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Malinowski and Gardiner: The Egyptian Connection

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Alan Henderson Gardiner

R-B on 150 local groups during his 1910-11 fieldtrip to Western Australia, together with some of his original notebooks; the University Archives include other R-B papers.

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Malinowski and Gardiner: the Egyptian Connection

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Among the Bronislaw Malinowski Papers in the Sterling Library at Yale University is a letter written to Malinowski in the Trobriands early in 1918 (I/3/212A). Although the signature is missing, it has been possible, by checking the internal address against the London Post Office Directory for 1915, to identify the sender: A.H. (later Sir Alan) Gardiner (1879-1963), the noted Egyptologist. A link between Malinowski and Gardiner has already been noted by scholars interested in the history of language-related disciplines: the two are often retrospectively placed together in the "London School" or "Firthian" tradition of linguistics (Langendoen 1968; Henson 1974; Kachru 1981; Robins 1971). In view of the letter's contents, the connection between the two men may be worth pursuing briefly.

The son of a wealthy company chairman, Gardiner had become fascinated by ancient Egypt while a student at Charterhouse. After his undergraduate years at Queens' College, Oxford, he studied briefly with Gaston Maspero at the Sorbonne, and then spent ten years in Berlin working on an Egyptian dictionary project organized by several German academic societies. By 1909, he had begun publishing the series of Egyptian texts with translations and commentary which were to be his distinctive scholarly contribution. Financially independent, Gardiner's only academic appointment was two years (1912-14) as Reader of Egyptology at the University of Manchester, a position he accepted somewhat reluctantly at the urging of Grafton Elliot Smith. How Malinowski and Gardiner met is not clear, although Gardiner's friendship with Smith may provide a link to the prewar British anthropological community which Malinowski himself had entered in 1910. Given that Malinowski was later to conduct a highly polemical debate with Smith and his diffusionist disciple William Perry, who argued an Egyptian origin for all cultures, this seems a paradoxical connection. On the other hand, Malinowski was the son of one of Poland's more renowned contributors to the field of philology, and like Gardiner had spent time in Germany, sharing with him a cosmopolitanism atypical of the general run of English academics of the time. But whatever the circumstances of their meeting, the two were to become good friends, and after the war Malinowski was on several occasions a guest in the Gardiner home.

Whatever personal empathy and social solidarity lay behind their intellectual relationship, they seem to have found common ground in bemoaning the state of linguistics, and in attempts to rectify matters. Each was to make a respected, though non-canonical, contribution to the field. Malinowski's reputation derives from his dictum that meaning must be sought in the "context-of-situation" (1923), an insight that links him directly to the later work of J. R. Firth. While this view has attracted the attention of many philosophers and anthropologists, it is not central to the development of semantic theory as recognized by most contemporary linguists. Gardiner, for his part, brought his ideas together in a work entitled The Theory of Speech and Language (1932), where it was clear that the differences between him and Malinowski had grown (see Chapter 2 of Terence Langendoen's [1965] dissertation for a discussion of Gardiner's ideas, unfortunately omitted from the published version [1968]). Nevertheless, during the period under review here, they shared at least a view that situation was an essential but neglected dimension of linguistics, and that language had more to do with communication than with the static encoding of meanings. In The Theory of Speech and Language, Gardiner explicitly tied some of his thinking to conversations with Malinowski and others fifteen years before (1932: vii). It is not surprising, then, that the fieldworker and the philologist found a large degree of validation and stimulus in the letters they exchanged during the period of Malinowski's Trobriand research.

In his Trobriand diary Malinowski mentions writing to "A.H.G." in September or October of 1917, and again in April and May of 1918 (1967: 108; 265). He considered one of Gardiner's letters to him to be worthy of publication in Man. And published it was, as "Some Thoughts on the Subject of Language" (1919). Its content covers some of the same ground as the letter reproduced below, but of more immediate interest is the way in which Gardiner acknowledges Malinowski: "I should not have dreamt of printing [these remarks] in their present incomplete and admittedly one-sided form but for the exhortations of an honoured friend by whose counsels I set the utmost store, and who considered that they might prove stimulating to some one among those who, in this new beginning of things, are casting about for a promising object of study" (1919: 3). Malinowski, in turn, cited Gardiner at several points in his own published work (1920: 36-7, 1923: 454; 1935: xxii). Although neither man ever engaged a full-scale analysis of the other man's ideas, it seems clear that for a few years they offered each other vindication of their approaches in their respective disciplines.

