CHAPTER I.

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE.

"If we preserve in our histories of the world the names of those who are said to have discovered the physical elements—the names of Thales, and Anaximenes, and Empedocles—we ought not to forget the names of the discoverers of the elements of language—the founders of one of the most useful and most successful branches of philosophy—the first grammarians."—MAX MÜLLER.

"Speech is silver, silence is golden," is the well-known saying of a modern prophet, wearied with the idle utterances of a transition age, and forgetful that the prophet, or προφήτης, is himself but the "spokesman" of another, and that the era which changed the Hebrew seer into the Nabi, or "proclaimer," brought with it also the beginning of culture and civilization, and the consciousness of a high religious destiny. Far truer was the instinct of the old poet of the Rig-Veda, the most ancient monument of our Aryan literature, written, it may be, fifteen centuries before the birth of Christ, when he calls "the Word" one of the highest goddesses "which rushes onward like the wind, which bursts through heaven and earth, and, awe-inspiring to each one that it loves, makes him a Brahman, a poet, and a sage." The haphazard etymology which saw in the μιστασεις ἀνθρωποι of Homer "articulate-speaking
men,” must indeed be given up, but we may still picture to ourselves the “winged words” which seemed inspired with the life and divinity of Hermès, or the sacred Muses from whom the Greek singer drew all his genius and power. Language is at once the bond and the creation of society, the symbol and token of the boundary between man and brute.

We must be careful to remember that language includes any kind of instrumentality whereby we communicate our thoughts and feelings to others, and therefore that the deaf-mute who can converse only with the fingers or the lips is as truly gifted with the power of speech as the man who can articulate his words. The latter has a more perfect instrument at his command, but that is all. Indeed, it is quite possible to conceive of a community in which all communications were carried on with the hands alone; to this day savage tribes make a large use of gestures, and we are told that the Grebos of Africa ordinarily indicate the persons and tenses of the verb by this means only. Wherever there is the power of making our thoughts intelligible to another, or even simply the possibility of this power, as in the case of the infant, there we have language, although for ordinary purposes the term may be restricted to spoken or articulate speech. It is in this sense that language will be understood in the following pages.

Now one of the earliest subjects of reflection was the language in which that reflection clothed itself. The power of words was clear even to the barbarian, and yet at the same time it was equally clear that he himself exercised a certain power over them. Wonder, it has
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been said, is the mother of science, and out of the wonder excited by the great mystery of language came speculations on its nature and its origin. What, it was asked, are those modulations of the voice, those emissions of the breath, which inform others of what is passing in our innermost souls, and without which the most rudimentary form of society would be impossible? Perhaps it was in Babylonia that the first attempt was made to answer the question. Here there was a great mixture of races and languages, and here it was accordingly that the scene of the confusion of tongues was laid. The Tower of Babel, the great temple of the Seven Lights of Borsippa, whose remains we may still see in the ruins of the Birs-i-Nimrud, was, it was believed, the cause and origin of the diversity of human speech. Men endeavoured to make themselves equal to the gods, and to storm heaven like the giants of Greek mythology, but the winds frustrated their attempts, and heaven itself confounded their speech. Such was the native legend, fragments of which have been brought from the Assyrian library of Assur-bani-pal, or Sardanapalus, and which cannot fail to bring to our minds the familiar history of Genesis.

Now the same library that has given us these fragments has also given us the first beginnings of what we may call comparative philology. The science, the art, and the literature of Babylonia had been the work of an early people who spoke an agglutinative language and from them it had all been borrowed and perhaps improved upon by the later Semitic settlers in the country. Their language, which for the want of a better name we
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will call Accadian, had ceased to be spoken before the seventeenth century B.C., but not before the civilization and culture it enshrined had been adopted by a new race, who had to study and learn the dead tongue in which they were preserved, as the scholars of the Middle Ages had to study and learn Latin. Hence came the need of dictionaries, grammars, and reading-books; and the clay tablets of Nineveh accordingly present us not only with interlinear and parallel Assyrian translations of Accadian texts, arranged upon the Hamiltonian method, but also with syllabaries and lexicons, with phrase-books and grammars of the two languages. It is the first attempt ever made to draw up a grammar, and the comparative form the attempt has assumed shows how impossible was even the suggestion of such a thing without the comparison of more than one form of speech. The vocabularies are compiled sometimes on a classificatory principle, sometimes on an alphabetic one, sometimes on the principle of grouping a number of derivations around their common root; and the latter principle enunciates at once the primary doctrine and object of comparative philology—the analysis of language into its simplest elements. With the discovery of roots we may date the possibility and the beginning of linguistic science.

