西方语言学经典书系

Selected Writings of Otto Jesperson

叶斯柏森选集Ⅱ

[丹麦] 奥托·叶斯柏森 (Otto Jesperson) /著

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EFFICIENCY

IN LINGUISTIC CHANGE

1. Evolution and Progress.

1.1. In my youth I was, like so many of my contemporaries, under the spell of what Sapir (Language 130) somewhat unjustly termed 'the evolutionary prejudice', Darwin's and Spencer's theories. Into the latt-r I was first initiated through the philosophical lectures of Professor S. Heegaard during my freshman's year (1877-78). It stamped the whole of my intellectual outlook, and when I first began a serious study of philology I tried to apply this theory to the history of language, though I soon saw that Spencer's famous formulas of evolution (integration, heterogeneity, definiteness) could not be strictly and dogmatically applicable to language. I took "Progress in Language" to mean something totally different from what Spencer spoke of in the linguistic paragraphs of his essay "Progress, its Law and Cause" (Essays, vol. 1): he there speaks exclusively of a greater and greater heterogeneityan increasing number of parts of speech, of words to express the most varied ideas, of languages and dialects produced by the splitting up of one uniform language. I took progress in the more popular sense of advance in usefulness, which Spencer here totally neglects.

Still I had some points of contact with Herbert Spencer. I had early been impressed by his essay on "the Philosophy of Style" (in Essays, vol. 2). In this he says that the best

style is that which pays most regard to the economy of the recipient's attention. "Other things equal, the force of all verbal forms and arrangements is great, in proportion as the time and mental effort they demand from the recipient is small." Again, "there is an expenditure of mental energy in the mere act of listening to verbal articulations, or in that silent repetition of those which goes on in reading—the perceptive faculties must be in active exercise to identify every syllable", etc.

But in examining the laws of style Spencer necessarily speaks of the hearer (recipient) only and says nothing about the speaker (producer). Now I found that in valuation of a language, or a linguistic expression, both sides should be taken into consideration: the best is what with a minimum of effort on the part of the speaker produces a maximum of effect in the hearer. This is the substance of my essay "Fremskridt i sproget" (1891), which formed an introduction to my thesis "Studier over engelske kasus", and was expanded in English in "Progress in Language" (1894) and still more so in "Language" (1922).

When some years after the first appearance of my theory W. Ostwald began the publication of his philosophy of energetics, I recognized in his ideas the same point of view that I had already applied to language: I found in this coincidence a strong argument in favour of my views (see "Energetik der sprache" (1914), reprinted in "Linguistica").

"Survival of the fittest"—this is the ingenious watchword invented by Herbert Spencer to explain what Darwin understood by "natural selection": those individuals of a species are preserved that are best adapted for their environments. Can this be applied to language? Evidently not to

language as wholes: which of these are preserved and which are doomed to extinction is determined by other considerations than the intrinsic perfection of their structure or the reverse: here wars and political conditions are generally decisive. But within a language we must admit the truth of the slogan: those particular traits of a language which are best adapted to their purpose tend to be preserved at the cost of others which do not answer the linguistic purpose so well. This will be demonstrated in many particulars of the following disquisition.

1.2. When I began writing on language, the prevalent theory was this: language had begun with inflexible roots, some of these in course of time became subordinate grammatical implements which were first agglutinated to and eventually fused with the more substantial elements. In this way was achieved the development of inflexional languages such as primitive Aryan (Indo-European, exemplified in Sanskrit, Greek and Latin); here the high-water mark was attained, and since then we witness only decay, degeneracy, and destruction of the beautiful structures of these old languages. To this I objected, trying to show that viewed from the point of view of human energetics so far from being retrogressive the tendency in historical times has on the whole been a progressive one.

Though it is possible that in my endeavour to refute old theories I paid too little attention to those changes that are not beneficial, I never maintained that all linguistic changes in all languages and at all times made for progress; I never was an "optimist à la Pangloss", but I still think that I was right in saying that on the whole the average development was progressive and that mankind has benefited by

this evolution. (See the detailed exposition in Lang., p. 319 -366.)

In the summary found ib. p. 364, I said that the superiority of the modern Aryan languages as compared with the older stages manifests itself in the following points:

- (1) The forms are generally shorter, thus involving less muscular exertion and requiring less time for their enunciation.
- (2) There are not so many of them to burden the memory.
 - (3) Their formation is much more regular.
 - (4) Their syntactic use also presents fewer irregularities.
- (5, Their more analytic and abstract character facilitates expression by rendering possible a great many combinations and constructions which were formerly impossible and unidiomatic.
- (6) The clumsy repetitions known under the name of concord have become superfluous.
- (7) A clear and unambiguous understanding is secured through a regular word-order.