For Malinowski, in particular, Gardiner's support came at a point in his fieldwork when he needed it, both emotionally and intellectually. On May 3, 1918, when he was "heartbroken at the thought" of writing a letter breaking off one of his romantic attachments, he recorded the following in his diary:

- Letters from Gardiner and Robertson buck me up. I am planning, on returning to England, to form a society or

academy of all those who think like Gardiner and me. A kind of humanistic R.S. [Royal Society], very exclusive and strictly scientific and international (1967: 267).

The letter from Gardiner is almost certainly the one reproduced below. When, a week later, Malinowski was trying "to formulate a few general points of view," his second category consisted of "Reflex phrases, scholia, etc." (1967: 273), which Gardiner had used in the letter. Further evidence comes from the methodological "Introduction" to Argonauts of the Western Pacific, where, in emphasizing the necessity of recording utterances in the native language, Malinowski wrote:

In working in the Kiriwinian language I found still some difficulty in writing down the statement directly in translation which at first I used to do in the act of taking notes. The translation often robbed the text of all its significant characteristics--rubbed off all its points--so that gradually I was led to note down certain important phrases just as they were spoken, in the native tongue. As my knowledge of the language progressed, I put down more and more in Kiriwinian, till at last I found myself writing exclusively in that language, rapidly taking notes, word for word, of each statement (1922: 23-4).

In a footnote to this paragraph, Malinowski claimed that "it was soon after I had adopted this course that I received a letter from Dr. A. H. Gardiner... urging me to do this very thing"--acknowledging Gardiner's contribution, but not at the expense of his own claim to originality. Moreover, he insisted that his corpus of Kiriwinian texts was superior to that of any philologist's because "these ethnographic inscriptions are all decipherable and clear, have been almost all translated fully and unambiguously, and have been provided with native cross-commentaries or scholia obtained from living sources" (1922: 24).

It seems likely that Malinowski did indeed devise the specific features of his approach in the course of his fieldwork, since the development can be traced from some of his earlier ethnographic writings. He had, for example, already stressed the importance of working in the vernacular in his report on the Mailu (1915: 501-2), but hedged it with the qualification "whenever I was able to," rather than setting it up as a requirement of his method.

Nevertheless, the question of Malinowski's originality in this area remains problematic. He may have been "original" in the sense of refining his linguistic techniques in the context-of-situation of his own research. But he was certainly not the first to engage in the systematic collection of native texts. In British circles, Sydney Ray had recommended such a procedure some years earlier and among the founders of American anthropology, the contribution of Franz Boas in this regard is well known. Stocking has noted the links between Boas's ethnographic method

and "19th century traditions of humanistic scholarship in the historical and philological study of antique civilizations generally" (1977: 4), and it seems likely that a parallel case can be argued for Malinowski (cf. Henson 1971: 23-5). The allusions to classical scholarship in his writings, and his references in two of his major Trobriand monographs to the creation of a "corpus inscriptionum" (1922; 1935) suggest a strong debt to the traditions of humanistic scholarship, whether or not this debt was mediated by the "Egyptian connection."

9 Lansdowne Road,
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8 January 1918

Dear Dr Malinowski,

Your second letter (No. 1 must, as you suppose, have gone down) has just reached me, and I want to lose no time in telling you that I, for my part, have never felt more encouraged by anything than by your cordial words of approval. One thing that struck me particularly was that you have clearly understood my precise meaning in all the passages to which you refer, and your comments on them often place them in a light which was certainly implicit in my point of view, but which I myself had not quite realized. These are busy days, when consecutive and, above all, calm thought is difficult; but I shall read your letter as well as your article many times again and endeavour to absorb to the utmost all the good things I know I shall get out of them. Then, very probably, I shall again inflict a letter upon you.

