2-23-1990

Language Theory and National Character in the Eighteenth Century

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In *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau took a firm position against the teaching of languages to young people:

I agree that if the study of languages were only the study of words—*that is to say, of figures or the sounds which express them*—it could be suitable for children. But in changing the signs, languages also modify the ideas which these represent. Minds are formed by languages; in each language the mind has its particular form. (109)

Implicit in Rousseau’s injunction is a set of assumptions and principles concerning language and its power to shape thought. In this paper, I would like to investigate these assumptions and principles in the eighteenth century as they relate to the formation and perpetuation of national character. Even though a significant body of scholarship exists on theories of national character and on the manifestation of national types in literature, little work exists, as far as I have been able to determine, on relationships between these and language theory in the century. Yet this was the century in which it first became possible to link them systematically.

As it may appear, my purpose will be largely descriptive, but along the way I hope to make it apparent that language thinkers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were working out the implications of their understanding of the nature and workings of language in three ways: 1) identifying the elements of language that reflected distinctive national traits, 2) defining the manner in which those elements reflected character, and 3) determining which arose first, a people’s traits or its language choices which then helped create its traits. In relation to the first, we will see that in the period covered here, language elements reflecting national character were first identified primarily as words, then as words and syntactical structures, and finally as a nebulous force or spirit infusing both of these. In relation to the second, we will see that defining the mechanism by which language revealed character was generally problematic, but that thinkers availed themselves of the doctrine of association of ideas as a key link between language and group identity. In relation to the third, we will see that one figure who thought deliberately about the problem of causal priority, Wilhelm von Humboldt, recognized the effect language had in
shaping individual thought but found it much more difficult to specify how language created national character than to specify how national character determined language differences.

I would like to begin by running quickly through a series of viewpoints from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and then I will turn attention to more profound and sophisticated concepts linking national character and language in the writings of the Abbe Condillac and Wilhelm von Humboldt. That seventeenth-century thinkers perceived connections between language and nationality cannot be doubted, even though the basis for those connections was not articulated and the connections themselves smacked less of linguistic features than of economic and political prejudice. Certainly, for centuries, writers had taken note of the obvious—the French, the Germans, the Italians not only exhibited distinctive national traits, but they spoke languages which partook of those traits. Language was, if not the rough equivalent of nationality, at least part of the equation. A national language was treasured as part of the make-up of a people, something to be refined, protected. Indeed, as Thomas Sprat observed, the fate of a nation was intimately tied to the state of its language: "The purity of Speech, and greatness of Empire have in all countries, still met together" (41).

Language was therefore linked not only to national character, but to national destiny. It offered itself as both resource and weapon in the struggle for literary, philosophical, or scientific preeminence. A nation’s language offered a sort of scheme for understanding the nature of things and a more—or less—apt vehicle for the elegant expression of external nature and human experience. To Sprat, speaking for the newly founded Royal Society in 1667, it was no accident that experimental science had taken root and was beginning to branch in England. Character and language lent themselves to the task as a gloved hand. Morose as they might seem to the effete French and Italians, the English were ideally suited for advances in practical knowledge, a hardy people of straight-forward, unequivocal communication. And although he did not assert it in so many words, it is apparent that Sprat believed English offered the ideal vehicle for scientific discourse. Sprat’s critique of eloquence and its dangers to scientific advancement, can, in light of commonplace views of Continental languages, be read as much as a critique on them as on eloquence. The English, said Sprat, combined the "middle qualities, between the reserved subtle southern, and the rough unhewn Northern people," but he might as well have been describing their language.

