

## THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE.

## THE IMITATIVE THEORY AND MR. MAX MÜLLER'S THEORY OF PHONETIC TYPES.

WITHOUT intending to underrate the merits of Professor Max Müller's recent and now well-known volume of "Lectures on Language," we yet venture to affirm that the most noteworthy thing about it is its form. The interest with which it will be read for its own sake, great as that is, is inferior to that which it may claim as commemorating an important stage in the history of the youngest of the sciences. That in the year 1860 a course of lectures was delivered within the walls of an institution formally devoted to science, on a study which before the present century would have been regarded merely as a branch of literature, will be a more significant fact for the future historian of science than that those lectures were heard and read with an admiration which they well deserved by the elegance and lucidity of style which is so seldom, as in this case, the vehicle of profound learning. Indeed we should be inclined to accuse Professor Müller of an exaggerated estimate of the importance of the aspect of this fact, of falling too much in one portion of his work into the tone of an advocate endeavouring to establish a good, but disputed title,—a title the soundness of which was admitted by the fact of being mentioned within the institution where the lectures were delivered. Perhaps in this respect our science suffers from the only very convenient name which is applied to it in England. *Philology* has, to some ears, a slightly unscientific association—a faint odour of that scholarship which is in a certain sense opposed to the impartial analysis alike of the rich and philosophic Greek or Sanscrit and the barbarous African languages, the very names of which would be unknown to our readers. Nevertheless, we think the Professor overrated our

English aversion to abstract speculation when he spent any time or trouble whatever on the vindication of his first postulate—that Linguistic, as the study is called on the Continent, or *Logology*, if the hideous word could be tolerated for the sake of the correct principles on which it is formed—is a true science.

In remarking on the graceful style of these Lectures as their principal characteristic, we have implied the conviction that they rather bring to a focus the light which has already been thrown on the subject, than add any original ray from the mind of the author. Perhaps, indeed, in a course of popular lectures this was not to be looked for; but we can hardly say that it was not attempted. Our readers will perceive that we are at issue with the Professor on the subject which we have named in connexion with his book; and it is, in fact, the illustration and proof of that hypothesis of the Origin of Language condemned by him, which forms the object of the following paper. Were we noticing a work of less celebrity, we should guard anxiously against the appearance of expressing any estimate of the book which we notice only in connexion with the subject inadequately treated in it. We should carefully explain that we were concentrating our attention on that small part of an admirable work which was written with the left hand. But the number of favourable reviews of the volume which have appeared, and the eagerness with which two editions have been read, render any carefulness of this kind superfluous; and we proceed to explain and illustrate that theory of the Origin of Language on which we join issue with our author.

The first natural prejudice which most thoughtful persons would bring with

them to any discussion on the Origin of Language, is that it must be inevitably fruitless. Language is much more than the garment of thought. We cannot conceive of the separation of the two, as we can of a man and his clothes. The word by which the philosophic Greek signifies reason or speech—a word sanctified to us by its connexion with the deepest mystery of our faith—appears not to belong to either more exclusively. “When we can separate light and illumination, life and motion, the concave and convex of a curve,” says the writer from whom we have taken the above illustration, “then will it be possible for thought to tread speech underfoot, and do without it.” To speculate, therefore, on the origin of speech may appear as fantastic an effort of abstraction, as an endeavour to reason out on *à priori* grounds the condition of the inhabitants of a distant planet. Yet a little reflection is sufficient to show that hypotheses on the Origin of Language rest on precisely the same basis as any other theory in physical sciences—on observations upon accomplished facts, and reasoning from effects to causes. Geology affords an exact parallel; it deals with a series of events which began from the first moment of creation. The state of the world then was scarcely more removed from any conceptions of ours, than that of the human race at the Origin of Language; but, as we do not begin by abstracting all conditions of the present, and reasoning deductively from the residuum, but by observing those effects which are working now, and tracing that chain of cause and effect of which they form one link as far backwards as we can, there is nothing fanciful in geology. To say that this is the right method with the science of language, however, is to a certain extent begging the question, as it is exactly on his neglect of it that our quarrel with the Professor is grounded. We have seen, however, that no one can contend more strenuously than he for the admission of Philology among the physical sciences; and we would urge upon the attention of those who ap-

proach the subject for the first time, that any hypothesis on the subject must rest less upon any positive evidence than upon that verisimilitude which is given by analogy with accepted truth.