Next in order of time to the grammarians of Babylonia and Assyria came the grammarians of India, whose labours again were called forth by the comparison of different forms of speech. The sacred language of the Veda had already become antiquated and obscure, while the rise and spread of Buddhism had raised more than
one popular dialect to the rank of a literary language, and obliged the educated Hindu not only to study his own speech in its earlier and later forms, but to compare it with other more or less related idioms as well. Since Indian philology, however, is intimately connected with the history of the modern science of Language, it will be more convenient to consider it further on.

The problems of language were naturally among the first to present themselves to the activity of the Greek mind. Already the instinct of their wonderful speech, itself the fitting creation and reflex of the national character, had found in the word ἀγαθός an expression of the close relationship that exists between reasoned thought and the words in which it clothes itself; and the question which Greek philosophy sought to answer was the nature of this relationship, and of the language wherein it is embodied. Do words exist, it was asked, by nature (φύσις) or by convention (σύντονος); do the sounds which we utter exactly and necessarily represent things as they are in themselves, or are they merely the arbitrary marks and symbols conventionally assigned to the objects we observe and the conceptions we form? This was the question that the greatest of the Greek thinkers attempted to solve; and the controversy it called forth divided Greek philosophy into two camps, and lies at the bottom of all its contributions to linguistic science. It is true that the question was really a philosophic one, and that the advocates of free-will on the one side, and of necessity on the other, naturally saw in speech either the creation and plaything of the human will, or else a power over which man has as little control as over the forces of nature. Important as were the results
of this controversy, not only to the philosophy of language, but yet more to the formation of grammar, it was impossible for a science of language to arise out of it: its results were logical rather than linguistic, for science requires the patient *à posteriori* method of induction, not the *à priori* method of immature philosophizing, however brilliantly handled. The Greeks had, indeed, grasped a truth which has too often been forgotten in modern times, the truth that language is but the outward embodiment and crystallization of thought; but they overlooked the fact that to discover its nature and its laws we must observe and classify its external phenomena, and not until we have ascertained by this means the conditions under which thought externalizes itself in language, can we get back to that thought itself.

Greek researches into language fall into three chief periods, the period of the præ-Sokratic philosophy, when language in general was the subject of inquiry, the period of the Sophists, when the categories of universal grammar were being distinguished and worked out, and the period of Alexandrine criticism, when the rules of Greek grammar in particular were elaborated. Herakleitus and Demokritus are the representatives of the first period: the one the advocate of the innate and necessary connection between words and the objects they denote, the other of the absolute power possessed by man to invent or change his speech. The dispute, however, was soon shifted from words as they are to words as they once were; since on the one hand it was manifest that the union assumed to exist between words and objects could no longer be pointed out in the majority of instances,
and on the other hand that numerous words are merely the later corruptions of earlier forms, so that the invention of even a single word must be pushed back to an age far beyond the oldest experience. Hence grew up the so-called science of etymology, a science whose name, it must be confessed, fully justified one of its leading principles which resulted in the derivation of *lucus a non lucendo*, "because the sun does not shine therein." Ἠθυμο-νοσία was "the science of the truth," the ascertain-ment of the true origin of words; but in Greek hands its truer designation would have been the "science of false-hood" and guess-work. Its follies have been enshrined in ponderous works like the "Etymologicum Magnum" or the "Onomastikon" of Pollux; and its curious illustrations of the absurdities into which a clever and active intellect will fall when deprived of the guidance of the scientific method of comparison, are scattered broadcast through the writings of Greek thinkers. Two of its rules, for in-stance, both founded on the assumption of the "natural" origin of words, lay down that the word undergoes the same modifications as the thing it denotes, and that objects may be named from their contraries (κατὰ ἀνιψαρία); and hence it was easy to derive φαρμα, "a thief," from ὁφλόωσα, "to steal," by "depriving" the latter word of its first syllable, and to see in *calum*, "heaven," *calatum*, "covered," "because it is open," or in *faedus*, "cove-nant," *faedus*, "hateful," "because there is nothing hateful in it."1 After this we need not smile at Plato's derivation of *thèsei*, "gods," from *théon*, "to run," because the

