deal of time helping launch a new magazine called *Main Currents in Modern Thought* with Fritz Kunz, a leading light in theosophy whose name pops up regularly in theosophical books from Cleather (1922) onward.

6. Logophobia and anti-logocentricism

Whorf sits uncomfortably on the line between academic linguistics and the world of intellectual fantasy. He brings together not only theosophy and linguistics, but the concerns of the followers of Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950) and General Semantics (Korzybski, 1948). Linguistics, Theosophy and General Semantics are all in their different ways the products of the West's encounter with Eastern modes of thought. Modern linguistics begins with the recognition of the importance of Sanskrit for the understanding of the linguistic—and therefore the general—history of Europe. Theosophy is the search for the lost unity of mankind and its ancient wisdom. Like the linguist, the theosophist must look to the exotic and the unfamiliar to find the materials required to make the self whole again. Whorf uses Hopi as a lens through which English can be defamiliarized, and its own exotic view of reality exposed. This implies that we need the Other in order to understand ourselves. Whorf's cautionary tales of fire accidents are allegories of the dangers of reification; he suggests that the Hopi language reflects more faithfully the flux of consciousness and the changing nature of reality than the languages of Europe. In this the Hopi speaker is at one with modern science which has uncovered the dynamic reality behind the static appearance of the world of objects. General Semantics, like its successor Deconstruction, draws on a critique of Western modes of thought and points an accusing finger at its rigid dualities. Like Whorf it suggests that language is potentially dangerous if we allow it to confuse us, if we mix up the map with the territory, a particular representation system with reality.

The notion that the cultures of the 'Orient' have retained a vitality that the West has lost was applied to language by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa in *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry* ([1920]; 1936). Hence Chinese is fluid, open-ended, vivid; it possesses qualities that Western languages have lost. Fenollosa/Pound rejected the 'tyranny of mediaeval logic', the inability of Western logic to represent change or growth, noting that '[t]his is probably why the conception of evolution came so late in Europe' ([1920] 1936: 25, 27). Primitives, poets and scientists are in agreement against the logicians ([1920] 1936: 29). The argument is made that Chinese written symbols are less arbitrary, and therefore closer to reality, than Western alphabetic writing systems: 'The thought-picture is not only called up by these signs as well as by words, but far more vividly and concretely. Legs belong to all three characters [for 'man', 'sees', 'horse']: they are *alive*' (italics in original, [1920] 1936: 8–9). Like Whorf, Fenollosa/Pound view the 'exotic' language as better representing the nature of time than the European one ([1920] 1936: 8):

One superiority of verbal poetry as an art rests on its getting back to the fundamental reality of *time*. Chinese poetry has the unique advantage of combining both elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate [italics in original].

Through Chinese we can return to our poetic roots, we can reanimate our language and escape the stifling logic which 'deals with abstractions drawn out of things by a shifting process' ([1920] 1936: 12). Yeats, in the preface to his joint translation of the *Upanishads*, speaks of having managed to escape the rigid and artificial language of previous renderings, 'that polyglot, hyphenated, latinized, muddled, muddle of distortion that froze belief' (Shree Purohit Swami/Yeats 1937: 8). Rabindranath Tagore had likewise been critical of a Western translation of the *Upanishads*, arguing that it had failed to come to terms with the language of the original. In the *Upanishads* a spiritual life is expressed which is not dogmatic: 'in it opposing forces are reconciled—ideas of non-dualism and dualism, the infinite and the finite, do not exclude each other' (Tagore, 1924: x). Grammar is a form of confinement of language which must be transcended, but it is a necessary confinement (Tagore 1924: xiv):

If in our language the sentences were merely for expressing grammatical rules, then the using of such a language would be a slavery to fruitless pedantry. But, because language has for its ultimate object the expression of ideas, our mind gains its freedom through it, and the bondage of grammar itself is a help towards this freedom.

Fenollosa/Pound believed that we can escape logical categories both through understanding the way Chinese represents reality, and through accepting what modern science teaches us. For there is no negation in nature, but there are negative

sentences in language: 'But here again science comes to our aid against the logician: all apparently negative or disruptive movements bring into play other positive forces. It requires great effort to annihilate' ([1920] 1936: 14). This suggests that if we reconstruct the history of negative particles, we will find that they originate from transitive verbs: 'It is too late to demonstrate such derivations in the Aryan languages, the clue has been lost, but in Chinese we can still watch positive verbal conceptions passing over into so-called negatives' ([1920] 1936: 14–15). Fenellosa/Pound set up an opposition between the natural and the artificial, recalling the Romantic organicism of Friedrich Schlegel:

One of the most interesting facts about the Chinese language is that in it we can see, not only the forms of sentences, but literally the parts of speech growing up, budding forth one from another. Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated (Fenellosa/Pound [1920] 1936: 17).

Grammar is an imposition of the natural fluidity of language: 'It is only lately that foreigners, European and Japanese, have begun to torture this vital speech by forcing it to fit the bed of their definitions.' Chinese remains in touch with its etymological roots, these are visible and living: 'Languages today are thin and cold because we think less and less into them' ([1920] 1936: 24). Only the poet in the West is still in touch with the vital roots of life: 'With us, the poet is the only one for whom the accumulated treasures of the race-words are real and active' ([1920] 1936: 25).

