

# Linguistic Aesthetics from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century: The Case of Otto Jespersen's "Progress in Language"

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## ABSTRACT

From the early nineteenth century up until the first half of the twentieth century, many leading scholars in the emerging field of linguistics were occupied with what would today be considered a kind of linguistic typology. The various classifications of languages they proposed were generally intertwined with speculation about the "racial" traits or national mentalities that different language types might represent and their putative value relative to one another. This article investigates these schemes from the perspective of Otto Jespersen's (1860–1943) theory of "progress in language." It first shows how Jespersen, inspired by theoretical developments in linguistics and neighboring sciences, inverted the traditional rankings and praised the modern "analytic" European languages over their classical "synthetic" ancestors. It then explores contemporary reactions to Jespersen's theory and traces the gradual disappearance of language evaluation and related questions from the discipline. Charles Bally (1865–1947) receives special attention for his nuanced critique of Jespersen's position, which casts unique light on linguistic ideology in the period that saw the birth of structuralism in its different varieties.

**M**odern linguistics is a largely dispassionate science, treating its object of study, the human language faculty and the languages to which it gives rise, as self-contained systems to be studied in the abstract. This was, however, not always

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so. The beginnings of modern “scientific” language research are often identified with the development of nineteenth-century historical-comparative grammar, whose focus lay on the formalistic comparison of sounds and morphological patterns in languages in order to establish their genetic relations. But many comparativists and their scholarly allies were also equally concerned with what would today be considered a kind of typological classification, which was intertwined with speculation about the “racial” traits or national mentalities that different language types might represent and their putative value relative to one another.<sup>1</sup> Only in the twentieth century did such questions become taboo for mainstream linguistics.<sup>2</sup>

An interesting figure in the transition from the nineteenth- to the twentieth-century orthodoxy is the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943), who was occupied throughout his career with questions of language evaluation: his doctoral dissertation, published 1894 in English translation as *Progress in Language*, is dedicated to this problem,<sup>3</sup> as is his final publication, the 1941 *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*.<sup>4</sup> The topic also features prominently in his 1922 magnum opus, *Language*.<sup>5</sup> Jespersen’s innovation was to invert the aesthetic judgments of the preceding century. While his forebears generally saw in the complex “synthetic” morphology of the classical Indo-European languages—Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin—the height of linguistic development, Jespersen praised the simple “analytic” forms of their present-day descendants as a sign of progress.

This article explores Jespersen’s work on “progress in language” and what it tells us about linguistic ideology in this period. We begin in Section I with an examination of Jespersen’s theory and its historical context. Although Jespersen’s proposal answered to developments in linguistics, it was shaped by influences well beyond the emerging discipline, in particular by innovations in contemporary logic and philosophy of mathematics. The meeting point of these various fields was the international language movement, in which Jespersen actively participated. In Section II, we look at reactions within linguistics to Jespersen’s theory. We see how nuanced critiques, most notably

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1. The best overview of nineteenth-century historical-comparative grammar and language classification remains Anna Morpurgo Davies, “Language Classification in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 607–716.

2. At the fringes of present-day linguistics, questions of the relative complexity of language types and their possible place in various evolutionary schemes are once again making their appearance. Such views have not yet achieved mainstream acceptance. For a good historical overview up to the present day, see John E. Joseph and Frederick J. Newmeyer, “All Languages Are Equally Complex: The Rise and Fall of a Consensus,” *Historiographia Linguistica* 39, nos. 2/3 (2012): 341–68.

3. Otto Jespersen, *Progress in Language* (London: Sonnenschein, 1894).

4. Otto Jespersen, *Efficiency in Linguistic Change* (1941), reproduced in *Selected Writings of Otto Jespersen* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 381–466.

5. Otto Jespersen, *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922).

that of Charles Bally (1865–1947), teased apart the evaluative schemes of the nineteenth century, and yet were ultimately pushed aside as an uncompromising formalism came to dominate the mainstream of linguistics. Section III offers a conclusion.

### I. PROGRESS IN LANGUAGE

“THAT LANGUAGE RANKS HIGHEST WHICH GOES FARTHEST IN THE ART OF ACCOMPLISHING MUCH WITH LITTLE MEANS, OR, IN OTHER WORDS, WHICH IS ABLE TO EXPRESS THE GREATEST AMOUNT OF MEANING WITH THE SIMPLEST MECHANISM.” This axiom, printed in small capitals, represents Jespersen’s formula for “measur[ing] linguistic values” and is the guiding principle of his thesis of “progress in language.”<sup>6</sup> All languages move toward increasing communicative efficiency, believes Jespersen: in every language, there is an appreciable diachronic tendency toward reducing the effort required on the part of both speaker and hearer to transmit and receive a message. In his mature work, Jespersen considered efficiency across all key aspects of languages—their sound systems, vocabularies, and grammars—but his engagement with this topic began with the notion of “analyticity” in grammar, and this always remained his chief concern.<sup>7</sup>

In the first instance, Jespersen’s analyticity is derived from the opposition “analytic” and “synthetic” in language typology, which originates in the work of August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845).<sup>8</sup> Drawing on existing morphology-based language classifications, Schlegel posited a three-way primary division of language types corresponding to the categories isolating, agglutinative, and inflecting, which, while no longer employed in serious typological work, maintain a genericized existence in linguistics up to the present day. In short, isolating languages, prototypically represented by Classical Chinese, have no morphology and rely entirely on syntax and auxiliary words to indicate grammatical relationships. Agglutinative languages, typified by Turkish, have, in addition to syntax, invariant affixes that attach to roots. Finally, inflecting languages, whose greatest exponents are the classical Indo-European idioms, are distinguished by the presence of highly irregular inflections that are intimately bound to roots. In these languages, there is no clear separation between root and inflection—as there is between root and affix in the agglutinative languages—and roots must be classified into different conjugations and declensions depending on the inflections they exhibit. The obvious loss of the defining property of inflection in latter-day Indo-European varie-

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6. Ibid., 324. The axiom is repeated from Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 13.

7. Compare chaps. 17 and 18 of Jespersen, *Language*; Jespersen, *Efficiency*; and Jespersen, *Progress in Language*.

8. See Anna Morpurgo Davies, *History of Linguistics, Volume IV: Nineteenth-Century Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1998), 71–76.

ties leads Schlegel to divide this group into the older “synthetic languages” (les langues synthétiques) and their younger descendants, the “analytic languages” (les langues analytiques).<sup>9</sup>

While there were certainly many prominent dissenting voices,<sup>10</sup> general opinion among language scholars up to the middle of the nineteenth century saw in the inflecting class the height of linguistic development. This judgment would seem to have been first explicitly expressed by Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829)—the brother of August Wilhelm—who famously admired the “organic” Indo-European languages, in which the inflections grew from the “living germ” (lebendiger Keim) of the root, while all other languages merely combine roots and affixes “mechanically.”<sup>11</sup> Following this assessment, August Schlegel himself assigned “first place” (le premier rang) to the inflecting languages.<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), although recognizing and valuing the diversity of grammatical processes exhibited by the world’s languages, similarly admired inflection, and provided a detailed justification for his judgment in terms of Kantian philosophy. According to Humboldt, language is the locus of the Kantian “faculty of imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*), which effects a synthesis of “sensuality” and “understanding.” A word in language combines a physically perceptible sound with a concept, and through this combination the two sides, the sound and the concept, take on definite form. Only in inflected forms is this process of Kantian synthesis properly achieved. The inflected word combines the concept and its relation to the rest of the proposition—expressed by the root and inflection respectively—into a single package where the concept retains its identity. This is in contrast to isolating and agglutinating structures, where the relation is only in loose association to the concept or not expressed at all, and to “incorporating” structures—an additional type recognized by Humboldt, exemplified by the Mexican language Nahuatl—where one concept swallows up another.<sup>13</sup>

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9. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençales* (Paris: Librairie grecque-latine-allemande, 1818), 14–17.

10. Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 14–17, and *Language*, 322–23, summarize a few dissenting voices from midcentury onward.

11. Friedrich von Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1808), 50–52.

12. August Schlegel, *Observations*, 15.

13. See Jürgen Trabant, *Weltansichten: Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachprojekt* (Munich: Beck, 2012), 101–3; James McElvenny, “The Fate of Form in the Humboldtian Tradition: The *Formungstrieb* of Georg von der Gabelentz,” *Language and Communication* 47 (2016): 31–33; Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1836), 169.

In an intellectual environment in which the synthetic inflecting languages represent the height of linguistic development, the loss of inflection in their modern analytic descendants could only be a sign of degeneration. This attitude found its most extreme expression in the work of August Schleicher (1821–68), the leading comparative grammarian of midcentury, and Jespersen’s nominated foil in presenting his theory of progress in language. Discussing the evolution of the older synthetic Germanic languages, represented by Gothic, into the modern, analytic Germanic languages, Schleicher wrote: “Our words, as contrasted with Gothic words, are like a statue that has been rolling for a long time in a bed of a river till its beautiful limbs have been worn off, so that now scarcely anything remains but a polished stone with faint indications of what it once was.”<sup>14</sup> Just as for Humboldt, Schleicher sees synthetic structures as the grammatical ideal, because only the inflected word properly bundles the concept and its relation into a single package.<sup>15</sup> He sought to force the evolution of language into a scheme of development and decline. All languages begin their formation in prehistoric times with isolating structures and strive toward the ideal of flexional synthesis. But only a few languages reach the height of linguistic development; the rest remain at the beginning or intermediate stages. In the historical period, this process is reversed and languages devolve toward the isolating pole. The degree of degeneracy exhibited by a language is proportional to the richness and eventfulness of its speakers’ history: for this reason, among the Germanic languages English has deteriorated much further than Icelandic.<sup>16</sup>

Jespersen inverted these traditional value judgments. Synthetic forms, he argued, force the speaker to fit their expression to complex inherited arbitrary structures. The declensions and conjugations into which inflected words must be sorted are inventories of irregularity and superfluity. Schleicher’s ideal, asserted Jespersen, is simply the product of unfounded prejudice, “a grammar-school admiration, a Renaissance love of the two classical languages [Latin and Ancient Greek] and their literatures.”<sup>17</sup> He concluded: “The so-called full and rich forms of the ancient languages are not a beauty but a deformity.”<sup>18</sup> The ideal language would rather “always express the same thing by the same, and similar things by similar means; any irregularity and ambiguity would be banished; sound and sense would be in perfect harmony; any number of delicate

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14. August Schleicher, *Die deutsche Sprache* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1860), 34. The English translation given here is from Jespersen, *Language*, 326; see also Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 11.

15. Schleicher, *Deutsche Sprache*, 21.

16. *Ibid.*, 33–35. See also Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 4–10, and *Language*, 76–78, which attribute Schleicher’s formulation to his “strong preoccupation with Hegelian ideas.”

17. Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 9–10.

18. *Ibid.*, 14.

shades of meaning could be expressed with equal ease”<sup>19</sup> Analytic forms are closer to this ideal: they provide a means for transmitting broken down, *analyzed*, thoughts from the speaker to the hearer without excess historical baggage: “In language, analysis means suppleness, and synthesis means rigidity.”<sup>20</sup>

Within linguistics, Jespersen’s alternative evaluation rests on a shift that occurred around the middle of the nineteenth century, in which a new emphasis was placed on the pragmatic nature of language. This new emphasis arose largely in response to the materialist excesses of such figures as Schleicher, who forced his theory into a literalist biological mold: “Languages are organisms of nature; they have never been directed by the will of man; they rose, and developed themselves according to definite laws; they grew old, and died out. They, too, are subject to that series of phenomena which we embrace under the name of ‘life.’ The science of language is consequently a natural science.”<sup>21</sup> The reaction—from such linguists as Georg Curtius (1820–85), Johan Nikolai Madvig (1804–86), and William Dwight Whitney (1827–94), all cited by Jespersen in this connection—was to insist on the nature of language as a human institution, a tool for communication between people, whose historical development is shaped by forces that manifest themselves in communicative interaction.<sup>22</sup> Toward the end of the century, this position became the received opinion of mainstream linguistics, as reflected in its incorporation into the leading statement of Neogrammarian theory, Hermann Paul’s *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*.<sup>23</sup> With communication elevated to the primary purpose of language, communicative effectiveness immediately suggests itself as a measure of linguistic value.

It is at this point that “efficiency” enters the equation. In every act of speech, argues Jespersen, there are two opposing tendencies at play, “ease” and “distinctness.” “Ease” is the tendency on the part of speakers to minimize the effort required to articulate their thoughts, while “distinctness” is the social pressure that demands a minimization of the effort required on the part of listeners to interpret the linguistic expression.<sup>24</sup>

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19. *Ibid.*, 365. Jespersen reaffirmed this view in *Language*, 441–42, and Otto Jespersen, “Energetik der Sprache,” in *Linguistica: Selected Papers in English, French and German* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1933), 99.

20. Jespersen, *Progress in Language*, 25–26.

21. August Schleicher, *Darwinism Tested by the Science of Language*, trans. Alexander V. W. Bikkens (London: Camden Hotton, 1869), 20–21. Originally published as *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1863). A summary and assessment of Schleicher’s position is offered by Jespersen, *Language*, 71–76.

22. Jespersen, *Language*, 86–88. See also Brigitte Nerlich, *Change in Language: Whitney, Bréal and Wegener* (London: Routledge, 1990).

23. Hermann Paul, *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*, 5th ed. (1880; Halle: Niemeyer, 1920).

24. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 391–92.