Addison devoted Spectator No. 135 to the relations between language and national character in a way that illustrates
once again the strength of the bonds perceived between the two, but the relative lack of systematic inquiry into the bonds. The links Addison perceives are mostly at the word and not structure level and show more the imprint of the people on their language than of language on people. "I have read somewhere," he wrote, "of an eminent Person who used in his private Offices of Devotion, to give Thanks to Heaven that he was Born a Frenchman: For my own part I look upon it as a peculiar Blessing that I was Born an Englishman. Among many other Reasons, I think myself very happy in my Country; as the Language of it is wonderfully adapted to a Man who is sparing of his Words, and an Enemy to Loguacity." English suits the English because its abundance of monosyllables "gives us an Opportunity of delivering out Thoughts in few sounds." In other instances, such as in the tendency to eliminate the vowel and therefore the syllable from the past tense (e.g. drown'd instead of drowned) and the practice of forming contractions, the English have left the imprint of their character upon their tongue. "This indeed takes off from the Elegance of our Tongue, but at the same time expresses our Ideas in the readiest manner."

Mandeville, who recognized how difficult it was to achieve impartiality in comparing the beauties of different languages (2:297), yet valued English in several ways that were intimately tied to the genius of the its speakers. First off, in avoiding excessive gestures and bawling intonations, the English paid each other the compliment of speaking to engage the reason more than the passions. "I can't help thinking," says Cleomenes in the Sixth Dialogue of the Fable of the Bees, "but that, next to the Laconick and manly Spirit, that runs through the Nation, we are very much beholden for the Strength and Beauty of our Language to this Tranquility of Discourse, which has been in England, more than anywhere else, a Custom .. " (2:292). He seems to have drawn this idea directly from Guy Miege’s Present State of Great Britain (1707). Second, English distinguished itself as a vehicle for communicating substance. Echoing a common sentiment, Mandeville differentiated the traits of English from those of other languages. He charged that French was a very persuasive language, at least insofar as one’s purpose was to coax or wheedle or talk of food and drink. In French, the most valued expressions were those that soothed or tickled; in English, those that pierced or struck (2:297). If his judgment was partial, Mandeville didn’t know "how to be sorry for it." "I don’t think it amiss, that Men should be inclined to love their own Language, from the same Principle, that they love their Country" (2:297).

Johann David Michaelis wrote his Dissertation upon the Influence of Opinions on Language, and of Language on Opinions in response to a prize essay topic of the Berlin
Academy. Part of the background for his work was the debate in the 1750s over the choice of language to be favored in the lectures and publications of the Academy, with Maupertuis and others favoring French. Michaelis' essay attempted to rise above nationalistic panegyrics and to assess, as the title describes, how language and thought shape each other. With the known differences even in European languages, it was impossible for Michaelis to avoid suggesting connections between these and the character of a people. In fact, this study was the first to imply in its central question such connections. Unfortunately, Michaelis did not avail himself of the work of Condillac which had been written over a decade earlier and which I will shortly discuss. His work marks the furthest point to which the investigation could be carried without recourse to Lockean principles of mind and some understanding of the syntactical principles of language.

Michaelis suggested two ways in which language and "opinion" influenced each other. Opinion influenced language in that a people named only things they perceived to be worthy of naming and only in that aspect from which people perceived them: "by this appearance it is, that the names we give [objects] . . . are ever regulated." And: "It is from the opinions of the people and the point of view, in which objects appear to them, that language receives its form" (2). As new words were coined to name new ideas, or old ideas in new light, these words joined the language by a kind of social process. "Thus it is that thousands of men become contributors to that immense heap of truths and errors, of which the languages of nations are the repositories" (3). In relation to abstract and metaphysical ideas, a language was useful only insofar as it had "gone through philosophic hands." Otherwise it would be full of the errors of ignorant people attempting to account for the world but merely reducing it to the proportions of their own blindness. Michaelis pointed out, for instance, that the Ethiopians, "having but one word for nature and person, could not distinguish those two things in the controversy concerning Christ's two natures" (5).

By a reciprocal process, language influenced opinion. A copious language, for example, stimulated perception. Where a language is rich it imports a tincture of knowledge even to the common man: things become known to him, which without the assistance of his language he would even have remained ignorant of; he observes the course of nature better, and finds himself capable of communicating experiments to the more learned, which otherwise would have been lost. (22) But to enjoy to the benefits of one's language in this way required that one know the language well. Peasants lacking full knowledge of their own tongue live in more than economic poverty: "they walk about in the fields, amidst a
rich display of nature's various productions, but they are blind, and are so only for want of fit words to distinguish the productions" (24-25).