Each of these points had in the preceding pages been fully documented by typical examples; no. (2), for instance, through reference to the chapter in "Progress" in which the case system of OE and ModE had been tabulated in the same way, filling seven and two pages respectively. With regard to (3) I pointed out the very important consideration that when we look at the actual facts we see that anomaly and flexion go invariably together (Lang. 232): it is thus wrong to say that "the Aryan inflexions were once more numerous and at the same time more distinct and regular," as Sweet says (Collected Papers 68).

These chapters in my book have never been refuted, either as a whole or in detail. Most subsequent writers on language simply disregard the question of progress or retrogression, or even mention it as lying outside the sphere of scientific linguistics.

In reading many books on the history of language one gets the impression that the history of languages is nothing but a purposeless fluttering hither and thither. I tried, and shall again in this treatise try to show that a great many changes manifest a purpose, conscious or unconscious, to better existing conditions, and that some changes, though apparently detrimental, may, if summed up, in the long run prove beneficial and make for progress. People have sometimes blundered into improving their mother-tongue.

1.3. The only two writers, as far as I know, who after me have dealt at some length with the question of progress in language-are Charles Bally and J. Vendryes. The former discusses it in Le Langage et la Vie, 1st ed. 1913 (thus nineteen years after Progress), 2nd ed. 1926 (thus three years after Language). He has no difficulty in showing that language has not attained, and on account of the multiplicity of practical life probably never will attain, the complete logical ideal of univocité-the same idea always expressed by the same form, and the same form always meaning the same thing-and he goes on to examine the relation between synthesis and analysis with examples of their mutually replacing each other so that advance is a pure illusion: it is six of one and half a dozen of the other; the whole linguistic development is made up of rhythmic ups and downs. He mentions neither my previous work nor my criticism of his 1st edition. His treatment is unsatisfactory

because he does not compare the structure of earlier and later stages of the same language as wholes, as I had done in the chapter mentioned above (1.2), and because he does not see the importance of the point of view of energetics, the relation between the output of energy and the result attained.

- J. Vendryes in the last chapter of Le Langage (1921) deals with "le progrès du langage". But though he warns against "une confusion fâcheuse entre la langue littéraire et la langue tout court" he does not seem himself to have avoided this confusion. His main result is that on the whole gains and losses counterbalance one another very nearly: everything depends on the hand that shakes the instrument. He no more than Bally has seen the importance of energetics, nor does he compare two stages of one and the same language as wholes. Most of his chapter does not concern us in this connexion.
- 1.4. In a very short chapter of his admirable book The Making of English Henry Bradley speaks of "Profit and Loss". He turns against some extreme optimists who think that in the evolution of language "everything happens for the best, and that English in particular has lost nothing, at least so far as its grammar is concerned, that would have been worth keeping". But who are these optimists? As already remarked, I myself never said that everything happened for the best. Bradley says that in writing English special care and ingenuity are often required to avoid falling into ambiguities—but is not that true of other languages as well? In colloquial English there are some abbreviations which sometimes occasion inconvenience by their doubtful meaning: thus he's may be either 'he is'

or 'he has', and I'd may be either 'I had' or 'I would'but certainly in nearly every case the form of the following verb will resolve any doubt. Still, Bradley says that English has gained by many additions to its grammatical resources and by the disappearance of superfluous inflexions as well as by the reduction of those which remain to mere consonantal suffixes; this has greatly increased the capacity for vigorous condensation. English thus has the peculiar advantage of a noiseless grammatical machinery, and further the ability of stressing the auxiliary as in 'I did live there' and of using the auxiliary by itself as in 'Yes, I do,' 'it certainly will not.' I think that in spite of his cautious expressions his few pages on the subject justify me in enlisting the eminent late scholar among those who on essential points agree with my views on progress in English.

- G. Cederschiöld's paper Framsteg i språket (1897) reprinted in Om kvinnospråk och andra ämnen (1900), fully agrees with my points of view. So does E. H. Sturtevant in Linguistic Change (1917), p. 176.
- 1.5. In this treatise I shall not repeat the substance of what I said in *Progress* and *Language*, but merely in detail examine some points in which the progressive tendency manifests itself in various ways. In thus taking up some related strands and trying to weave them into a new pattern I am afraid that readers of my other books will here and there recognize ideas and examples they have seen elsewhere, but as they are given here in a new setting and for a different purpose I hope I may be forgiven for such unavoidable repetitions.