Jespersen sees these two tendencies as driving all kinds of language change, from sound changes to changes in lexical and grammatical form and meaning.<sup>25</sup> These mechanisms come directly from the pragmatic conception of language. “Comfort” (*Bequemlichkeit*) was proposed by Curtius as the main driver of sound change: sound changes come about as speakers seek to reduce the effort required to articulate speech sounds in their mouths. A brake on sound change, preventing the language from falling into unintelligibility, was the opposing need to maintain distinctness between words.<sup>26</sup> The same mode of explanation was employed by Whitney in his “tendency to ease or economy,” which takes on both a simplifying and regenerative role.<sup>27</sup> By abbreviating and distorting original compound forms, it drives the further development of words toward the pragmatic ideal of simple signs for communicative exchange: “Thus the tendency to economy, in the very midst of its destructive action, is at the same time constructive. It begins with producing those very forms which it is afterward to mutilate and wear out. Without it, compound words and aggregated phrases would remain ever such. Its influence is always cast in favor of subordinating in substance what is subordinate in meaning, of integrating and unifying what would otherwise be of loose structure—in short, of disguising the derivation of linguistic signs, making them signs merely, and signs easy to manage.”<sup>28</sup>

A more immediate inspiration for Jespersen’s two tendencies comes from the linguist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–93), whose influence on his thinking Jespersen freely acknowledged.<sup>29</sup> Jespersen’s orthogonal tendencies to ease and distinctness answer precisely to Gabelentz’s “drive to comfort” and “distinctness” (*Bequemlichkeits- und Deutlichkeitstrieb*).<sup>30</sup> This connection introduces a complication into Jespersen’s position, however, since Gabelentz does not restrict himself to purely communicative considerations. For Gabelentz, “distinctness” goes beyond transmitting a clear phonetic signal to include the needs of personal aesthetic expression:<sup>31</sup> “The reason and purpose of the need for distinctness is not always related to business: it can also be tempera-

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25. Compare Jespersen, *Language*, 261–64.

26. Curtius’s formulation was widely received by his contemporaries and is signposted by Bertolt Delbrück (1842–1922) in his introductory history of Indo-European linguistics as one of the waypoints in the development of this field. See Bertolt Delbrück, *Einleitung in das Studium der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 6th ed. (1880; Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1919), 172–73. Note that the first, second, and third editions of Delbrück’s book have the title *Einleitung in das Sprachstudium*.

27. William Dwight Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language* (London: King, 1875), 49–74.

28. *Ibid.*, 53.

29. See, e.g., Jespersen, *Language*, 98.

30. See Georg von der Gabelentz, *Die Sprachwissenschaft, ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* (1891; Berlin: Language Science Press, 2016), 190–94.

31. See McElvenny, “Fate of Form in the Humboldtian Tradition,” 39.

mental and aesthetic, and in this case we prefer to speak more of expressive, vivid, striking language than distinct language. But it is still related to essentially the same distinctness.<sup>32</sup> In his later work, Jespersen allows such factors to play a role in shaping the character of languages: “Man does not live by bread alone, and language has other tasks besides being a useful tool for communications. It is used not only for speaking but also for singing, and talking is often nothing more than a mere playing with sounds to amuse oneself and one’s hearers.”<sup>33</sup> His brief survey of additional tasks of language includes such linguistic phenomena as poetic devices (meter, rhyme, and alliteration), taboo and stigmatized languages, in-group slang, and sound symbolism. But despite making concessions to other uses of language, Jespersen always treats its communicative function as primary.

Although the pragmatic mechanisms of language change to which Jespersen appealed had become a commonplace in linguistics, his value judgments remained highly individual. Even Whitney, a champion of the pragmatic conception, did not deviate far from Schleicher in his aesthetic views. While he rejected the absolute separation of linguistic classes advocated by many of his contemporaries in favor of a constantly evolving continuum of linguistic form, Whitney continued to praise Indo-European inflection as the height of linguistic development.<sup>34</sup> Gabelentz, by contrast, offers a very different position. He labels the inflection of the Indo-European languages a “defective system” (Defectivsystem), where the same grammatical function must be expressed through different arbitrary forms depending on the paradigm to which the root belongs. Rather than being a superior representation of concept and relation, as claimed under the traditional scheme, inflection should be seen in the first instance as a playful expression of the mental energy of the Indo-Europeans during the youth of their “race.”<sup>35</sup> Gabelentz’s assessment is not necessarily a deprecation of inflection, but rather a different way of viewing it.<sup>36</sup> he is not so much interested in the function it performs

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32. “Nicht immer jedoch ist das Deutlichkeitsbedürfniss seinem Grunde und Zwecke nach geschäftlich: es kann auch gemüthlich und ästhetisch sein, und dann redet man wohl lieber von ausdrucksvoller, anschaulicher, eindringlicher Sprache, als von deutlicher. Und doch ist es im Grunde immer die Deutlichkeit, auf die es dabei ankommt” (ibid., 194). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

33. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 442.

34. See Michael Silverstein, ed., *Whitney on Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), xvi–xviii; cf. McElvenny, “Fate of Form in the Humboldtian Tradition,” 40.

35. Gabelentz, *Sprachwissenschaft*, 420–23.

36. Interestingly, Jespersen was in fact accused of plagiarizing this aspect of Gabelentz’s work in his theory of progress in language. The accusations had little credibility and were rebuffed by Gabelentz himself: they were a move of one of Jespersen’s rivals, Jón Stefánsson, in a no-holds-barred contest for a professorship in Copenhagen and based on superficial, largely rhetorical, similarities between Gabelentz’s and Jespersen’s respective writings. The accusations were made in Jón Stefánsson, *Dr. O. Jespersen*



as in what it reveals about speakers' temperament. Gabelentz's approach was fundamentally relativistic. Although not averse to passing judgment on languages, he employed no single measure or scale. Rather, he took the diverse features found across the world's languages to reflect the individual mental and living conditions of their speakers. In this alternative assessment of form, Gabelentz was continuing and extending the strand of Humboldtian thought that values linguistic diversity and seeks to elucidate its causes and implications.<sup>37</sup> This approach reemerges in responses to Jespersen's theory of progress, discussed below.

But Jespersen's absolute scale received reinforcement from outside linguistics. "Analyticity," in a related sense, was also a totem of new notational systems in the sciences that were developed in these years, in particular in logic. The ideals of these notational schemes came to encroach on natural language with the rise of the international language movement, a vibrant stream of activity from the 1880s until the end of the Second World War which sought to institute a single language for international communication. From the beginning, the preferred solution was to engineer a new artificial language for this purpose. Although there were innumerable competing plans and projects, the first candidate to really capture the collective imagination was Volapük, which soon gave way in the late 1880s to the incomparably more successful Esperanto, a language that remains synonymous with these efforts to this day.<sup>38</sup> Guiding the design of all projects was the desire to create a language maximally "simple" and "logical." These concerns became even more marked with the official entrance of scholars into the movement with the establishment of the *Délégation pour l'adoption d'une langue auxiliaire internationale* at the Exposition Internationale of 1900 in Paris.

The *Délégation* was called into being by the mathematicians and philosophers Léopold Leau (1868–1943) and Louis Couturat (1868–1914). It was to be a committee that would examine the international language problem and recommend a solution to the International Association of the Academies, the worldwide union of national learned societies, which would definitively decide on the issue. The committee's final

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*på krigsstien* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1893). Jespersen mentions them in his autobiography: Otto Jespersen, *A Linguist's Life: An English Translation of Otto Jespersen's Autobiography with Notes, Photos and a Bibliography*, ed. Arne Juul, Hans F. Nielsen, and Jørgen Erik Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1995), 86–87. See also Hans Frede Nielsen, "Otto Jespersen's Progress in Language Theory and Georg von der Gabelentz," in *Beiträge zur Gabelentz-Forschung*, ed. Kennosuke Ezawa, Franz Hundsnurscher, and Annemete von Vogel (Tübingen: Narr, 2014), 199–212.