Michaelis waffled on an important question we would call cultural diversity. He recognized, as the above passages show, that languages contained very different senses of what existed in the world and how it was all related. Languages differed even more so in abstract terminology. At the same time, he expressed little tolerance for differences from what he perceived as a norm of truth. All languages, in his view, perpetuated both truth and error. But he showed little hesitation in pronouncing upon specific points of error and suggesting ways in which language could avoid them. Perhaps this confidence was related to his faith in learning. Learning liberated people from the errors of language: "The noxious influences of a language, but little affect the man of true learning. Generally speaking, they are such only to the ignorant, to persons of superficial knowledge, to the learned of a contracted genius" (74). In the final analysis, then, Michaelis undid the relations between language and the character of a people insofar as its learned members were concerned. Yet at other points he confessed that many errors contained in language escaped notice entirely (otherwise they would no longer be errors). It would require "some philosophical genius . . . equally a master of some remote language, as the Chinese, as of European tongues" to unravel the strands (71).

If Michaelis carried the inquiry into relations between nations and languages as far as it would go at the word level, the Abbe Condillac, writing a decade and a half earlier, laid the groundwork for these relations at the level of mental processes and linguistic structures. "Every language expresses the character of the people that speak it," he said in Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (1746; English, 1756:285). As I have already mentioned, one finds this opinion nearly everywhere. Condillac drew on principles of psychology to explain how it was so. In the section of the Essay devoted to "The Character of Languages," Condillac treated language as a product of the character of its speakers; however, much material also suggests the reciprocal relationship, that national character is also partly the result of language. I will want to examine each side of this relationship because it defines the first clearly articulated rationale for the widely adopted position that language indeed helped create and perpetuate national character.

The theoretical foundations were set down by Locke. Condillac, in fact, subtitled his Essay "A Supplement to Mr. Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding." Locke had argued that individuals and peoples constructed language as a convenience in communicating their ideas to one another and
that languages differed in their terms because different groups had different needs. Each language therefore contained words that could not be translated directly into others. In fact, even individuals differed in the way they assigned words to name ideas, and therefore language was ultimately a private thing. Especially in arriving at general, complex, and what Locke called "mixed-mode" ideas, people were apt to differ from each other because they constructed these ideas from simpler ones, combining them in ways that did not exist in nature. General terms and abstractions are absolutely necessary. A people couldn’t have a name for every single tree or "every Crow that flies overhead," for example, but nature itself did not dictate where the boundaries between species would be fixed. Much less did the external world offer a pattern for terms such as "justice," "adultery," "fratricide," "corporeity," and so forth. These names stand for bundles of ideas that seem worth differentiating to one people but not, perhaps, to another.

Implicit in this set of theories, we find a provocative basis for links between language and national character. Language recorded, especially in its abstract and general terms, the unique bundles of ideas and associations that a people saw as necessary to discourse about themselves individually, their society, and the external world they inhabited. Locke did not foresee, however, how his theories could be used to show that language in turn exerted an influence on the way a people thought about themselves and the external world.

Locke devoted most of his analysis at word level and did not suggest how the syntactical relations of language arose. However, his principle of association of ideas suggested to Condillac a way in which a people's character would be reflected in their language at both word and syntactical levels. Condillac confronted the question: what caused a person, and, by extension, a society, to associate ideas in a particular way? The answer, finally, was "interest"—that is, an implicit understanding of the way particular clusters of ideas will serve the individual who associates them in a characteristic manner. This principle may be used to explain not only why words differ, but how even word orders and grammatical relationships—assumed by the principles of universal grammar to reflect distinctions and operations of the mind—may preserve the interests of a language group.

