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Introduction to the Science of Language

Archibald Henry Sayce (1845–1933) became interested in Middle Eastern languages and scripts while still a teenager. Old Persian and Akkadian cuneiform had recently been deciphered, and popular enthusiasm for these discoveries was running high when Sayce began his academic career at Oxford in 1869. In this two-volume work of 1880, Sayce attempts to give 'a systematic account of the Science of Language, its nature, its progress and its aims'. As he explains, the methods and theories which underlie the work were set out in his 1874 *Principles of Comparative Philology* (also reissued in this series). In Volume 1, Sayce outlines the history of theories of language, and the development of a science of language, and considers the causes of language change, phonology, morphology and comparative syntax. Chapter appendices examine topics such as the vocal organs of animals and the various phonetic alphabets then in use.

Introduction to the Science of Language

VOLUME 1

A.H. SAYCE

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCE OF LANGUAGE.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCE OF LANGUAGE.

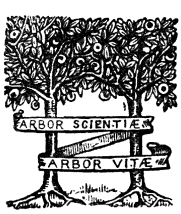
BY

A. H. SAYCE,

DEPUTY PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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1880.

"Ille demum foret nobilissima grammaticæ species, si quis in linguis tam eruditis quam vulgaribus eximie doctus, de variis linguarum proprietatibus tractaret; in quibus quæque excellat. in quibus deficiat ostendens."—BACON ("De Aug. Scient.," vi. 1).

PREFACE.

BUT few words of Preface are needed for a work which will sufficiently explain itself. It is an attempt to give a systematic account of the Science of Language, its nature, its progress and its aims, which shall be at the same time as thorough and exhaustive as our present knowledge and materials allow. How far the attempt has been successful is for the reader to judge; the author cannot do more than his best. The method and theories which underlie the work have been set forth in my "Principles of Comparative Philology," where I have criticized certain of the current assumptions of scientific philology, and endeavoured to show their inadequacy or positive error It is gratifying to find that my views and conclusions have been accepted by leading authorities on the subject, and I shall, therefore, make no apology for tacitly assuming them in the present work. So far as the latter is concerned, however, it matters little whether they are right or wrong; an Introduction necessarily has mainly to deal with the statement and arrangement of ascertained facts. The theories the facts are called upon to support are of secondary importance.

It may be objected that I have handled some parts of the subject at disproportionate length. But it has

seemed to me that an Introduction should give a survey of the whole field to be explored, and not neglect any portion of it for the sake of literary unity or easy reading. There is certain work which must be done once for all, if the ground is to be cleared for future research and progress, and if well done need not be done again. The historical retrospect in the first chapter is indispensable for a right understanding of the "Science of Language;" but in writing it I have tried not to forget that brevity is a virtue as well as completeness. It is the fault of the subject-matter if the chapter seems unduly long.

Exception may perhaps be taken to the use I have made of the languages and condition of modern savage tribes to illustrate those of primitive man. It is quite true that in many cases savage tribes are examples of degeneracy from a higher and less savage state; the Arctic Highlanders of Ross and Parry, for instance, have retrograded in social habits, and the disuse of boats and harpoons, from the Eskimaux of the south; and if we pass from savage to more civilized races there is distinct evidence in the language of the Polynesians that they have lapsed from a superior level of civilization. It is also quite true that, however degraded a tribe or race may now be, it is necessarily much in advance of palæolithic man when he first began to create a language for himself, and to discover the use of fire. Nevertheless, it is in modern savages and, to a less degree, in young children, that we have to look for the best representatives we can find of primæval man; and so long as we remember that they are but imperfect representatives we shall not go far wrong in our scientific inferences. As

Professor Max Müller has said:[1] "The idea that, in order to understand what the so-called civilized people may have been before they reached their higher enlightenment, we ought to study savage tribes, such as we find them still at the present day, is perfectly just. It is the lesson which geology has taught us, applied to the stratification of the human race."

In the matter of language, however, we are less likely to make mistakes in arguing from the modern savage to the first men than in other departments of anthropology. Here we can better distinguish between old and new, can trace the gradual growth of ideas and forms, and determine where articulate language passes into those inarticulate efforts to speak out of which it originally arose. In fact, a chief part of the services rendered to glottology by the study and observation of savage and barbarous idioms consists in the verification they afford of the results of our analysis of cultivated and historical languages. If, for example, this leads us to the conclusion that grammatical simplicity is the last point reached in the evolution of language, we must go to savage dialects for confirmation before we can accept the conclusion as proven. Moreover, there is much of the primitive machinery of speech which has been lost in the languages of the civilized nations of the world, but preserved in the more conservative idioms of savage tribes—for savages, it must be remembered, are the most conservative of human beings; while were we to confine our attention to the groups of tongues spoken by civilized races we should

[1] "Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion," p. 65.

form but a very partial and erroneous view of language and its structure, since the conceptions upon which the grammars of the several families of speech are based are as various as the families of speech themselves. Nor must we forget the lesson of etymology, that the poverty of ideas with which even our own Aryan (or rather præ-Aryan) ancestors started was as great as that of the lowest savages of to-day.

My best thanks are due to Professor Mahaffy for his kindness in looking over the sheets of the present work during its passage through the press, and to Mr. Henry Sweet for performing the same kind offices towards the fourth chapter. Mr. Sweet's name will guarantee the freedom of the chapter from phonetic heresies. I have also to tender my thanks to Professor Rolleston for the help he has given me in the preparation of the diagrams which accompany the work, while I hardly know how to express my gratitude sufficiently to Mr. W. G. Hird, of Bradford, who has taken upon himself the onerous task of providing an index to the two volumes. How onerous such a labour is can be realized only by those who have already undergone it.

A. H. SAYCE.

QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD,
November, 1879.

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