A large part of the journey which lies before those who attempt to trace the stream of language to its fountain-head must be made in common, however different the goal they have placed before themselves. We have to resolve speech into its elements before we can enter on any hypothesis respecting the elements. The chief part of Professor Müller's work is occupied with this analysis—in tracing the successive steps by which such a word as *donation*, for example, is first derived from the Latin *donum*, a gift, and ultimately from a root or simple syllable *da*, signifying give. In this way it has been found possible to reduce the endless variety of language comprised in the speech of the Aryan or Indo-European group of nations—in other words, of the dominant race of the world—into four or five hundred elementary syllables. Now, all we have to account for is the existence of these roots. How we get from *donation* to *da* is clear enough; but how do we get from *da* to the act it signifies? Is the word a mere accidental label stuck on to the thing? Or is there any inherent connexion between sounds and things? That is the first question; on which, however, we need not pause, as our issue with the Professor is not joined upon it. That there is nothing accidental in language is indeed the first assumption on which its admission among the physical sciences rests. Our issue with the Professor is exclusively upon the nature of the connexion between sounds and things.

We give his account of the matter in his own words, necessarily much compressed. He notices three theories, as he makes them—the last being his own. We, however, invert the order, and begin from that hypothesis which is peculiar to our author.

1. “The roots which remain as the constituent elements of language are phonetic types, produced by a power

"inherent in human nature. There is a law which runs through nearly the whole of nature, that everything which is struck, rings. It was the same with man, the most highly organised of nature's works. Man, in his most primitive and perfect state, was not only endowed, like the brute, with the power of expressing his sensations by interjections, and his perceptions by onomatopœia. He possessed likewise the faculty of giving more articulate expression to the rational conceptions of his own mind."

It may be thought that the vagueness of the foregoing paragraph is due to our omissions. We can only assert that we have included every expression which has helped us to the author's meaning; but it is so little definite to our minds, that it is possible the needful compression may have excluded some significant touch. However, our purpose being rather to prove what he denies than to deny what he asserts, we can afford to leave this point undecided, and pass on to those two hypotheses which the above extract notices in speaking of man's power of expressing his sensations by interjections, and his perceptions by onomatopœia, and which we should regard as the two sides of one hypothesis, according as it regards two classes of objects.

2. "His perceptions by onomatopœia."

—"It is supposed," he says, "that man, being yet mute, heard the voices of birds and dogs and cows, the thunder of the clouds, the roaring of the sea, the rustling of the forest, the murmurs of the brook, and the whisper of the breeze. He tried to imitate those sounds, and, finding his mimicking cries useful, he followed up the idea, and elaborated language."

This is his account of the theory which is generally known by the awkward and lumbering name of onomatopœia; which he entitles the "bow-wow theory," and which we should best exemplify to the reader by supposing that all language was formed on the type of the word *cuckoo*.

3. "His sensations by interjections."

—"Why should man be supposed," say the supporters of this theory, "to have taken a lesson from birds and beasts? Does he not utter cries himself, according as he is affected by fear, pain, or joy? These cries were represented as the natural beginnings of human speech"—everything was supposed to be elaborated after their model."

This theory is not so easy to exemplify as the former; but the Spanish *arriero*, a mule-driver, formed from the cry *arri*, used in urging on his mule, would give an instance of the formation of language on the interjectional or "pooh-pooh" theory.

Now, these two theories appear to us no more than the representation of the same formative power working on a different material. A man cries *arri*, and we call him an *arriero*; a bird cries *cuckoo*, and we call it a cuckoo. Where is the difference in the two cases? Those sounds which are to the man what *bow-wow* is to the dog, *are* interjections; and those who trace language to the imitation of natural sounds are not divided into two classes, because one division of sound expresses human emotion. We shall, therefore, drop all notice of this division, and speak of that view of the origin of language which our author rejects, as the imitative theory.