Meanwhile, since you are en route to the field of your researches, I want to put before you some wholly tentative questions and suggestions - things only half-thought-out but which are greatly and persistently haunting my mind. No. 1 is this: the question of language. I am always rather troubled in reading modern anthropological works by the fact that statements, even when quoted verbatim (as they should be; you set an admirable example in this) are quoted in translation only. Now of course the modern field-worker has an immense pull over the critic of ancient texts in the fact that if he is not sure that he has interpreted a statement correctly he can cross-question the speaker. He thus obtains what are in effect glosses (scholia) [or possibly skolia]. But none the less one feels that one would have liked to have the ipsissima verba of the original statement in all its obscurity and vagueness, since that is the way that people think, and precisely the glosses and skolia [sic] are not really the meaning of the original statement, but an improvement upon it called forth by the fact that the questioner is (if you will pardon me saying so) unusually importunate and troublesome. Would it not be true to say that a man's real beliefs, his stock-in-trade, so to speak, are the things he can be induced to say without thinking--his linguistic reflex

movements. Of course it is of immense interest to determine a more or less "primitive" man's capacity for deliberate, individual thinking--what a friend of mine calls a man's "limits of progressiveness": but this seems to me quite a different question from the former one.

I am not sure that you have not said all this, and said it better, towards the end of your essay, which I have not referred to for six months, but the practical application for which I would plead is this: would it not be possible for you often to place in footnotes or in an appendix the actual native text of important assertions made in your hearing, or replies to your questions. These would always serve you and others as points of repair whenever, as must necessarily be the case sometimes, doubts arise as to the correctness of an interpretation, or when a new synthesis suggests itself. I sadly miss in anthropological books something corresponding to our ancient religious texts, which I am continually interpreting and reinterpreting.

The next point I have to put to you about language is one I shall find very difficult to express, and if I fail to make myself clear on the subject it is because I am not clear on the point. I have not had the advantage (sometimes, I fear, a disadvantage) of a philosophical training, but in most discussions of the bigger problems that I read I have a hazy kind of notion that the writers have never asked themselves exactly the meaning of the words they are using. Philosophers seem to forget that all language, even the simplest, is a mass of daring abstractions, and that philosophy ought to be, to a large extent, the consideration of the validity of those abstractions, or if not their validity, their usefulness--the two things, I take it, are one. For instance, I have before me a book which begins thus: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" He then goes on to discuss the "existence" of a chair, a "table" etc., and he does this mainly by considering chairs, tables etc. as they come before us phenomenally. This is, no doubt, all very much as it should be; but I feel morally certain that quite half the question for the real philosopher is here left out. What worries me much more than an actual "chair" or "table" is to account for the words "chair" and "table," applied to such extremely disparate objects. And then again that precious word "existence!" Nowadays we are overburdened with the "problem of existence;" but my Egyptians only rather rarely use the word, and with them the copula ("is", "are") is almost invariably omitted. I have made the little discovery that, so far as Egyptian is concerned, the verb "to be" (itself derived from "to move") is only used for the copula in the case of modalities, temporal or otherwise, of the verb, e.g. "would be" "will be". For example: "he is in the house" is in Egyptian "he-in-house" and the insertion of the verb "to be" is the direct outcome of the desire to express the idea of "he-in-house" [in the?] future or otherwise circumscribed conditions. It seems then that whole ages of men have got on very comfortably without the conception of "existence", and I sometimes wonder whether we should not have

been better off if we had done so too! Some of our long-lived abstractions, such as "substance" have been purged away by modern science, the term "god" no longer makes the same appeal it did a couple of centuries ago, and so, too, perhaps, we ought to shed "existence". Be this as it may, I feel certain that among the most important tasks before us is to trace from savagery up the gradual evolution of the meanings of words. As a philologist [sic], I am supremely dissatisfied with the whole position of semantics. It is true, I have read neither Paul nor Wundt, but I have read later books on semantics where their results ought to be incorporated. Lévy-Bruhl and Powell (History of the New World) have a few things of interest . . . [here the letter, as preserved, breaks off]

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Peter Austin (Linguistics, La Trobe University) is writing a paper describing the card file which Radcliffe-Brown kept on 150 local groups from the Gascoyne-Ashburton region during his fieldwork in Western Australia in 1910-11 (cf. under Sources for the History of Anthropology).

Thomas Buckley (Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Harbor Campus) hopes to finish a book on A. L. Kroeber and "the moral context of anthropological understanding" during a sabbatical leave starting this fall.

James Clifford (History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz) is doing research on the history of collections, and on the alternate ways of displaying non-Western and American minority "art" and "culture."

Victor Golla (Anthropology, George Washington University) is collaborating with Piero Matthey (Turin) on a new, much expanded edition of the correspondence between Edward Sapir and Robert H. Lowie.

Joan T. Mark (Cambridge, Mass) has received an individual award from the History and Philosophy of Science Program of the National Science Foundation for research on "anthropology in the field--the problems of ethnography."