37. See James McElvenny, "Grammar, Typology and the Humboldtian Tradition in the Work of Georg von der Gabelentz," *Language and History*, 60, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.

38. For scholarly accounts of the history of the international language movement in this period, see Detlev Blanke, *Internationale Plansprachen: Eine Einführung* (Berlin: Akademie, 1985); and Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague: Mouton, 1982).

report, delivered in 1908, recommended a reformed Esperanto, a proposal rejected by the Esperanto movement; this reform project ultimately became the independent language Ido (meaning “offspring”).<sup>39</sup> Jespersen was a member of the committee, along with the linguists Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927); all three were already known as defenders of constructed languages within linguistics.<sup>40</sup> It was, however, from the nonlinguists on the committee that Jespersen found the greatest support for his conception of language. Most significant here are Couturat himself, the mathematician Giuseppe Peano (1858–1932), and the chemist Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932).

Couturat and Peano were both leading figures of the “logician” camp in the philosophy of mathematics, which sought to secure the conceptual foundations of mathematics in logic. In their view, all mathematics could be reduced to arithmetic, and this in turn to logic.<sup>41</sup> This movement went hand in hand with the elaboration of new logical formalisms; for both Couturat and Peano the constructed international language would accord with the same principles. In this endeavor, both looked to the early Enlightenment figure Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716),<sup>42</sup> who in his contributions to efforts in his day to construct “philosophical languages” eschewed the preconceived classificatory schemes preferred by his contemporaries and instead aimed to elucidate the composition of thoughts expressed in language, right down to the constitutive primitive concepts. This would, he argued, not only offer a universal language, which, because of the shared basis of rationality, would be understandable to all people, but would also provide a calculus of thought that could automatically deliver proofs and expose fallacies.<sup>43</sup>

The theorizing behind the new logical notations of the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century—endorsed by Couturat, Peano, and many of their colleagues—engages, as Humboldt had done in his earlier philosophical justification for his views on language typology, with analysis and synthesis in a Kantian sense. Gottlob Frege

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39. Jespersen provided his own account of the Ido committee in Otto Jespersen, “History of Our Language,” in *Selected Writings of Otto Jespersen* (1921; London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 743–53.

40. The papers collected in Reinhard Haupenthal, ed., *Plansprachen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), provide a succinct overview of several prominent linguists’ positions on constructed international languages in this period.

41. See Ivor Grattan-Guinness, *The Search for Mathematical Roots, 1870–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

42. See Louis Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz* (Paris: Germer, Baillière et Cie, 1901), 55–56; Hubert C. Kennedy, *Peano: Life and Works of Giuseppe Peano* (Concord, CA: Peremptory Publications, 2006).

43. See chap. 5 of Jaap Maat, *Philosophical Languages in the Seventeenth Century: Dalgarno, Wilkins, Leibniz* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004).

(1848–1925)—another pioneer of logicism, acknowledged as an inspiration by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and involved in priority disputes with Peano—was driven to invent his logical notation, the *Begriffsschrift*, by the conviction that mathematical truths are in essence analytic judgements, and not synthetic, as Kant had claimed. Kantian analytic judgments are essentially the sum of their parts, while synthetic judgments come about through the irreducible contribution of human intuition. Against Kant’s claim, Frege argued that mathematical truths are in fact analytic; all that is required is a suitable decomposition.<sup>44</sup> The aim of the *Begriffsschrift* was to reveal this analytic character and set it out in visible form.<sup>45</sup> Peano did not address Kant directly in his own theoretical work, but Russell drew the link: “The Kantian view . . . asserted that mathematical reasoning is not strictly formal [i.e., analytic], but always uses intuitions [i.e., synthetic]. Thanks to the progress of Symbolic Logic, especially as treated by Professor Peano, this part of the Kantian philosophy is now capable of a final and irrevocable refutation.”<sup>46</sup> The linguistic and logical senses of “analytic”—both embedded in Kantian philosophy—converged as a common desideratum in the language engineering of the Délégation.

The rhetoric of efficiency espoused by Jespersen received its greatest reinforcement within the Délégation from Wilhelm Ostwald who, through his theory of “energetics” (*Energetik*), had a successful parallel career as a popular philosopher. Drawing above all on contemporary advances in physics and chemistry, energetics was a monistic theory of metaphysics that posited “energy” and its conversion from one form to another as the fundamental principle of existence, in terms of which all else, including such traditional metaphysical incommensurables as matter and consciousness, should be understood.<sup>47</sup> In Comtean fashion, this metaphysics extended into the human world, into sociology—or the *Kulturwissenschaft*, as Ostwald preferred to call it—where the development of all culture and society is conceived of as nothing more than a means of making ever more efficient use of available energy.<sup>48</sup> Language was for Ostwald a domain of culture calling out to be optimized through deliberate intervention. His vision

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44. Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), 101. Originally published as *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (Breslau: Wilhelm Koebner, 1884).

45. *Ibid.*, sec. 91. See also chaps. 3 and 4 of Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

46. Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 4.

47. See Volker Mueller, “Freigeistige Weltanschauung und naturwissenschaftlich begründeter Monismus bei Wilhelm Ostwald,” in *Wilhelm Ostwald: Monismus und Energie*, ed. Arnherr E. Lenz (Neu-Isenburg: Lenz, 2012), 5–18.

48. Wilhelm Ostwald, *Die energetischen Grundlagen der Kulturwissenschaft* (Leipzig: Klinkhart, 1909), 37–39.

of the optimal language accorded well with the pragmatic view to which Jespersen subscribed. Language is a means of communicating concepts, and in the ideal language each sign in the system would be associated uniquely with a single concept. The signs themselves, whether in spoken or written form, would be as easy to produce and to recognize as possible.<sup>49</sup> This position became the official line of the Délégation, being repeated by Couturat with attribution to Ostwald.<sup>50</sup> Apart from their inherent design inefficiencies, the multitude of existing languages, according to Ostwald, in itself represents a waste of energy, since we are obliged to learn more than one language or to convert messages from one system to another. A single constructed international language, with optimal design specifications, is the solution to this problem.<sup>51</sup>

Jespersen saw in Ostwald's energetics a broad-ranging theory compatible with his own views.<sup>52</sup> Invoking somewhat off-handedly Humboldt's notion of language as *Energieia*, Jespersen insisted that Humboldt had not been nearly consequential enough in his conception. Language, Jespersen argues, is indeed "energy," which he understands in his own terms as human effort directed to the end of communication, and linguistic progress will inevitably occur as speakers make increasingly efficient use of this energy.<sup>53</sup> Progress can, however, receive a helping hand from deliberate intervention in language; this was Jespersen's motivation for participating in the international language movement.