In The Art of Writing, Condillac acknowledged the difficulty of defining literary qualities such as "elegance" and "the poetic style" because of the ways these differed not only from great writer to great writer and genre to genre, but from nation to nation. The explanation for the differences is the association of ideas. These differ "with the spirit of the nations who, having different usages, customs, and
characters, would not know how to agree to associate all their ideas in the same manner" (400).

The principle of association of ideas not only explained how syntactical relations might encode a people's way of thinking, it also could explain how language itself influenced national character. Condillac observed that signs were necessary to thought and therefore conditioned it. A people's language reflected its character, but it also produced that character generation after generation. By habit—that is, by growing accustomed to the constraints imposed by the terms and syntax of a language—speakers learned to associate ideas in a manner that appeared natural to them. "We are naturally accustomed to connect our ideas according to the genius of our mother tongue," he said in the Essay (271). With this thought, we are led to Rousseau's injunction against teaching other languages to children before their own thinking had taken the shape of their native tongue. Said Rousseau, "Minds are formed by languages; in each language the mind has its particular form. This is a difference which might very well be a part of the cause or of the effect of national characters; and what appears to confirm this conjecture is that in all the nations of the world language follows the vicissitudes of morals and is preserved or degenerates as they are" (109).

We shall now turn our attention to Wilhelm von Humboldt as the end point of this study—not because he represents the end of inquiry into national character and language, but for two other reasons. First, Humboldt recognized one of the problems inherent in the eighteenth-century handling of this issue and tried to address it, though without final resolution. This was the problem of priority of cause: did national character create the distinctive features of language, or did language choices taken by the earliest founders of nations prescribe the path of development of the their characters? Which came first? Second, Humboldt represented a new phase in the intellectual struggle to locate the nature or character of languages themselves in that he posited the existence of this character at a level beneath, but manifested in, the outer (phonetic) and inner (grammatical and syntactical) forms of language. Humboldt’s writings on language and national character are scattered among papers, essays, and fragments, some of which he never completed or published. As Hans Aarsleff has noted, Humboldt was continually working on his immense language projects but often left them unfinished. He synthesized and integrated most of his views, however, before his death in 1835 in the work just mentioned, which he designed as the introduction to On the Kawi Language on the Island of Java. Aarsleff points to the centrality of the language-nation relationship in Humboldt’s project: His papers "were read with interest and engagement in Paris and
Humboldt acknowledged the elusive nature of the character of languages. To some degree the distinctive bent of each language "is only sensed and cannot be represented" (GS 4:421; Manchester 109). Elusive though it may be, however, it could be approached. We have already seen that the character of a language may be located at word or structure level. Humboldt held that even at word level, even with the same general referents for words from different languages, the individuality of each language emerges. The apparently translatable words actually mean slightly different things in context:

Thinking never treats an object isolated, and never uses it in the whole of its reality. It merely skims off relationships, conditions and viewpoints, and interconnects them . . . and it may therefore justifiably be said that even with respect to completely sensuous objects the words of various languages are not perfect synonyms, and that those who say *hippus*, *equus*, and *Pferd* do not say throughout and completely the same thing. (GS 3:170; Manchester 107)

If the character of a language manifests itself in the precise nature of what is named by its words, it also, of course, does so in the structure, for that dictates the manner in which named ideas relate one to another. To describe exactly how that character takes shape in structure eluded Humboldt, but he was certain that the force of character was in some sense prior to both the "outer form" (phonetic structure) and the "inner form" (syntactic and semantic structure). The opening passage of his chapter on the character of languages in *The Diversity of Human Language-Structure* declared:

The grammatical framework of language, as we have so far broadly surveyed it, and its external structure in general, by no means exhaust its nature, however, and its true character still depends upon something far more subtle, more deeply hidden and less accessible to analysis. (148)

Indeed, the most basic link that language provides between our ideas of things and sounds is a mysterious thing which yet contains the subtle strands of individual character. "We can split up concepts, dismember words, as far as we are able," he wrote, and we still get no closer to the secret of how the thought actually couples with the word. In their most primal relation to the nature of individuality, therefore, language and the basis of all nationality have a direct resemblance to one another. (153)