2. Language. Change.

- 2.1. Language is activity, chiefly social activity undertaken in order to get into touch with other individuals and communicate to them one's thoughts, feelings and will. On other social purposes see below, ch. 10. Sometimes language may be used simply to give vent to one's feelings, or even to make one's ideas clear to oneself, thus especially in silent soliloquy. But, as remarked, the main purpose of language is communication with other people.
- 2.2. A speaking individual is at any moment in his speech obliged to make a choice from among a variety of expressions that his own language, i. e. the collective habits of the community to which he belongs, places at his disposal and which he retains in his memory. He is, of course, seldom clearly conscious of this selective process, but it is nevertheless a fact. He has to decide for the moment if he is to use the most familiar, natural, everyday expression, or if he is to use a more literary, solemn, stilted, or even poetical style. He chooses out of a set of synonyms that which seems to him the most adequate: big, large, extensive, enormous, etc., or loves, likes, is fond of, prefers, etc. What details is he to include, and what is he to leave to the imagination of his audience? Is he to make a direct assertion or to use a rhetorical or ironic question? Will it be best to speak very loud, using a very distinct and pointed, emphatic pronunciation, or will a careless, inattentive, or even slovenly pronunciation do for the moment? Is a severe, rough, or a mild, insinuating tone to be employed? The same, or nearly the same, idea can thus be brought to the consciousness of one's hearer in a variety of ways: language is a multifarious world.

What is here said of speaking naturally applies mutatis mutandis to written exposition as well, where a man has to make his choice between different styles, from the most elaborate to the most 'telegraphic' way of expressing himself; within each he has the same choice of words and constructions as in talking.

2.3. Speech is here taken in the strict, most concrete sense of a momentary act of one individual. Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to distinguish sharply between parole and langue. I criticized part of his view in Mank. p. 11 ff., chiefly because he established a gulf between the two and said that the individual was absolute master of his speech, but was powerless with regard to his language. The distinction has since then been elaboratedly treated by Alan H. Gardiner, see The Theory of Speech and Language (1932) and his paper at the Rome Congress (Attidel III Congresso Intern. dei Linguisti, p. 345 ff.), see also his reply to criticisms in ESts 19.58 ff.

The following remarks form the substance of what I said in the discussion in Rome.

We have a whole gradation, from the most concrete to the most abstract notion, cf. in another domain: one particular cruel act of one individual tiger—the cruel habits of the same tiger — cruelty as a characteristic trait of tigers as a species. In language we have:

- (1) Speech.
- (2) The whole of one individual's language, his vocabulary, intonation, etc.
- (3) The manner of expression common to him and his set.

- (4) The dialect of his parish, town, or county.
- (5) His mother-tongue as comprising all the various local dialects of one country or one nation. In the case of English we may even distinguish (5a) the language of Great Britain, (5b) that of the British Empire, (5c) that of the United States, the three making up together a still higher abstraction, "English" as a whole.
- (6) The power of using language common to all mankind, what Saussure called *le language* as distinct from *la langue*.

It is a simple consequence of our definition that an isolated word, as we find it in a dictionary, belongs to language only; it is an abstraction; in speech it is found only in connexion with other words. This is really also the case when one word makes up a whole sentence, because other elements are understood from the context or it may be from the whole situation, as in answers: "Who said that? — Mother" | "When did she say it? — Yesterday;" — and in retorts: "If I were rich enough . . . Yes, if!" | "Splendid!"

As developed in PhilGr. 64 ff., it is characteristic of proper names such as John that while in language, in a dictionary for instance, they are completely void of meaning, they are pregnant of the most comprehensive meaning when actually employed in speech, where they call up each time a whole complex of associations.

2.4. That language changes is a fact which no one can be blind to who reads a page of Beowulf, of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, and compares it with the speech of his next-door neighbour. But why is it constantly changing? If we are not content with the general answer that everything

human changes, and that London and the ways of its inhabitants are now necessarily different from what they were centuries ago, we must look for special causes in the very nature of a language. These are partly already hinted at in the definition just given, and lie partly in the fact that language is not inherited like the process of digestion, etc., but must be learnt afresh by each individual through imitation—a child's imitation of his parents and playfellows and a grown-up's imitation of his contemporaries. The imitation is never perfect in every respect, and new situations and wants constantly force a speaker to say something which he has never heard or said before in exactly the same way.

It is evident that in order to be introduced into any language an innovation must first occur in speech: it may be used by one individual and be accepted by his fellows, or it may, as is often the case, spring up independently in the speech of several individuals belonging to the same nation.

2.5. In linguistic changes we see the constant interplay of two opposite tendencies, one of an individual, and the other of a social character, one towards ease and the other towards distinctness.