A constant companion to linguistics and the humanities more generally throughout the nineteenth century, showing many points of mutual influence, is evolutionary theory in biology in its various forms. The most explicit and extreme attempt to align language study with evolutionary theory was Schleicher's biologism, mentioned above, but evolutionary principles and rhetoric permeated the field, even among Schleicher's opponents.<sup>54</sup> Jespersen was well versed in contemporary discussions on biological evolution and directly cited both Charles Darwin (1809–82) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in various works. He also made active use of Darwinian notions of selection

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49. *Ibid.*, 126–27.

50. Louis Couturat, "On the Application of Logic to the Problem of an International Language," in *International Language and Science*, ed. Louis Couturat, Otto Jespersen, Richard Lorzen, Wilhelm Ostwald, and Leopold Pfaundler (London: Constable & Company, 1910), 43–44.

51. *Ibid.*, 131.

52. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 382.

53. Jespersen, "Energetik der Sprache."

54. For background on the interaction of linguistics and biological evolution in this period, see Stephen G. Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

from among variants and the causes of speciation in his accounts of language change as well as engaging with Darwin and Spencer's writings on the origins of human language.<sup>55</sup> By his own account, however, Jespersen's conception of "progress" differed from that propagated in biology. Jespersen admits to being from his student days "under the spell" of the "evolutionary prejudice," a description he attributes to Edward Sapir (1884–1939).<sup>56</sup> But he soon found accounts of progress current in evolutionary theory, such as Spencer's view that progress consists in increasing heterogeneity, to be incompatible with his own pragmatic approach, which emphasized simplicity and uniformity. "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,'" writes Jespersen.<sup>57</sup> "He there speaks exclusively of greater and greater heterogeneity—an 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."<sup>58</sup> Jespersen goes on to comment, however, that he was impressed by Spencer's stylistic advice, which advocates expressions that minimize the effort required on the part of the hearer, although Jespersen felt that he should have also considered the needs of the speaker.<sup>59</sup>

The nineteenth century opened with a conception of linguistic aesthetics that praised the "organic" qualities of Indo-European inflection and deprecated the "mechanical" procedure of other morphological types. By the end of the century, Jespersen had inverted these judgments and held up the "simplest mechanism," the most efficient machine for transmitting concepts, as the linguistic ideal, an ideal that could be approached by deliberate linguistic engineering. Elsewhere Jespersen praised the "'noiseless' machinery" of English,<sup>60</sup> the modern European language furthest down the analytic path, and the language most despised by Schleicher for precisely this analytic degeneracy.

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55. See James D. McCawley, "The Biological Side of Otto Jespersen's Linguistic Thought," *Historiographia Linguistica* 19, no. 1 (1992): 97–110.

56. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 381.

57. Herbert Spencer, "Progress: Its Law and Cause," in *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Spencer (1857; London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), 8–62. On 23–26, Spencer comments specifically on alleged growing heterogeneity in language evolution.

58. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 381–82.

59. *Ibid.* Jespersen refers here to Herbert Spencer, "The Philosophy of Style," in *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, vol. 2, ed. Herbert Spencer (1852; London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), 333–69.

60. Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, Part VI: Morphology* (London: Routledge, 1954), 85.

## II. REACTIONS

In contemporary reactions to Jespersen's theory of progress in language, the retreat into cold formalism and accompanying dismissal of any kind of evaluation that is familiar today was already present. But this opinion does not exhaust the range of reactions: also present were more nuanced views, the most interesting of which is perhaps that of Charles Bally. Although he still rejected Jespersen's judgmental notion of progress, Bally imposed no blanket taboo on assessing the properties of languages. For him, however, the question revolves not around the structure and composition of language systems but the use to which their speakers put them.

The formalist rejection of language evaluation is clearly expressed by Bernard Bloch (1907–1965) in his review of Jespersen's *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*.<sup>61</sup> "Is it part of a linguist's business to rate languages or linguistic features on a scale of practical values?" asks Bloch, and then concludes: "We can describe and codify the facts of language, and we can explain them, within the framework of our science, by historical statements; to judge their usefulness or their beauty is to go outside that framework. . . . This does not mean, of course, that a linguist is debarred by his profession from having opinions or tastes. In his unofficial capacity as a human being and a user of language, he can no more help making judgments than anyone else."<sup>62</sup> Jespersen's folly, and that of the old evaluative language classification, was to permit human fancies to encroach on the dispassionate scientific enterprise.

Bloch was an adherent of the school of American Structuralism that grew up around Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), and his unwavering commitment to formalism essentially represents a radicalization of the doctrines of that school. Bloomfield himself stated that languages have a diachronic tendency toward "simplification," with "shorter and more regularly constructed words"<sup>63</sup> and cited Jespersen's *Progress in Language* in support of this claim.<sup>64</sup> He even incorporated Jespersen's hypothesis into the formal framework of his theory, including the historical movement to shorter and more regular forms as underlying "assumptions" in his "postulates for a science of language."<sup>65</sup> A prime feature of Jespersen's *Progress*, in Bloomfield's opinion, was that it

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61. Bernard Bloch, review of *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*, by Otto Jespersen, *Language* 17, no. 4 (1941): 350–53.

62. *Ibid.*, 352–53.

63. Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Holt & Co., 1933), 509. Compare Joseph and Newmeyer, "All Languages Are Equally Complex," 347.

64. Bloomfield, *Language*, 524.

65. Leonard Bloomfield, "A Set of Postulates for the Science of Language," *Language* 2, no. 3 (1926): 163–64.

more or less presented this tendency as a simple observed fact. But Jespersen's later writings, so felt Bloomfield, took the unfortunate turn of trying to account for language change by making ever greater appeals to language users' "desires or needs."<sup>66</sup>

However, unlike Bloch, Bloomfield never forbade questions about the potential extralinguistic causes and implications of the apparent tendency to simplification—and about language change more generally—but rather postponed them to a time when the sciences had advanced to a point where such questions could be profitably posed and answered: "It is apparent even now that we can see historical change in human affairs most intimately in the change of language, but it is evident also, that we shall have to know far more both of practical (that is, extra-linguistic) events and of linguistic changes that have actually occurred, before we can reach the level of scientific classification and prediction."<sup>67</sup> Bloomfield's restriction of the tasks of linguistics was no doubt encouraged by his adherence to the doctrine of "unified science" propagated by his logical positivist colleagues, with whom he came into increasingly intensive contact and collaboration in these years.<sup>68</sup> A compartmentalized linguistics could concentrate on describing the formal apparatus of languages, confident that neighboring sciences would in due course help to complete the picture.<sup>69</sup>

Among Bloomfield's contemporary intellectual allies—as opposed to his doctrinaire disciplines—language evaluation and engineering continued to be considered legitimate tasks of linguistics. The psychologist Albert Paul Weiss (1879–1931)—generally credited with converting Bloomfield to the psychological school of behaviorism<sup>70</sup>—included such tasks in his programmatic list of "language problems common to both linguistics and psychology which need more intensive investigation."<sup>71</sup> Weiss—and following him, Bloomfield—conceived of language as nothing more than a very complex system of signaling between humans that allows them to extend their chain of stimuli

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66. Leonard Bloomfield, review of *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin*, by Otto Jespersen, *American Journal of Philology* 43, no. 4 (1922): 371. For a detailed examination of Bloomfield's reception of Jespersen, including his theory of progress in language, see Julia S. Falk, "Otto Jespersen, Leonard Bloomfield and American Structural Linguistics," *Language* 68, no. 3 (1992): 465–91.

