

## ARTICLE VI.

## THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE.

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THIS is a subject of vital interest to every student of language and of the human mind, so that it is incumbent upon every intelligent seeker after truth to reach his own conclusions in his own way without slavish deference to the opinions of others. Special interest in it has been awakened in recent years by the fact that two of the foremost philologists of the English-speaking world, Max Müller and Professor Whitney, have discussed the subject in all its bearings, and have gathered about them, in this country and Europe, able exponents of their respective theories. In Whitney's valuable volume "Language and the Study of Language" and in Müller's suggestive treatise "The Science of Thought," these contrasted theories are forcibly stated and defended, and the way is fully opened for the independent investigations of the student of philology and psychology.

Two opposing theories may thus be said to possess the field of inquiry.

## THEORY OF IDENTITY.

The first is that of Identity, maintaining that Thought and Language are practically one in province and function. On the basis of this position it is held, that the number of ideas and words is the same, that all thought is expressible in words, and that there is no such thing as thinking without

the use of words as a medium. Müller, in his "Science of Thought," seems to maintain this view. In the preface, he speaks of the "inseparableness" of language from thought, of "the identity of reason and language." He insists that *logos*, in Greek, refers to "the undivided essence of language and thought," and adds: "The best study of the real laws of thought will be hereafter the study of the real laws of language." One of the introductory chapters is entitled "The Identity of Language and Thought." This is, indeed, the theme and content of the book; while he takes special pleasure in quoting, in confirmation of his view, such notable names as Abelard, Hobbes, Leibnitz, William von Humboldt, Schelling, Hegel, Whately, and others.

Two or three objections to this theory may be noticed.

1. That it places the mind upon a level with the instrument that it uses, thus confounding the medium with that of which it is the medium — means with ends — so unnecessarily lowering thought and elevating language; while the strict use of the word "identical" in this connection would properly exclude any such idea as that of relationship.

2. Moreover, it may be stated, that, *a priori*, thought is greater in province and function than speech, that there are more mental notions than there are terms by which to express them. Hence, all thought would not seem to be expressible; while thinking itself, as in the case of what is called abstraction, would appear to be possible without the conscious use of language as an agent. It is thus that Müller himself is obliged to refer to noted names in opposition to his theory: as, Berkeley, who went so far as to say that words are, at times, "an impediment of thought"; Kant, who calls language "the greatest but not the only instrument of thought"; Sir William Hamilton; John Stuart Mill, who

says, "Reasoning takes place *usually* by means of words"; Jevons, the French logician, who cautiously states, "Hardly ever do we think without the proper words coming into the mind"; while Whitney ridicules the notion, saying, "There can hardly be a more pernicious error in linguistics or metaphysics." "If he [Müller] were right," says Hartug, "the problem of training in the English Language and the problem of thought-training would be identical. But this view is an exaggerated one. The fact that an illiterate mechanic has devised elaborate machinery which he would have been totally incapable of describing in words appears to ruin his generalization. The case of students successful in analysis but incapable of describing in words their successful reasoning, is no less to the point, nor could one deny to the great painter, sculptor, or musician the faculty of being able to think out without words a great work." "There is a world of things," he adds, "real, but intangible, that words at most suggest that they cannot represent."

In fine, this view of Identity may be said to be that of an extremist; so that its ardent advocacy by Müller was regarded as revolutionary and has, at present, no substantial following. It might be called the Numerical Theory of Language, by which the sum total of ideas and words is made equal, developing in the same ratio and order and reducing the whole subject of the expression of thought to a kind of an arithmetical equation.

#### THEORY OF CONVENTIONALISM.

The second theory, which is advocated by Whitney, is that of Conventionalism. According to this view, ideas and words agree, on the principle of mere convenience. Communities have so arranged to use certain terms to express

certain ideas, and hence they are so used. As they have been agreed upon by general consent, they can be modified or abrogated by general consent. The special advocate of this theory is Leibnitz, who declares language to be "a body of conventional signs deriving their value from the mutual understanding of one man with another." Professor Whitney, indorsing this view, scouts the notion that thought ever seeks expression by an internal impulse or inward necessity; holds that "speech is not a personal but a social possession"; and adds, as to words, "that they are effects produced upon the auditory sense by atmospheric vibrations whose products are no more mental than the motions of the fingers." In this view, he is supported by such authorities as Locke and Dugald Stewart. It is noticeable, as to this theory in its boldest form, that it represents a natural reaction from that of Identity. It bears, on the face of it, the excess of a reactionary theory, going farther than prudence or reason or the facts would warrant. In noting it more specifically, it must be conceded, first of all, that language is partly and largely conventional, and to this degree social, in its nature. This conventionality, however, it is to be emphasized, is mainly found in the lower and less important spheres, in the names of persons and objects; in the realm of the mechanical and purely practical, rather than in the province of mind and spirit and taste. While it accounts, therefore, for much of the content of our vocabulary, it does not account for the most essential.

