

Change in **LANGUAGE**

Whitney, Bréal and Wegener

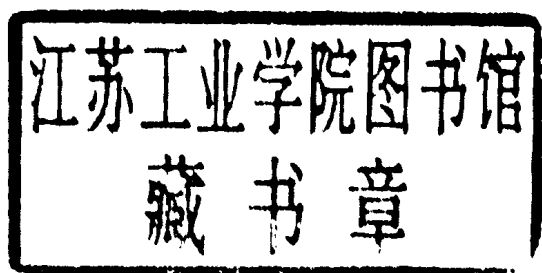


Brigitte Nerlich

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CHANGE IN LANGUAGE

Whitney, Bréal, and Wegener

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DEDICATION

To
Anita, my sister
Simone, my friend
and
David, my husband

INTRODUCTION

To make language, the intent to signify must be present.

(Whitney: 768) Ph*

The history of nineteenth-century linguists is relatively well known, including much of the work of William Dwight Whitney, Michael Bréal and Philipp Wegener. However, what is not so familiar and yet deserves to be, is that these three linguistics tried to solve the mystery of language-change in new ways. This is crucial for a better understanding of linguistics in the nineteenth century and for a better understanding of language and language-change *per se*. Despite their different intellectual and vocational backgrounds, and the different countries in which they worked (the United States, France, and Germany), Whitney, Bréal and Wegener converge upon a single point in their respective solutions to that problem: it can only be solved if linguists stop regarding language as an autonomous entity, or, in the fashion of that time, an organism that lives and dies independently of the users of the language, and instead start to focus on the *actions*, as advocated by Whitney, and the *mind* of the language users, as stressed by Bréal, together with the *situation* in which they use it, as recommended by Wegener.

This book is presented in two parts. Part one points out the similarities and differences between the approaches of Whitney and Bréal, two linguists working in the tradition of comparative

* Whitney Ph: 768 (for 'Philology, part 1: Science of language in general') and I shall refer to those works which are quoted very often in abbreviated form, e.g. Bréal FF: 12 (for the article 'De la forme et de la fonction des mots'). To those works for which translations exist I shall refer in the following mode: e.g. Bréal ES: 112/285, where the first page number refers to the French edition, the second to the English translation. All the other quotations will be given in the standard form, e.g. Müller 1861: 14. A list of the abbreviations is provided at p. ix.

philology, but criticizing it from within, especially through their rejection of linguistic 'naturalism' (e.g. Schleicher), and linguistic 'mysticism' (e.g. Schlegel, Grimm and those who wanted to find the Indo-European 'Ursprache') (cf. Bréal 1891, LN: 619; 1873a). These similarities are grounded in their mutual acceptance of the Humboldtian dictum that linguistic origin and change are not based on different principles (also known as uniformitarianism in geology and linguistics; cf. Christy 1983). From this springs their interest in the origin and evolution of language, especially on the semantic level where sense is created *all the time*. This mutual interest culminates in their defence of the speaker, his/her will and intentions, which they regarded as the true forces of language change.

Part two examines the work of Wegener, who is gaining increasing attention from theoreticians and historians of communicational linguistics, constructivism, and psychology of language. Unlike Whitney and Bréal, he gives prime importance to the dialogue between speaker and hearer and their collaborative construction of meaning, taking into account the situation, and the mental representations that the interlocutors have of it, as well as their reference to mental schemata and other cognitive structures. Wegener thus completes the work, begun by Whitney and Bréal, fulfilling the promises hidden in their *oeuvres*: to demonstrate that speakers and hearers are the true language-makers.

This demonstration is far more revolutionary and modern than that of Hermann Paul, who could also have been chosen as the third in that group of linguists working towards the establishment of a new science of linguistics. However, Wegener's importance in this construction-work is clearly shown by the fact that Paul relied heavily on Wegener's *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens* (1885) when he remodelled his theory of semantic change in the second edition of his *Principien der Sprachgeschichte* (1880), published in 1886. It would be a rewarding task to give a full description of Paul's contribution to a theory of language-change. In this book he will often be evoked, but rather as an *éminence grise*, looking at the performance of the three main actors on the linguistic stage.

All in all, I would like to reconstruct the contributions of Whitney, Bréal, and Wegener to general linguistics, a discipline that for them was an *historical* and *psychological* science, two points of view that were lost in the linguistic revolution of the twentieth century. Whitney and Bréal both regretted the fact that general linguistics,

or the philosophy of language, had been so carelessly neglected by German thinkers. In Wegener they would have found somebody to fill this need. Was Aarsleff correct when he wrote: 'The radical innovations that occurred during the later decades of the nineteenth century [cf. Whitney and Bréal] did not occur in Germany, where the new development, though important, stayed closer to accepted institutional forms' (Aarsleff 1979: 64)? In their obituaries of Whitney, Brugmann and Leskien (1897), the leaders of the neo-grammarians movement, praised Whitney's 'Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte' (*Language and the Study of Language*, 1867). It is no coincidence that, in translation, the title of Whitney's book is the same as Paul's *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*, a book that Bréal announced as a contribution to 'la sémantique' (cf. ES: 307/281) and that others regard as the bible of the neo-grammarians.