67. Bloomfield, *Language*, 509.

68. See Henry Hiz and Pierre Swiggers, "Bloomfield the Logical Positivist," *Semiotica* 79 (1990): 257–70.

69. Compare Leonard Bloomfield, *Linguistic Aspects of Science*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, vol. 1, no. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

70. See, e.g., Peter Hugoe Matthews, *A Short History of Structural Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21–22. As is often observed, Bloomfield's 1926 "set of postulates for the science of language" was modeled on Albert Paul Weiss, "One Set of Postulates for a Behavioristic Psychology," *Psychological Review* 32, no. 1 (1925): 83–87.

71. Albert Paul Weiss, "Linguistics and Psychology," *Language* 1, no. 2 (1925): 54–55.

and responses beyond the individual and displace it across space and time.<sup>72</sup> This view of language is essentially Jespersen's communicative conception in behaviorist guise. A united scientific linguistics and behaviorist psychology, argued Weiss,<sup>73</sup> could contribute to such ends as making English more accurate and easier to learn, fashioning a universal language, and comparing and improving the structural forms as well as the phonetic and written substance of other existing languages.

But the radicalization of the next generation turned Bloomfield's postponement into banishment. In Bloch's estimation, the spirit evinced by Jespersen puts him in the company of heretics that transgress the formalist faith by countenancing questions of the external entanglements of linguistic form.<sup>74</sup> Not distinguishing degrees of heresy, Bloch includes Charles Bally in this group. Bally was, however, also an opponent of Jespersen's theory, albeit for very different reasons. Departing from an enduring tendency of linguistics to seek the abstract systems behind languages—famously codified at this time by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) in his notion of *langue*<sup>75</sup>—Bally sought to elaborate, in his signature theory of “stylistics” (*stylistique*), an approach that studies languages as means employed by speakers in order to express themselves in life.<sup>76</sup> Bally goes to some length to define “stylistics” as a precisely delimited technical term: it is to be distinguished from traditional literary stylistics, which treats the style of a particular author, as well as from a study of general principles of expression in human languages.<sup>77</sup>

Addressing such issues as language use and expression would be enough on its own to run afoul of a confirmed Bloomfieldian, but Bally also engaged in the kind of spec-

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72. *Ibid.*, 52–53. Compare Bloomfield, *Language*, 22–29. It is worth noting that Weiss's article, a thoroughly programmatic paper, appeared in the second issue of the journal *Language*, which was in fact the first issue to contain substantive contributions; the contents of the inaugural issue did not extend beyond fanfare and formalities. *Language* is the official journal of the Linguistic Society of America, the chief professional society for linguistics in North America, among whose founders was Bloomfield.

73. Weiss, “Linguistics and Psychology,” 54–55.

74. Bloch, review of *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*, 351.

75. As coeditor, with Albert Sechehaye (1870–1946), of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), Charles Bally was of course instrumental in bringing into the world the foundational Saussurean scripture. Bally himself cannot, however, really be described as a Saussurean: he was never Saussure's student, and in fact had arrived at many of his own theoretical positions before he even encountered Saussure. See Sylvie Durrer, *Introduction à la linguistique de Charles Bally* (Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1998).

76. Charles Bally, *Traité de stylistique française*, 2nd ed. (1909; Paris: Klincksieck, 1921).

77. *Ibid.*, 17–20. The potential ambiguity that arises from the different senses of “style” is most probably what led Bally to eventually abandon the term *stylistique* in favor of *énonciation*, a designation that persisted throughout the century in francophone linguistics.



ulation about links between language and mind that is anathema to the strict formalist. How a language is used, argued Bally, reflects the mentality of its speakers. For example, in the European languages—even those with different genetic origins, such as Hungarian and Finnish—we can identify a shared “European stylistics” (*stylistique européenne*) that rests on a common “European mentality” (*mentalité européenne*).<sup>78</sup> Seemingly unknown to Bloch—or at least unacknowledged by him—Bally’s position here in fact represents a fissure between him and Jespersen. Jespersen was interested in the pressures shaping abstract linguistic systems, whereas Bally looked for the influences on the way in which linguistic systems are used to produce speech. The fissure widens when we consider the nature of the factors respectively considered by Jespersen and Bally. The transferring of propositional content that lies at the basis of Jespersen’s communicative conception of language is reduced to just one, subordinate aspect of language in Bally’s account, the “intellectual” side of language. More important for Bally is the “affective” side: how speakers represent themselves, their subjective feelings, and their place among other speakers.<sup>79</sup> The concrete goal of his stylistics was to examine and represent the affective variants offered within each language system: stylistics “studies the affective value of the facts of organized language, and the reciprocal action of expressive facts that compete to form the system of means of expression of a language.”<sup>80</sup>

A consequence of Bally’s emphasis on the affective dimension of language is his abnegation of the Enlightenment ideal of language as a logical, unambiguous sign system. This ideal is, according to Bally, in fact antithetical to real human language, since it privileges its intellectual side to the absolute detriment of its affective dimension. The ambiguity in language that the logicians seek to abolish is in fact a necessary product of the extension of word meanings and grammatical functions that comes about because of “expressivity” (*expressivité*), the craving of speakers to express themselves in fresh and vivid ways, a notion reminiscent of Gabelentz’s drive to distinctness in its aesthetic aspect. Existing expressions, through repeated use, inevitably become stale and dull, and for this reason there is an imperative to constantly innovate. Among the examples cited by Bally is the adoption of *tête*—etymologically *testa* ‘pot’—as the usual word for “head” in French, replacing the descendants of the Latin etymon *caput* ‘head’. Now the ordinary word for “head” and therefore expressively weak, *tête* is in turn being edged out in present-day colloquial French by newer alternatives, such as *bille*, *caboché*, *citronne*,

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78. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

79. Durrer, *Introduction*, 113–20; Bally, *Traité*, 12.

80. “[La stylistique] . . . étudie la valeur affective des faits du langage organisé, et l’action réciproque des faits expressifs qui concourent à former le système des moyens d’expression d’une langue” (Bally, *Traité*, 1).

and so forth. In terms comparable to Whitney's remarks on the tendency to economy, Bally observes that this process of normalization and blunting of senses is frequently accompanied by an abbreviation of form. In this way, *automobile*, *vélocipède*, and *chemin de fer métropolitain* become *auto*, *vélo*, *métro*, collapsing the compositionality of these forms. What were once compounds slavishly spelling out their senses are now inscrutable snippets used to evoke complex but mundane concepts.<sup>81</sup> In these examples and others we see the primacy of the affective over the intellectual in human language: "The history of a few facts demonstrates to us that the requirements of expression—that is, of life—are more pressing than those of logic; expressivity avoids exact notation of facts and pushes for incessant innovations; in effect, nothing wears out more than that which is expressive, and from there comes the obligation to constantly innovate."<sup>82</sup>

Bally's abandonment of Enlightenment linguistic ideals and embracing of the denotative chaos engendered by expressivity entails a relativism akin to that manifested by Gabelentz. For Bally, as for Gabelentz, there is no single measure or ideal. Bally was not alone among his contemporaries in endorsing such linguistic relativism, even though it was being increasingly overwhelmed by formalism in the mainstream. One of the best illustrations of these alternative relativistic conceptions comes from the second round of academic involvement in the international language movement.<sup>83</sup> As was perhaps foreseeable, the *Délégation pour l'adoption d'une langue auxiliaire internationale* did not definitively resolve the international language question. In 1924, a little more than decade after the *Délégation* officially concluded its efforts, the New York philanthropist Alice Vanderbilt Morris (1874–1950) called the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA) into being, to once again seek a scientific solution to the problem of international communication.<sup>84</sup> Like the *Délégation* before it, IALA organized meetings

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81. Charles Bally, *Le langage et la vie*, 3rd ed. (1913; Geneva: Droz, 1965), 39.