Two or three valid objections to it may be cited.

1. On this basis, there is scarcely such a study possible as the Science of Language, as scientific laws, in any department, have a deeper reason than mere convenience. Modern philologists are priding themselves on the fact that language

is, at last, reduced to a scholarly basis; that distinctive principles enter, and that thought, in its highest sense, is an indispensable factor.

2. It may further be objected that, even on this theory, agreement is ratified between certain ideas and words only because the relation between them is already close and natural; such words as "state" and "seminal" and "noxious" being connected, respectively, with the ideas of fixedness, and seed-planting, and injurious influence. In this way, the theory borrows much of its best element without making any due acknowledgment of its indebtedness.

3. The main objection to the theory, however, lies in the fact that it is in keeping with the purely physiological view of language; that words are mere vocables, having only to do with the physical organs of speech, and the atmosphere as the conducting medium,—“an assumption,” as Müller states it, “unsupported by any evidence.” It is the view, in fact, of the modern materialistic school of philosophy, in the support of which its advocates have a definite purpose; namely, to eliminate from language, as from life, all spiritual factors and reduce it to a purely naturalistic basis. Hence it is not strange that this is the position taken by the ultra evolutionist, and is in keeping with the tenets of the mechanical theory of science and philosophy.

#### THEORY OF VITAL INTERACTION.

There is a third and more tenable theory, as we believe, mediating between the extremes of Identity and Convention-  
alism, and insisting that there is, to some extent, at least, a vital and an organic relation between thought and words. It may be called the Theory of Vital Interaction. On this principle, language is an organism, and not a mere

mechanism,—emphasizing thought as dominant over the mere expression of the thought, regarding words as but the media of ideas and ministrant to them, deriving their value from them, and in all the higher realms of thinking and being vitally connected with the ideas they express. In this sense, the statement of Pope that “language is the dress of thought” must be held inferior to that of Wordsworth, that it is “the incarnation of thought,” and not a mere vestiture to be donned and doffed at pleasure. It is in support of this theory that Whewell writes in his “Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences”: “Language is often called an instrument of thought, but it is also the nutriment of thought, or it is rather the atmosphere in which thought lives, an element modifying by its qualities and changes the growth and complexion of the faculties which it feeds.” In support of this theory, as thus stated, some arguments may be adduced.

1. The first is an *a priori* one. As man is a rational and a thinking being, and also possessed of the power of articulate speech, it is presumed that the relation between his thinking and speaking would be to some extent organic, joint factors of one personality. Hence the force of the Greek word *logos*, involving reason and speech in vital union. Hence the relation of *ratio* and *oratio*, in Latin; of man the thinker, and man the speaker. Hence the aptness of Müller’s statement, “To think is to speak low; to speak is to think aloud”; or, as Farrar expresses it, “The speaker descends from thought to words; the hearer rises from words to thought.” Even pantomime, or a sign language, may be said to confirm this vital connection, in that the signs have no significance apart from the words they are used to designate, and into which they are at once rendered by the spectator.

2. This theory is in keeping with the twofold origin of language, as partly mental and partly material. All the higher terms of language, those expressing intellectual and spiritual life, would thus find a place, as, also, the lower terms of everyday necessity; nor between the two is there any pronounced discordance, as they together make up the sum total of human speech. Such terms as "faith," "idea," "love," "duty," are of one order; while such as "work," "body," "time," and "space" are of a lower order. It is just here that the theory escapes the narrowness of conventionalism and identity alike, by making thought wider in its province than language, and superior to it.