Now the first obvious thing to be said for it is, that this is the course which would be adopted at the present day by any one who had to invent some means of communication. Put our Professor among a people of whose language he is ignorant, and his attempts at intercourse would be made without the very faintest reference to the phonetic types, and would provide us with an excellent illustration of the bow-wow theory. This he admits, in quoting the story of the Englishman in China, who condenses the question to his servant—"Is this duck on my plate?"—into the syllables, "quack-quack?" while the Chinaman makes himself perfectly intelligible by the answer "Bow-wow." He would probably reply that two men who have to invent speech, having their thoughts disciplined by speech, are not in the



position of the originators of language. We should agree with him that it is not possible for us to put ourselves exactly into their position; all we would establish is that, just so far as we approach it, the principle brought into play is that for which we are contending.

The word *onomatopœia* — which means simply name-making—is the relic of that theory which regards speech, not as potentially contained *within* the constitution of man, but miraculously added to it. Those who hold this theory could not but observe in such words as hiss, bang, whirr, coo, a harmony between the sound and sense; which, being regarded as an exceptional element in language, was enough to constitute a division by itself, and was supposed to be *made*, in contradistinction to the body of true language, which was ascribed to some more mysterious principle. Quintilian seems to have regarded this harmony as an especial privilege of the Greek language; of which it certainly appears to us a strong characteristic. He quotes the expressions from Homer, tolerably represented in sound, as well as in sense, by the words, “the bow *twanged*” — “the eye” (of the Cyclops, when the glowing stake was plunged into it) “*hissed*” — as exemplifying a power of which he regretted the absence in his own language. Those who are acquainted with the Cratylus of Plato will remember how little this power of the Greek language was appreciated by the man who has made it the vehicle of most imperishable thought. In that first discussion on the origin of language which has been preserved for us, the result is an unqualified rejection, at least in words, of the principle for which we are contending. We wish we had space for an analysis of the dialogue, as we conceive that the phonetic types of Professor Müller exactly fit into the groove of the Socratic origin of language. But what we would now remark is, that Socrates is so little alive to the true force of *onomatopœia* that he instances an undoubtedly imitative word as an example of the error of the

theory which makes imitation the basis of language. “Can we admit,” he asks, “that those who imitate the baaing of “the sheep name the animal?”—and the emphatic denial of Hermogenes is evidently considered as the only possible reply—while to any one who recalls the baaing of the sheep in connexion with the Greek *mehlon*, the name becomes almost as imitative as cuckoo. Burns’s elegy on the death of poor *Maily* recalls to us the same attempt at imitation in the lowland Scotch—a similarity which certainly cannot be accounted for on any hypothesis of derivation. Those who have not considered the subject would find it difficult to believe how soon an intention of this kind becomes disguised. *Cow* is an instance in point—it does not in its present form recall the sound of the animal. In the German form *Kuh*, however, we are reminded of our nursery, while we perceive at once the identity of our own word with the Sanskrit *gao*, and the connexion of this latter with the synonymous Icelandic *gauli*, which is allied with *gaula* or *baula*, to bellow, a word obviously imitative. If those links, each so unquestionably sound, bring us from a word in which we listen in vain for any tinge of imitation to an imitative root, we think that the transition between any possible instances of the two, ought, in the long ages during which language has been subject to growth and decay, to be no difficulty to any one. The same is true of the word *turtle*; which in its English form retains no sensible resemblance to the cooing of a dove, but in the guise of the Latin *turtur* recalls that sound at once. Here the English form contains a faint suggestion of its original meaning, which may escape our attention unless we connect it with an allied form where it is more apparent. This is also true of English *hog*, which Professor Müller denies to resemble grunting, though he would not, we presume, deny its connexion with the Breton *hoch*, to grunt.

The foregoing etymologies are merely a sample of those we should present as an answer to the natural objection that in the names of animals, where we

should most look for the imitative principle, we can find so little evidence of it. At first sight this is true; but we have seen that it needs but little examination to find, in the names for the sheep, cow, turtle, and hog, the very same principle which has named the cuckoo, which we took as the typical and undeniable instance of that for which we are contending. It is not in this class of words, however, that our theory will meet with most opposition. Animals do utter sounds; and their names might therefore become connected with them, while the body of language was yet derived from some different source. We can do no more in the small space which remains to us than point out one or two of the chief instances of the imitative principle working on a material for which it has less obvious affinity.