82. "L'histoire de quelques faits nous apprendra que les nécessités de l'expression, c'est-à-dire de la vie, sont plus impérieuses que celles de la logique; l'expressivité évite la notation exacte des faits et pousse à des créations incessantes; en effet, rien ne s'use autant que ce qui est expressif; de là l'obligation de toujours innover" (ibid., 38).

83. The specific example of the international language movement is chosen here to illustrate debates on linguistic aesthetics because of the common ground with Jespersen. This is not the only potential narrative, however. Bally's stylistics could also be discussed against the background of contemporary stylistic and "idealist" approaches to linguistics, represented in more extreme—and often polemical—form by such scholars as Karl Vossler (1872–1949) and Leo Spitzer (1887–1960). For Bally's *stylistique* in this context, see Étienne Karabétian, *Histoire des stylistiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2000).

84. See pt. 2 of Julia S. Falk, *Women, Language and Linguistics: Three American Stories from the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999); Frank J. Esterhill, *Interlingua Institute: A History* (New York: Interlingua Institute, 2000).

of experts to examine the international language problem. Jespersen, unsurprisingly, was among the most active contributors to IALA's efforts. More surprisingly, given his theoretical views, Bally was also involved. The multitude and diversity of languages, according to Bally, is another natural consequence of expressivity. Even as dominant dialects overwhelm their minority rivals, new islands of difference will appear as new expressive forms arise within specific occupational and recreational groups and other social milieux.<sup>85</sup> In opposition to Jespersen and his like-minded colleagues, Bally imagined and embraced increasing heterogeneity in languages. Although he was clearly hostile to the notion of an international language, his participation in IALA's activities is perhaps somewhat more explicable in light of the commissions paid.

Both Bally and Jespersen were present at the 1930 international conference of the IALA in Geneva. As recorded in the protocol of the meeting, Jespersen led most of the discussions, while Bally had very little to say. Bally's name appears only to record his acknowledgment of the submission of various motions.<sup>86</sup> But Bally had already aired his views on how a constructed international language would operate, if it could be instituted. The dream of an "improved" language was unrealistic; the international language could be no more than a kind of amalgam of the common European style and its associated mentality. To speakers of Chinese or African languages, it would be just as foreign and present just as many hurdles as any existing European language.<sup>87</sup>

This relativistic position, which deflated the optimistic idealism of the earlier logicians, in fact became the official position of IALA, courtesy of its head of linguistic research in its early years, Edward Sapir. For Sapir, there was no absolute standard for judging languages: "Language in its fundamental forms is the symbolic expression of human intuitions. . . . If, therefore, we wish to understand language in its true inwardness we must disabuse our minds of preferred 'values' and accustom ourselves to look upon English and Hottentot with the same cool, but interested, detachment."<sup>88</sup> Any postulation of a single direction of development in language would be a manifestation of the nineteenth-century "evolutionary prejudice," which, as noted above, Jespersen acknowledged as an influence on his early thought.<sup>89</sup> Sapir's relativism is classically identified with that of his teacher Franz Boas (1858–1942), who is taken to have introduced the modern conception of the uniqueness and equality of all cultures into

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85. Bally, *Le langage et la vie*, 46–50.

86. Reinhard Haupenthal, ed., *Protokolle der Konferenz der International Language Association (IALA) in Genf 20. März bis 2. April 1930* (Bad Bellingen: Edition Iltis, 2012).

87. Bally, *Traité*, 24.

88. Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1921), 124.

89. *Ibid.* See Sec. I of this article for Jespersen's account of the role of evolutionary theory in his thinking.

anthropology and related fields.<sup>90</sup> But Boas's ideas did not appear out of a vacuum: there is a case to be made that Boas had important predecessors connected to the Humboldtian tradition, in particular in the *Völkerpsychologie* of Moritz Lazarus and H. Steinthal, which also served Gabelentz as a key point of reference in elaborating his own related ideas.<sup>91</sup> There is therefore already an established and varied relativistic tradition in linguistics at this time, which refused a single standard against which languages can be measured, among whose representatives Sapir and Gabelentz may be counted.<sup>92</sup> Bally's position differs from these others, however, in that he looks to style in language use rather than properties of language systems themselves.

At a following meeting of IALA in New York, Sapir drew the consequences of his position: "So far as the logical structure of a language is concerned, we are perhaps not at the end of our researches. . . . [W]e, who are fashioning Occidental culture[,] have been using certain useful linguistic tools. These tools vary from place to place, but by and large are remarkably similar. . . . [W]hy not use the common bond of experience which is implicit in the use of all these tools in a simplified and regularized form?"<sup>93</sup> While "simplified" and "regularized" were still desiderata, the univocal edifice of pure logic was abandoned in favor of more homely expression.<sup>94</sup> Even after the departure of Sapir from IALA, his relativism remained. The final grammatical goal of IALA was to construct a language on the pattern of "Standard Average European," a term coined by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), a student of Sapir's, to designate precisely the kind of commonality between the European languages that such scholars as Sapir and Bally had identified.<sup>95</sup> In the present-day linguistic consciousness Sapir and Whorf are syn-

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90. For a detailed account, see Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998).

91. See Ivan Kalmar, "The *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal and the Modern Concept of Culture," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 4 (1987): 671–90; McElvenny, "Grammar, Typology and the Humboldtian Tradition."

92. Compare Els Elffers, "The History of Thought about Language and Thought," in *Linguistics in the Netherlands 1996*, ed. Crit Cremers and Marcel den Dikken (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1996), 73–84.

93. Edward Sapir, "Foundations of Language," in *International Auxiliary Language Association in the United States, Inc.: Annual Meeting, May 19, 1930* (New York: IALA, 1930), 17–18.

94. Jespersen did not entirely deny the desirability of adapting the international language to forms in existing languages, but his suggestions in this direction amounted to no more than selecting lexical roots that were already found in numerous European languages and so would be familiar to most learners. These efforts did not therefore challenge his a priori theorizing about optimal linguistic form. See, e.g., Otto Jespersen, "The Linguistic Principles Necessary for the Construction of an International Language," in Couturat et al., *International Language and Science*, 27–41.