3. What may be called the Law of Adjustment, in the use of words, confirms this theory. Not only, as Shakespeare suggests, must the action be suited to the word, but the thought and the word must be mutually adapted to each other. The phonetic agreement of sense and sound in verse illustrates this principle. In what we call synonyms, we see this law of adjustment, in that, among several terms that may approximately express the meaning we wish to convey, there is, as a rule, some one of these terms that most accurately expresses it, and the careful writer is not satisfied until he finds it. It is what Swift calls "the right word in the right place." In fact, what we term "style" in literary art finds its rational basis here. Buffon's sentiment that "the style is the man himself" involves not only the principle of the author's personality as essential to style, but that the style shall be a true transcript of the thought. Thus the French style is one thing, and the German another; that of Carlyle one thing, and that of De Quincey another; by which is meant that in each instance of race or nation or author there is a nice and an efficient adjustment of word to idea. All

purely mechanical theories of style evade this view of language, and at this point, therefore, style may be tested as natural or artificial.

4. A further proof of the submitted view is found in the fact that thought is, at times, self-expressive, uttered only because it must have outlet for its own sake, thoroughly contravening the position of Whitney that thought never seeks expression by "an internal impulse." This is the explanation of soliloquy. Hence, language has been defined "as a manifestation of something that wants to manifest itself." It is at this point, especially, that the view of language as a mere utility for purposes of convenience only is seen to be grossly defective, and we must take a wider view. What is called "meditation," as a discipline or mental pleasure, with no immediate purpose of expression in words, is thus made possible; and we commune with God and truth and ourselves.

5. This theory is also confirmed in the study and acquisition of foreign tongues. Such languages are mastered only when we are able to think in them. It is not enough that we have at our command a vocabulary, or that we are able to use the languages for the practical purposes of life, but that we so use them as to forget for the time that we are employing a foreign tongue. This result is reached only through the process of thinking the thoughts of the acquired speech and of the people behind it. The illiterate servant or superficial tourist may acquire considerable readiness in the use of foreign tongues; but the process is purely verbal and imitative, quite devoid of any intellectual feature, and forgotten as easily as acquired. Such persons cannot be said to know the language they are using. On the theory before us, the foreign language becomes one's own, so that it is used



almost as an inherited tongue. Hence, it is correct to say that another language, to be made our own, must be naturalized. This is what De Vere means when he says, "Language is the expression of the inner life of the human mind." It is thus that an interpreter of a foreign tongue must do more than merely connect the native word with the foreign; he must render the thought of the one into that of the other. So, as to the work of a translator, who finds his greatest difficulty, as well as his success, in reverting constantly to the ideas behind the outward sign. Even children with their limited vocabulary illustrate the same principle as they struggle to find just the word that will exactly convey their thought.

6. Still further, we note that thought and language mutually affect each other as to progress and decadence. What Archbishop Trench has called the elevation and degradation of words is found to be wholly dependent on a precedent elevation or degradation of mind. This is what is meant by history and morality in words as vitally related to the general history of thought and character. Nations of a low order of civilization and mental culture will evince such inferiority in their vocabulary, as the reverse conditions will also be so indicated. It is thus that Trench argues that so momentous a doctrine as the divine origin and fall of man is seen in human language; while he adduces scores of terms to show that, as men have risen or declined in the scale of being, language itself has accurately marked the fact. His treatise entitled "A Select Glossary of English Words used formerly in senses different from their present" simply means that the different senses of present usage have been necessitated by a change in the mental habit and life of the people. Such words as "knave," "menial," "conceit," "artifice," and "resent" have assumed a lower meaning than

they once possessed; while such as "humility," "angels," "martyrs," "affable," "paradise," and "regeneration" have assumed a higher meaning, and each class for the same reason; namely, the effect of mind and character on speech, elevating or degrading it.

It is on this principle that we account for the absence or presence of words in a language, some terms not being found at all in certain vocabularies, in that there was no call for them in the thought and inner life of the people using them, or in that, having them once, they no longer used them. We speak of new words coming into a language, and old terms disappearing, which simply means that the thought behind them no longer exists and, therefore, the word is no longer needed. The enormous growth of such a language as the English is a striking instance of the mental activity of the English-speaking peoples, while the ever-increasing list of obsolete terms evinces the fact of certain forms of decline. So, as to the whole subject of dead and living languages, called so because the vital processes in them have ceased or still exist. Just here is the heart of the discussion as to the methods of the study of the dead languages, and the answer to the question as to their continuance as objects of academic discipline. Such languages become valuable to us only to the degree in which they are made to live again in our thought and feeling. If they are to hold their place in liberal education, then must they be vitalized by the reproduction of the mental life that lies latent in them. Dead languages may be taught in a living way. In this sense Modern Greek as spoken is Ancient Greek in living form.