In the movements of water we arrive at those cases of onomatopœia in which the outline is, as it were, softened, away and which might be as fitly called representative as imitative. The confused sound of running water is represented by the repetition of some such sound as bar or mur. This becomes a type of all confused sound, and gives us *murmur*. *Barbarous* is formed on precisely the same principle, and, in its proper sense of unintelligible, carries us back to the period when the Greek tongue formed the casket which contained the civilization of the whole human race. How entirely adventitious is that tinge of aversion which with us has become the sole association of the word is recorded for us in the plaintive accents of Ovid, who laments that in his exile at Tomi he, the polished citizen, is a *barbarian* to all his neighbours; and in the announcement to one of the comedies of Plautus, taken from the Greek, that "Philemo wrote what Plautus has adapted to the barbarian tongue,"—i. e. Latin. Neither Plautus nor Ovid was aware of the suggestion of stammering which they were connecting with their verses; yet *balbus* and the French *balbutier*, to stammer, are evidently formed on the same plan. The

analogous use of this very word in our version of Isaiah xxviii. 11, where the context renders the literal meaning impossible, is an illustration of this connexion. Speaking generally, then, we might say that this class of words becomes typical of that feeling of contempt or aversion with which it is natural to regard any utterance that is incomprehensible to the hearer.

Another fertile source of onomatopœia is the sound sused by and to children. That the words for father and mother in every language are an imitation of the simplest sounds that can be formed by the lips of a child has been often noticed, and we will not pause to exemplify the fact. If we connect these first articulate sounds with the person who utters them rather than the persons who call them forth, we obtain the word *babe*—a striking instance of the manner in which the same root may form the origin of words totally opposite in meaning. This definiteness of imitation would be a little shaded off in the words which take their rise in the sounds which are addressed to infants. These would consist of the softest articulations that could be made by the movement of the tongue alone: la la—na na. From the former we have to *lull*, to set to sleep, to quiet. Hence a lull is a temporary cessation of noise—a pause. From the latter we have in Greek, first *nana*, a lullaby; then *ninion*, and the Spanish *niño*, a child, clearly allied with our *ninny*, a simpleton, a person not stupid, but preserving the childish state beyond its fitting period. The Italian has *ninnare*, or *ninnellare*, to lull or rock a child; hence *ninnellare*, to waver, to doubt. The latter etymology gives us an excellent specimen of the manner in which an act totally unaccompanied by sound may be brought within the sphere of vocal representation. But we also perceive an essential harmony between all the impressions of sense. We can readily imagine the imitative *tinkle* passing into the French *étincelle* and the English *twinkle*—the sharp delicate impression on the ear recalling that upon the eye;

and then, with a loss of sharpness in the consonant, into *tingle*—a ringing sensation, as it were. We can easily see that certain vowels correspond to the idea of size—that there is an inherent fitness in the relative appropriation of the words *sup*, *top*, *cat*, *tramp*, to express something larger or weightier, and *sip*, *tip*, *kit*, *trip*, to express something less or lighter. This seems to have been the kind of harmony which Plato attempted to illustrate in the somewhat fanciful symbolism of the dialogue we have already quoted. In considering *r* as expressive of violent movement, *d* of limitation, *n* of inwardness (we do not pretend to see the difference between the two ideas), *l* of gliding movement, and so forth, he is not setting up, as he evidently supposed, any antagonistic principle to that of imitation. He is merely showing the application of that principle where it is impossible it should work directly. The etymology of a thinker who knows no language but his own can never be worth much; but, as a specimen of the kind of analogy which exists between the impressions of the eye and ear—an analogy which to the dulled senses of a mature and weary race can only be discernible here and there, like the half-obliterated writing on a palimpsest—we should not desire a better. That language should represent what addresses itself to the eye is no alternative to the statement that it imitates what addresses itself to the ear. “Is not the delight of the quavering upon a stop in music *the same* with the playing of light upon the water?” asks Bacon after a number of similar instances. “Neither are these only similitudes, as men of narrow observation may conceive them to be, but the same steps of nature, printing upon different subjects or matters.” That *written* language was originally representative is no matter of question. The alphabet is not a collection of algebraic symbols, but the relic of an attempt at pictorial representation, the intention of which is in most cases long since lost. Here and there we can trace the original symbolism. In the letter N,