The former is the tendency to take things easy and to follow the line of least resistance—to say it bluntly, an outcome of human indolence or laziness. The desire to save time and trouble leads to slack and slovenly articulation, which in extreme cases descends to mere murmuring, and in another field to a slipshod style, throwing out vague hints and indefinite suggestions, thus implying rather than expressing.

The opposite tendency is an effort to be clearly and precisely understood, and to make as vivid and convincing an impression on the hearer as possible; each articulation is therefore made slowly and distinctly, and great exertion is made to choose the most lucid and forcible expression ('le mot propre'). In extreme cases this may lead to pompousness and over-emphasis.

If the former tendency is dissolving or subversive, the latter is on the whole conservative and tends to keep alive the traditional norm. But it is not strictly correct when it is sometimes said (e. g. by Gabelentz) that any innovation is an infringement of the norm or laws of the language in question: when an English speaker for the first time forms a plural in -s of a brand-new word, he introduces something absolutely new, but does so in strict conformity with the laws of the English language.

On the whole question of causes of changes see the detailed exposition in Lang. chs. XIV and XV. Cp. also what is said below (ch. 11) on fashion.

2.6. The first of these tendencies naturally leads to greater case. But the question of phonetic case is more complicated than it would seem at the first blush. Sapir and others say that the feeling of ease is subjective: what to us seems a very easy articulation is very difficult indeed to an Indian and vice versa. With regard to isolated articulations they are perfectly right, cf. also what Verner and myself say about difficulties of articulation in Lang. 262 f. Greater muscular exertion is not decisive: it requires less effort to chip wood than to operate for cataract. Is a stop like [t, d, k, g] easier or more difficult than the corresponding fricatives $[\delta, \gamma]$? That may be contested in

abstracto. Children learning their language evidently find the stops easier. But when the stops pass into the fricatives as in Dan. bade, bage, we have a case of assimilation, and in this intervocalic position the new open consonant is no doubt easier than the stop. All assimilations make for greater ease in that position: [m, l, r] are not in themselves easier than [n], yet Lat. impono, illegalis, irrationalis are easier than the supposed original forms with in + p, l, r. So is handkerchief with [hængk] than with [hændk]. All droppings of consonants also make for phonetic ease (many of these may be viewed as assimilations), thus [g] after [n] in king, song, etc., w and k in wrong, knight, etc. Here there is nothing subjective in the feeling of greater ease. Thus also, I think, when ia, ua in two syllables in rapid pronunciation become one syllable [ia, ja, ya, wa].

Apart from purely phonetic change it must be recognized that greater ease to everybody concerned is obtained by many morphological changes, as when the inflexional system is simplified and made more regular, think e. g. of the uniform development of the definite article the, the spreading of -s as mark of the plural, the whole simplification of the case-system in substantives and adjectives, etc.

2.7. The opposite tendency is seen in speech when one teels that one has not been understood. The other person may ask "What?" or "I beg your pardon" and one therefore has to repeat one's words more distinctly: "I said imminent, not 'eminent' with a clearly marked vowel, or "increase, not 'decrease" with the stress shifted on to the distinctive syllable. Or one may choose to repeat the same idea in different words altogether.

Even apart from such more or less altered repetitions

the desire to be distinctly understood may show itself in unusually protracted long vowels and consonants. Many double consonants in various languages evidently owe their appearance to the desire for emphasis. Under the influence of strong emotion Eng. [ju'] may be made into [i'u'] (Lang. 277); in novels written e.g. bee-yutiful; cf. also the emphatic pronunciations represented in tree-mendous, ber-luddy. When splendid is not felt to be strong enough, it is colloquially expanded into splendidious or splendiferous. Now and then long "mouth-filling" epithets may be desirable. Sometimes also a speaker or writer may be afraid that his audience will not understand something unless they get it hammered into their heads: for fear of a too concise style he may therefore fall into the opposite extreme, prolixity.

2.8. In course of time a pronunciation called forth by the desire to be clearly understood may become a fixed feature of the language in question. Thus the fuller forms ever, never, over, on, have been practically everywhere substituted for the formerly very frequent forms without v or n: e're, ne're, o're, a, which were liable to misunderstandings (MEG I 2.533). With regard to stress see MEG I ch. V on value-stress and contrast-stress, especially 5.55. Thus the distinction between pairs like lessor [le'so'a] and lessee [lelsi] has become firmly established, and a stressed re has become a much-used prefix in such formations as re-cover as distinct from the older recover. English superlatives also offer an example of the influence of a care for distinctiveness. In Elizabethan times they were often formed in -st with dropping of the unstressed vowel in accordance with the ordinary sound-laws: kind'st, stern'st, sweet'st,