1 See Jolly (translation of Whitney), "Die Sprachwissenschaft," p. 640.
stars were first worshipped, or Aristotle’s assumption that objects are easy of digestion when they are “light” in weight. Dr. Jolly has pointed out that the fact that ἐρωτός is Ionic indicates the origin of the pseudo-science in the Ionic schools of philosophy; it is therefore a remarkable illustration of the “self-sufficient” nature of Greek thought and of Greek contempt for the “barbarian,” that the dialects of Asia Minor, though so closely akin to Greek, should have been utterly disregarded, and the investigations into language consequently left to the vagaries of the fancy without the light of comparison to guide them to the truth. Plato in the “Krtylus” is almost the only Greek who has noticed the resemblance of one of these “barbarous” dialects to his own, and he has only noticed it to draw a wrong conclusion from the fact. Many Greek words, he maintains, were borrowed from abroad; and by way of examples he quotes ῥῶμο (the Sanskrit śrwaṇ, the Latin canis, and our hound), ῥῶμο (the Sanskrit udam, the Latin unda, and our water), and πῆ (the Latin pruna, the Umbrian pir, and our fire), as being identical with the names of the same objects in Phrygian. The very fact, however, that Plato has noticed this resemblance shows that the stimulating influence of contact with Persia was still felt, even in the domain of language, when the Greeks found themselves in the presence of an allied and similar civilization, with all its contrasts to their own, and when men like Themistokles found it politic to acquire a fluent knowledge of the Persian tongue. It was not until the Empire of Alexander had overthrown that of Cyrus and Darius and impressed upon the Greek a sovereign contempt for the Asiatic, and an equal belief
in his own innate superiority, that any regard for the jargons of the “barbarians” became altogether out of the question. It was then that the masterpieces of early Greek literature came to be the sole objects of study and investigation, and philological research took the form of that one-sided, and therefore erroneous, exposition of the grammar of a single language, which has been the bane of classical philology down to our own time.

The linguistic labours of the age of the Sophists were occasioned by the needs of oratory. When rhetoric became a profitable and all-powerful pursuit, and the end of education was held to be the ability to hold one’s own, whether right or wrong, and confute one’s neighbour, words necessarily came to be regarded as more valuable than things, and the main care and attention of the sophist were bestowed upon the form of his sentences and the style of his argument. Just as language had been approached in the preceding period from a purely metaphysical point of view, and was to be approached in the succeeding period from a logical point of view, so now it was looked at from the side of rhetoric. It was not etymology, a knowledge of the “truth,” that was wanted, but a knowledge of the composition of sentences and of the way in which they could best be arranged for the purposes of persuasion. The first outlines of European grammar accordingly go back to this Sophistic age. We find Protagoras criticizing the opening verse of the Iliad, because μῆνις “wrath,” is used as a feminine, contrary to the sense of the word, or distinguishing the three genders and忙着 himself with the discovery of the verbal moods, while the lectures of Prodikus were occupied with
the analysis and definition of synonyms. Some idea may be formed of the grammatical zeal of the Sophists from the “Clouds” of Aristophanes,\(^1\) where he ridicules the pedantry that would force the artificial rules of grammar upon the usage of living speech.

Plato and Aristotle, the products of the impulse given to thought by that greatest of the Sophists, Sokrates, form the connecting link between the Sophistic and the Alexandrine periods, and renew in the shape required by the progress of philosophy the old contest regarding the nature of language between the followers of Herakleitus and those of Demokritus. In philology as elsewhere, the idealism of Plato stands opposed to the practical realism of his pupil Aristotle. Plato paints language as it ought to be; Aristotle reasons upon it as it is. But in both cases it was not language in general, but the Greek language in particular, that was meant; and owing to this short-sightedness of view and disregard of the comparative method, the theories of each, however suggestive and stimulating, are yet devoid of scientific value and mainly interesting to the historian alone. The problem of Plato’s “Krtylulus” is the natural fittingness of words, which finally resolves itself into the question how it happens that a word is understood by the hearer in the same sense as it is intended by the speaker. No answer is given to the question; but the dialogue gives occasion for a complete review of the linguistic opinions prevalent at the time, and the conclusion put into the mouth of Sokrates is that while in actual (Greek) speech no natural and innate connection can be traced between words and

\(^1\) 660-690.