One key element in Fenellosa/Pound's view of language is the rejection of the verb 'to be' ([1920] 1936: 28). In translating Chinese poetry we should 'avoid "is" and bring in a wealth of neglected English verbs.' The 'dead white plaster of the copula' can be resolved by the poet 'into a thousand tints of verb' ([1920] 1936: 32). The verb 'to be' was one of the chief targets of the movement of General Semantics. Korzybski inveighed against the Aristotelian habits of thought in Western society, seeing in the misuse of the copula one of its most harmful manifestations. Korzybski's followers also took a similar line to Fenellosa/Pound in their comparisons of Western and non-Western languages. For Chase (1955: 106) Chinese is a 'multi-valued' language, whereas English and Western languages operate with two-valued oppositions between 'good' and 'bad', 'capitalism' and 'socialism', etc.' For Chase, 'speakers of Chinese set up no such grim dichotomies; they see most situations in shades of grey, and have no difficulty in grasping a variety of middle roads'. Likewise, the Wintu Indians of North America are 'even more shy of the law of identity (A is A) than the Chinese', and 'when a Wintu speaks of an event not within his own experience, he never affirms it, but only suggests, "perhaps it is so"'. For Chase, the message of linguistics is that 'Chinese, Hopi, have a structure which makes multi-valued elements easier to grasp' (1955: 188). A similar critique of Western categories of thought can be found in the writings of Edward de Bono, famous for the development of 'lateral thinking'. De Bono writes that '*Traditional* Western thinking—the Socratic method, the Gang of Three [Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle] operates with 'truth' [italics in original]. This implies certainty and absolutes. It was Plato's fascist

contribution to insist on there being three absolutes which Socrates was then asked to find—in Plato’s dialogues’ (de Bono, 1994: 152). Even Max Müller, who had been critical of Indian thought for its elaboration of endless abstractions (e.g. the concept of *Nirvāna*), came to believe that the West was in many ways worse off (1880: 381):

There is as much mythology in our use of the word Nothing as in the most absurd portions of the mythological phraseology of India, Greece or Rome, and if we ascribe the former to a disease of language, the causes of which we are able to explain, we shall have to admit that, in the latter, language has reached to an almost delirious state, and ceased to be what it was meant to be, the expression of the impressions received through the senses, or of the conceptions of a rational mind.

The critique of Oriental thought ends up being turned back on the categories and languages of the West (Hutton, 1995). In General Semantics there is a tendency to call ‘primitive’ the confusion between representation and reality, and to attribute this to residues of pre-rational thinking in the West (cf. Bloomfield’s views on ‘animist thinking’), to ‘word magic’ (Hayakawa, 1974: 169). The literary critic William Empson, following Lévy-Bruhl, admits to assuming that ‘the use of false identity is in some sense “primitive”’, though he does qualify this by noting that ‘[a]nthropologists have become rather more doubtful than they were about their inherent mental superiority to tribesmen, and even about where the primitive is to be found’ ([1951] 1985: 375). So we learn that it is the Hopi and the Wintu who live closer to reality, who do not reify or live within rigid abstract categories, who in this sense are not primitive, but closer to the vision of the world articulated by modern science.

The idea that reality is flux and that we should resist as far as possible the temptation to categorize and reduce can indeed be seen as coming both from advances in Western science and from the reception of eastern philosophy. Theosophy was a key element in the reception of Buddhism, and the reception of Zen Buddhism in the West had a powerful influence on the rejection of reified modes of thought. There is a direct line from Zen Buddhism through Heidegger to deconstruction, a movement which like General Semantics takes as a point of departure the unraveling of the foundational dichotomies of Western thought. Its anti-logocentricism places it firmly within the theosophical-Orientalism tradition in which language is ‘the slayer of the real’. Derrida’s critique of Heidegger’s intervention in National Socialism sees Heidegger as falling into the temptation to reify or privilege the category of *Geist*, i.e. it identifies his failure not as a political failure *per se* but as a failure to resist the siren-call of linguistic categories (Derrida, 1989; Dallmayr, 1993: 30–40).

7. Conclusion

In sketching this story about the interest and involvement in theosophy of some eminent linguists of the late 19th and early 20th century and how it connects to developments in later theories of language, we hope to have achieved a number of

things. We hope to have contributed to a view of the history of linguistics in which the institutional ‘mainstream’ does not serve as the sole focal point, with other views of language—including those with no scholarly credentials—interpreted strictly in its terms, if not ignored entirely. In examining how enquiry into language has become so often and so closely intertwined with theories of racial difference, we have not meant to cast scorn on anyone for holding ‘racist’ views, but rather to raise questions about what implications our own contemporary views of language logically entail about cognitive and genetic difference—implications we usually prefer to keep hidden behind a facade of pseudo-liberal pieties which however will not keep future generations from finding us out.

Most importantly, by emphasizing the difficulty of separating academic and mystical views on language either historically or intellectually, we have meant not to disparage any academic views on language as unscientific, but rather to challenge the notion that any science of language has ever been (or perhaps ever could be) constructed apart from theoretical leaps which, because they cannot be based upon observation, must be leaps of faith. To understand contemporary debates within linguistics, whether about mental modules or historical reconstruction (e.g. the ‘Nostratic macrofamily’), we need to think not only about the limits of our ability to reconstruct, and matters of methodology and proof, but also about the different political and ideological drives behind the whole undertaking. We are accustomed to think of modern science and occultism as diametrically opposed; the distinction between philology and fantasy is a particular instance of that opposition. But for many scholars of language the application of linguistic method has been a means of opening up new speculative vistas, about the human mind, the human past and human origins. In this sense there is no need (nor we do not have the means) to draw a line around a beleaguered science of language. Recognizing this involves looking for and accepting the links between linguistics and political and social movements of all kinds, from the most progressive to the most destructive.

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