The overlap between French, German, and American thought is demonstrated by another coincidence. In his obituary of Whitney, Brugmann talks about Whitney's contribution to the study of Sanskrit and, more importantly, to the elucidation of the 'Grundfragen des Sprachlebens' (1897: 95) – *this* is the title of Wegener's 1885 book which is discussed in Part two of this study. Paul and Wegener were the counterparts of Whitney and Bréal in Germany, all four contributing to the radical innovation of linguistic theory that took place during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In her seminal article on language classification in the nineteenth century, Anna Morpurgo Davies writes that the standard history of linguistics 'sees the period between the later 1830s and the '70s as a period of increased philological knowledge of the various languages, of greater interest in phonetics, of more solid etymologizing and of slow progress towards the concept of a sound law in the stricter sense' (1975: 631). This standard history overlooks the mounting literature on general linguistic questions and the interest in theoretical questions noticeable during this part of the nineteenth century. One has only to think of such writers as Max Müller, William Dwight Whitney, Archibald Henry Sayce, Hermann Paul, Heymann Steinthal, Philipp Wegener, Michel Bréal, Abel Hovelacque, and many, many others. One of these, Georg von der Gabelentz, actually *complains* about the ever-increasing literature in general linguistics and confesses that he did not try to keep up with it when writing his book *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (cf. 1891: 52). I hope that the reader of this history of linguistics will forgive me if I too

INTRODUCTION

have overlooked particular representatives of the linguistic scene surrounding Whitney, Bréal, and Wegener.*

ABBREVIATIONS

- CLG** Saussure (1916) *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris: Payot.
- CLG/E** *ibid.*, critical edition.
- CLG/H** *ibid.*, English edition.
- CLG/N** *ibid.*, edition of notes.
- DL** Whitney (1874) 'On Darwinism and language', *North American Review* 119, 61–88.
- ES** Bréal (1897) *Essai de sémantique (Science des significations)*, Paris: Hachette.
- FF** Bréal (1866) 'De la forme et de la fonction des mots', *Revue des cours littéraires de la France et de l'étranger* (29 December), 65–71.
- HM** Bréal (1887) 'L'histoire des mots', *Revue des deux Mondes* 82 (1 July), 187–212.
- IL** Bréal (1868) *Les idées latentes du langage*, Paris: Hachette.
- LGL** Whitney (1875) *The Life and Growth of Language: an outline of linguistic science*, New York: D. Appleton.
- LI** Whitney (1875) 'Are languages institutions?', *Contemporary Review* 25, 713–32.
- LN** Bréal (1891) 'Le langage et les nationalités', *Revue des deux Mondes* 108, (1 December), 615–39.
- LSL** Whitney (1867) *Language and the Study of Language: twelve lectures on the principles of linguistic science*, New York: Charles Scribner.
- OLS** Whitney (1873) *Oriental and Linguistic Studies. The Veda; the Avesta; the science of language*, New York: Scribner, Armstrong.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ph</i>	Whitney (1885) 'Philology, part 1: Science of language in general', <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black.
<i>SL</i>	Bréal (1879) 'La science du langage', <i>Revue scientifique de la France et de l'étranger</i> (26 April), 1005–11.
<i>US</i>	Wegener (1885) <i>Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens</i> , Halle a.d. Saale: Max Niemeyer.
<i>WS</i>	Wegener (1921) 'Der Wortsatz', <i>Indogermanische Forschungen</i> 39, 1–26.

* Full bibliographical data can be found in the References.

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WHITNEY AND BRÉAL

If language is a direct emanation of the mind, or an organic product, a sort of excretion of the bodily organs, so that a word, in any one's mouth, is an entity having a natural and necessary significance, (. . .) than one set of opinions on all theoretic points in linguistics will follow; but another and a very different one, if words are only signs for ideas, instruments with which the mind works, and every language therefore an institution, of historic growth.

(Whitney 1873: 94)

THE BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

William Dwight Whitney was born in the United States in 1827 and died there in 1894, having travelled on a number of occasions to Germany, the homeland of Indo-European and historical-comparative linguistics. His major theoretical works were written in the 1860s and 1870s. Michel Bréal was born of French parents at Landau in Rhenish Bavaria in 1832, but lived and worked most of his life in France, where he died in 1915.

Like Whitney, who, in 1850, went to Germany and spent three winter terms there studying with Albrecht Weber, Franz Bopp, and Richard Lepsius in Berlin, and two summers with Rudolph Roth in Tübingen, Bréal went to Berlin in 1857 to study Sanskrit under Bopp and Weber. Both Whitney and Bréal introduced German ideas and the values of a new scientific method to their respective places of research and instruction: Yale and Paris.

AN OVERVIEW OF WHITNEY'S LIFE AND WORK

William Dwight Whitney* was born into a family that provided a congenial background for scholarly work. Most important was his relationship with his brother Josiah Dwight Jr. William's attention was first directed towards natural sciences. In the summer of 1849 he was in charge of botany, the barometrical observations, and the accounts of the United States survey of the Lake Superior region of Michigan conducted by his brother, and in the summer of 1873 assisted in the geographical work of the Hayden expedition in

* This sketch of Whitney's life and work is based on Seymour ([1894] 1966: 399-426) Smith (1910-11: 611-12), Silverstein (1971: xii-xiii), and Hockett (1979).