for instance, we may recognise the three last strokes of the zigzag lines representing water, with which we are familiar as the sign of Aquarius  $\text{♒}$ , and which is found in Egyptian hieroglyphics with the force of the letter N. Here we can decipher the faint hint of resemblance when we know the model; but certainly we could not invert the process, and discover the thing signified from the sign. Now this is the problem set before those who endeavour to discover the imitative roots of language. They have to decipher the most weather-worn records of the human race—records subject to such influences as those which have brought Tooley Street out of St. Olave Street, Jour out of Dies, and offspring so unlike each other as Bishop and Evêque from the same immediate parent. If we consider the length of time during which these obliterating influences have been at work upon language, we shall be surprised, not at the wide lacunæ in the chain of evidence which we extract from our witnesses, but that the faint and hesitating accents in which they necessarily speak can afford us any sound link whatever.

On any hypothesis of the origin of language, we must expect to find it difficult always, generally impossible, to trace a word to the sensible image which supplied the original type of its meaning. Our thoughts are strung together by so subtle a thread that we might as well endeavour to calculate the path by which a grain of thistle-down is wafted from its parent stem as to indicate *à priori* the line of metaphor by which a word must have come to its actual signification. Who, for instance, from the two terms of the etymology *St. Ethelreda* and *tawdry*, could work out the intervening series? Yet the links are by no means numerous, and each, we believe, is unquestionably sound. *St. Ethelreda* gives us *St. Awdry*, who gives her name to a fair at which laces and other trifling finery would be sold,—whence *tawdry* lace leaves us the present signification of the word. We have given a similar instance in *ninnellare*. *Fanciful* is not a word



that must be used with any depreciatory intention on this subject; for the very nature of association in the human mind, to which etymology is due, is essentially fanciful. Nor does the science of language assume a more fanciful character when it attempts to connect visible objects and sound, than when it connects the wide diversity of language with the visible objects from which, on any theory, it took its rise at first.

Our science occupies, at this day, the position of geology forty years ago. Those among us who can look so far back may remember the smile of derision with which we heard that Scrope and Lyell were accounting for the formation of continents and elevation of mountains by the mere continuance of those agencies which we see working at the present day in the crumbling of our sea-cliffs, the sediment of our rivers, and such trifling oscillations as are recorded for us in the well-known instance of the Temple of Serapis, on the Italian coast. The influence of agencies such as these seemed to the geologists of a past generation to occupy as insignificant a place in the mechanism of their science as is taken, in the estimation of Professor Müller, by the imitative principle in the origination of language. Yet barely forty years have sufficed to consign the machinery of "cataclysms" to the limbo of epicycles in astronomy, and to show us, in the tools which the patient architect uses to *alter* the edifice we inhabit, the very same by which it was *erected*. Nature knows no bursts of fitful vehemence followed by intervals of inaction. The laws which preserve are separated by no generic interval from those which produce. Nor had the young race powers different in kind from those it possesses now. The eye

or the ear of a Londoner is hardly the same instrument, it is true, as that of a North American Indian, and this difference shrinks into insignificance when compared with that which removes us, probably, from the keen and delicate senses of our first parents; but the interval is one of degree alone, and the few words of the manuscript yet discernible to our eyes are our only guides in the endeavour to restore that which has faded. That portion of the vast growth of language which can be traced to a directly mimetic root may remain a small fraction of the whole; but, if it be the only portion whose structure is intelligible to us, we shall readily believe that the working of this principle is limited by our ignorance, and not by its own nature. The progress of all science consists in the destruction of these phantasmal limitations which, like the circle of the visible horizon, we project upon the outward world. "Celestial motion is perfect and continues for ever; terrestrial is corrupt and soon comes to an end," was the dogma of the early astronomers; but the child of to-day has learnt to bridge that barrier with the conception of one force, equally present in the movement of worlds which would contain our system and the separation of the withered leaf from its stem. Geology has taught us to destroy a similar barrier in Time, and to see in every shower of rain a specimen of the forces to which the present state of our globe is owing. The study of language, we doubt not, is destined to achieve an analogous triumph over the weakness of our imagination, teaching us, in the imperfect accents of the child or the savage, to recognise the working of that principle which has perfected for us the instrument of thought.