Even languages of similar structure are known to have
differences of character. Sanscrit, Greek, and Latin have a system of word-construction and word-ordering that is closely related and on many points the same. But everyone feels the difference of their individual character, which is not just a national characteristic becoming visible in the language, but, deeply rooted in the languages themselves, determines the specific make-up of each. (149)

As the above passage makes clear, language itself takes on a character beyond the mere imprint of national characteristics. It then becomes an independent force on the minds of its users, in some ways constraining and hampering what Humboldt called "the free and independent operation of the intelligence" (149). The character of a language is like a spirit which "takes up its abode in the language and animates the latter like a body it has produced" (153).

If language affects national character, as these passages imply, then one may fairly ask which occurred first, the imprint of a group's character on its language, or the effect of even their initial utterances on their traits as a group. And one may ask, in the developing nature of nations and language, which effect is stronger? Humboldt is unequivocal on one point—the effects are reciprocal. That is, each operates on the other. In addressing the question of priority of causation, we must accept a distinction Humboldt made between the early and later stages of language. In the earlier, a great abundance of alternative forms presented themselves in the minds of humans struggling to express their thoughts. The very play of opportunities and forms and the "stimulus of success, engenders and sustains their creative power" (148). The succeeding stage is one of crystallization, when certain forms dominate and the language becomes, "in effect, a finished product" (148).

The analysis of these two stages, and the remark that in the second stage language acquires character, have led Martin Manchester to conclude that "the character of a language is the result of influences operating upon it in its formative period" and that "the doctrine of a 'double character'" (the reciprocal effects of language and national traits) "is relevant not to the initial formation of languages, but only to the subsequent evolution of new languages out of old ones" (111). Manchester seems to have overlooked the caveat Humboldt offered in describing the two states: "It would be a great mistake, however, to suppose that what I have here kept sharply separate for purposes of clear distinction, is equally distinct in Nature" (157). It is true that the mind operates more freely in the earliest stages of language formation and that therefore, in making choices, the mind leaves its imprint more freely on language than does
language leave its mark on the mind. But if it is true, as Humboldt asserts, that the "mode of thinking or sensing in a people ... is already at work upon [language] from the very outset" (149), and that consciousness itself is integrally tied to language, then it is also true from what we have reviewed that the reciprocal effect is at work. The most thoughtful position would, therefore, be this one: that in the earliest stages the effects of group traits dominate over the effects of language on the group, but that in some sense language choices and traits are synonymous and inseparable.

At the later stage, the language may, in fact, become a kind of intellectual prison. If the nation submits to its language without spending creative energies on its development, the nation's collective intellect stagnates: "The language, as it were, outgrows the mind, and the latter, in its own languor, having ceased to be self-creative, plays an increasingly empty game with idioms and forms of language that originated from truly meaningful use" (150). One way a people may keep refreshing their language and minds is to remain alert to the "region that transcends language, and is actually constricted by language" yet for which "language in turn is the only means of exploring and fertilizing" (157). "If the feeling truly awakens in the soul," said Humboldt, "that language is not just a medium of exchange for mutual comprehension, but a true world which the mind must insert, by its own inner labour, between itself and objects, then it is on the right road towards continually finding more and depositing more in its language" (157).

I have reviewed some major contributors to the discussion of language and national character with focus on the elements of language that reflect that character, the mechanisms or means by which it does so, and the problem of mutual causality. I would like to conclude by pointing out that discourse on this topic was being conducted with broader and broader concepts. What began as common-sense linkages between national traits and language eventually took into account both rational and non-rational mental processes. With Humboldt, discourse on language and national character set its foundations in the three concepts of language, consciousness, and culture—concepts that gave universality and profundity to the discussion. At the same time, this very universality made specificity difficult. Discussion of language and national character acquired all the profundity of metaphysics but became detached from the study of language itself.
Works Cited