7. The ethical argument has an important place here, rising, at times, to the plane of the spiritual. Thus the Scriptures speak of Christ as the Incarnate Word, spiritual

personality in verbal expression. Plato seems to have taught the same principle in what he called the Divine Idea, embodied in the forms of language. The accepted theory of inspiration is a signal illustration of the high sense in which the relation of thought and language may be viewed. When it is said "that holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," it is, in substance, said that the thought of God is mediated to the world through human language. So vital is the relation that, to this day, the question is an open one as to just where God himself speaks and where man, or just what the human and the divine element in inspiration is. Hence, we have in theology what we know as the "mechanical" and the "moral" theories of inspiration, just as we have them in language. Hence, it is not strange that language has been called "a moral science," as thus based on character and as the expression of the soul of man. Strangely enough, Professor Whitney thus speaks of it. Max Müller goes to such an extreme as to hold that philology as a modern science takes its origin at Pentecost, when, by special miraculous agency, the gift of tongues was imparted to man; that there is such a thing as spiritual speech. The theory, though extreme, is suggestive as broached by such a man as Müller. We read that "there was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour"—a purely spiritual communion between God and the redeemed, outside of the area of articulate speech. "When I learn a new language," said Charles the Fifth, "I feel as if I had gotten a new soul." Noah Webster, in the preface to his Dictionary, writes, "Language ever was the immediate gift of God." It was when musing on the spiritual offices of language that the poet Wordsworth writes in the "Prelude":—

“Words are but under agents in their souls:  
When they are groping in their greatest strength,  
They do not breathe among them.”

The purely materialistic view of language as to its origin and uses and the zeal with which it is maintained is but another evidence of the validity and value of the higher theory. From this discussion some inferences follow:—

(1) That, thus viewed, the study of language is a Mental Discipline of a high order. It is the study of mind concretely expressed, what Müller calls “the science of thought.” Hence, the historic fact that, from the earliest days of academic systems, linguistic study has been classified among the disciplinary studies of liberal training, a real mental gymnastic to the student. It is this, if anything, that should preserve the study of the classical tongues, despite all opposition.

(2) On this theory, Figurative Language assumes increasing importance, inasmuch as, being a departure from the merely literal, it takes us into the upper realm of the imaginative and invisible, where words are the pictures or portraitures of thought, and in the use of which the mind knows no restrictions, but wanders at will through the open area of the infinite.

(3) There is an interesting application of this higher theory within the province of the Subconscious Life, in that, just to the degree in which that latent life takes conscious form, a corresponding vocabulary will emerge, the word always waiting upon the thought. Indeed, as our subconscious life is our most important life, there is a sense in which, in this lowermost realm of our being, we find the fullest representation of the vital union of mind and word.

(4) We note, on the basis of this theory, the increasing importance of the study of the modern tongues, especially the English, as living languages, where the interaction between thought and word is necessarily more potent than in unspoken tongues. Spoken languages have a pulse of life in them, nor is any one of them more vital than our vernacular, because of the area it covers, the increasing numbers who use it, and the immense interests it represents.

(5) This subject bears, also, on the possible relation of language and literature. Though language as a study has its own area, there is a valid sense in which there is a literary element in language as there is a linguistic element in literature. It is in a treatise on English Prose that Earle discusses "the bearings of philology" on prose. If thought and language are vitally related, literature and language should be; for, what is literature save the written form in which thought is expressed?

(6) The bearing of this subject on the probable future of English is interesting, in that English is the most wide-reaching and progressive of all modern tongues, and touches at more points than any other speech the expanding thought and life of the world.

All such schemes as Volapük and Esperanto for solving this problem of universality must fail, in that they are constructed on artificial methods and have reference to purely practical ends.

(7) So, as to the project of Spelling Reform. In so far as it sacrifices the scholarly to the convenient, and cuts athwart the nexus that binds the word to the thought, in order to meet commercial needs, to that degree it serves to awaken opposition on the part of those who insist on maintaining such a nexus.

(8) A final word is in place to students and especially teachers of language, that they should emphasize this principle of Vital Interaction — studying and teaching language as the embodiment and expression of thought, and ever seeking to lift the whole department of philological inquiry to the level of the intellectual and spiritual, and thus to coördinate it with all the noblest activities that engage the mind of man.