95. See Esterhill, *Interlingua Institute*, 23; Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956).

onymous with linguistic relativism, as lexicalized in the common binominal designation “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.”

Beyond his fundamental disagreement with the Enlightenment ideal of language advocated by Jespersen, Bally contends that any notion of “progress,” in the sense of teleological development, is incoherent. Here in accord with Saussurean orthodoxy, Bally insists on the unrelenting synchronic nature of language. Speakers live in the present: they can do no more than try to express themselves with the means their language offers at a single point in time. There is no more distant goal toward which they strive and toward which they can direct the development of their language. Of course, admits Bally, there is a very superficial sense in which progress is observable in language, in that new words are coined or borrowed to name technical and intellectual advances in civilization, but these changes, he argues, do not touch the internal structure of the linguistic system. The elaboration of exemplary literary style on the part of some authors—such as refined expository prose—also has no bearing on the structure of a language itself and its diachronic changes.<sup>96</sup>

Progress in language is an illusion caused by singling out specific features in a language and using them to confirm preconceived value judgments, generally without regard for the actual historical processes that led to their development.<sup>97</sup> The emergence of the definite and indefinite articles in French, observes Bally, is often treated as a sign of the language’s logical superiority. It is true that the articles mark distinctions that were expressed less overtly and less consistently in proto-Indo-European and the immediate ancestor of French, Latin. However, the American language Dakota similarly possesses definite and indefinite articles and yet is not held up as a paradigm of logical language. In terms of their actual historical development, the French articles came into being in a “period of semi-barbarity” (*époque de demi-barbarie*) and so could not in any case be treated as a sign of the superior mental development of French speakers at the time. Even in the modern language, the French articles do not exclusively serve the purpose of indicating definiteness. They are among the last remnants of the ancestral gender system, a feature generally considered to be a decorative luxury, far from the concerns of logic. With increasing phonetic attrition in the present-day language, they are also necessary for indicating number distinctions on nouns.<sup>98</sup> In the vicissitudes of language history functions are loaded on and lost to forms without any overarching plan.

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96. Bally, *Le langage et la vie*, 36. Bally’s distinction between different senses of “style” and *stylistique*, mentioned above, is of course relevant here.

97. *Ibid.*, 34.

98. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

The same principles, argues Bally, apply to Jespersen's standard-bearer of linguistic progress, the apparent move toward analyticity in grammar, which he also believes is an illusion. All language systems proceed through an eternal cycle that oscillates between the extremes of synthesis and analysis: "A linguistic form evolving through time can be compared to an accordion that extends and contracts."<sup>99</sup> Bally attributes this cycle to the driving force of expressivity. Striving for more emphatic expression, speakers of vulgar Latin elaborated the analytic form *intrare habeo*, "I will go in," to replace the worn-out synthetic form *intrabo*. But through repeated use the new form in turn became usual and flat, and in French collapsed into the abbreviated synthetic form *j'entrerai*. Speakers of present-day French have now developed a number of new analytic future forms to once again expand the expressive possibilities: *je vais entrer*, *je veux entrer*.<sup>100</sup> The cyclical view of grammatical evolution was not new with Bally.<sup>101</sup> In fact, from the beginning Jespersen had defended his theory against the idea, arguing that, even if isolated synthetic forms or irregularities in a language can spring up, the overall tendency in all linguistic systems when viewed as wholes is toward greater analyticity.<sup>102</sup> One curious aspect of the contrary arguments of Jespersen and Bally is that each accuses the other of looking at language atomistically. Bally insists that Jespersen can only imagine progress in language because he focuses on isolated features, while Jespersen contends that Bally is blind to progress because he fails to see the whole language system.<sup>103</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

The abstention from value judgments about languages current among mainstream linguists today is of relatively recent vintage. Leading linguists of the nineteenth century were not afraid to make their feelings known. They found in their chief object of study, the classical Indo-European languages, characterized by their "synthetic" morpholog-

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99. "Une forme linguistique évoluant à travers le temps peut être comparée à un accordéon qui tantôt se distend et tantôt se replie" (ibid., 43).

100. Ibid., 42.

101. The cyclical nature of grammatical evolution—and indeed the examples Bally uses to illustrate it—is a key assumption of the modern field of "grammaticalization," which traces its heritage in part back to Bally's colleague Antoine Meillet (1886–1936). For an introduction to the field, with brief historical background, see Elizabeth Traugott and Paul Hopper, *Grammaticalization*, 2nd ed. (1993; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a recent discussion of the standard historical narrative of the field, see James McElvenny, "The Secret History of Grammaticalization," *History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences*, October 17, 2016, <https://hiphilangsci.net/2016/04/28/the-secret-history-of-grammaticalization/>

102. For example, Jespersen, *Language*, 424–25.

103. Jespersen, *Efficiency*, 385–86; Bally, *Le langage et la vie*, 34.

ical structures, the ideal medium for human thought and constructed elaborate theoretical schemes to justify their judgments. The modern European languages, in losing the characteristic morphological intricacies and thereby becoming ever more “analytic,” represented for these scholars degeneracy and decline. This is the attitude of a discipline emerging from philology, seeking to confirm its prejudices through arguments that draw on the prestige of Kantian idealism.

Jespersen’s theory of progress in language amounted to no more than an inversion of the traditional value judgments. Inspired by a new emphasis from the middle of the nineteenth century on language as a vehicle of communication, Jespersen saw in the analytic forms of modern languages a more efficient means of achieving this end. The fussy synthetic forms of the older languages represented for him an impediment to be overcome rather than the height of linguistic evolution. His opinion was reinforced by developments at the time in neighboring sciences—above all logic and mathematics—with which Jespersen came into contact through the linguistic engineering efforts of the international language movement. The goal aspired to in these circles was a revival of the Enlightenment ideal of language as an unambiguous, universal sign system. Here modernist optimism and pragmatism superseded the old idealism.

Inchoate versions of the present-day position, in which all language evaluation is taboo, are visible in contemporary reactions to Jespersen’s theory. From the Bloomfieldian school, in particular, emerged an increasingly uncompromising formalism that objected to any attempt to assess linguistic forms in terms of the functions they might fulfill. This formalism, however, represents a radicalization of a more tolerant restriction and compartmentalization of the tasks of linguistics, which still respected the prospect of links between language, the mind and the world as questions to be addressed by the more advanced sciences of the future.

Other scholars continued to entertain such questions while rejecting the specific parameters of Jespersen’s thesis. Charles Bally was committed to a synchronic conception of language on the Saussurean model and could see no way in which a coherent notion of diachronic progress could be articulated. What most distinguishes Bally from Jespersen, his nineteenth-century forebears and even the proto-formalists, however, was his shift of focus from the language system itself to the use that speakers make of it in expressing themselves. It is the needs of expression, according to Bally, that drive the messy polysemy and subtle variety of language so lamented by the logicians. The Enlightenment ideal is in fact incompatible with real language. The inherent relativism of his position puts him in the company of such figures as Gabelentz and Sapir, who similarly refused a single ranking of languages but continued to consider the ways in which languages reflect the mentalities of their speakers. All alternative conceptions were, however, ultimately submerged by the rising formalist tide in the mainstream.

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