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INTERMISSION: ON ANIMATE AND INANIMATE EVOLUTION

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An early, perhaps the first, design of an analogy between the evolution of animate beings and the evolution of inanimate language appears in a lecture given by the scientist, historian, philosopher and etymologist T.H. Huxley in 1854, "*On the Common Plan of Animal Forms*":

> The lecturer here drew an illustration from Philology – a science which in determining the affinities of words also employs the method of gradation. Thus *unus*, *uno*, *un*, *one*, *ein*, are said to be modifications of the same word, because they pass gradually into one another. So *Hemp*, *Hennep*, *Hanf*, and *Cannabis*, *Canapa* and *Chanvre* are respectively modifications of the same word; but suppose we wish to make out what, if any, affinity exists between *Hemp* and *Cannabis*, the method of gradations fails us. It is only by all sorts of arbitrary suppositions that one can be made to pass into the other.
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> Nevertheless modern Philology demonstrates that the words are the same, by a reference to the independently ascertained laws of change and substitution for the letters of corresponding words, in the Indo-Germanic tongues: by showing in fact, that though these words are not the same, yet they are modifications by known developmental laws of the same root.
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> Now Von Bär has shown that the study of development has a precisely similar bearing upon the question of the unity of organization of animals. He indicated, in his masterly essays published five and twenty years ago, that though the common plans of the adult forms of the great classes are not identical, yet they start in the course of their development from the same point. And the whole tendency of modern research is to confirm this conclusion.
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> If then, with the advantage of the great lapse of time and progress of

> knowledge, we may presume to pronounce judgment where Cuvier and Geoffroy St. Hilaire were the litigants – it may be said that Geoffroy's inspiration was true, but his mode of working false. An insect is not a vertebrate animal, nor are its legs free ribs. A cuttlefish is not a vertebrate animal doubled up. But there was a period in the development of each, when insect, cuttlefish, and vertebrate were undistinguishable and had a *Common Plan.*"

The common plan for animate beings was some unidentified protoplasmic concoction of million of years ago; the common plan for European languages was what had been named at the beginning of the century: Indo-European.

A question that puzzled Huxley and Darwin, and continues to puzzle us, is whether general animate evolution has led from the simple to the complex, has been 'progressive' or not. We generally think of animate evolution as a progressive enterprise, leading as it did from simple brainless creatures to invertebrates to vertebrates to human beings, to what may be, despite the profession of the present reporter, the final and highest evolutionary development: the college professor. But Huxley was till way after the publication of the *Origin* more insistent upon Lyellian non-progressivism than tolerant of Spencerian progress. A change in environment, he seems to have enjoyed pointing out, may lead to lichens becoming the only life on earth, lichens replaced by giant crabs by H.G. Wells, an emigré from Huxley's classes, in his science-fiction extravaganza, *The Time Machine.*

And Darwin didn't consider it just to use 'higher' and 'lower' as taxonomic division, though thinking that dichotomizing is unjust did not prevent him from using these terms, any more than our knowing it irrational to use such value terms with reference to political parties in the U.S. prevents our using them anyway. A close examination of a fossil trilobite shows it to be as advanced in its morphology as its descendants, and a close examination of an earlier eukaryotic cell could show that to be as complicated in its various features, from protective devices to water and disposal systems, as a city.

If we were to focus on the brain as the most important feature of life, then there seems little doubt that evolution has proceeded from animals with no enviable mental achievement to us, though Thomas Hardy in "Before Life and After" was envious of those ancient animals who were blissfully nescient; and Mark Twain in "The Damned Human Race"

argued persuasively that human beings were very primitive in their ethics as compared to crocodiles.

Perhaps the most cheerful tracking of progress from primitive to complicated through the enlargement and complexity of descendant brains is the theory of Omega, an invention of Teilhard de Chardin, tracking evolution from lower forms to higher and finally to amalgamation with the highest form of Intelligence of all, God, whose mentality will merge with ours in a exquisite Saran wrap enveloping the earth. That the concept of 'God' as Intelligent Being is pure nonsense gives credibility to Teilhard's theory. Its paleontological data are supports for a theological kitsch that verges towards heresy as much as it does towards harmony.

Exploring the forest of language, we may deduce that it has undergone simplification in that so many more languages have gone extinct than are extant. This pruning is comparable to what happened in animate evolution, as is the mystery about how so many phyla appeared at once 700 million years ago comparable to the mystery of the origin of so many phyla of languages a long time ago (this phrase the closest one can come to timing the origin, or the origins). As to whether the English language in its evolution has moved from the simple to the complex or vice-versa, this paper can offer only the supposition that this language has mostly enjoyed simplification. Because the present reporter is at best a dilettante linguist, he will resist the temptation to survey the types of English investing our globe – Indian, Australian, British, Flemish, etc. etc., and will focus on the species that has appeared in his own neighborhoods.

The increase in vocabulary is not a sign of increased complexity any more than a large number of legs, as in a spider or a centipede, indicates a greater complexity than a small number of legs, as in a kangaroo's saltigrade apparatus or in Claudia Shiffer's lovely plantigrade legginess. The lexicon of English has increased abundantly from 50.000 or so words in Anglo-Saxon to the present 300.000 or so in a desk dictionary, which number, perhaps coincidentally, equals that of taxonomic names for various species of beetles. And it should be noted that adding words that appear only in specialized dictionaries will build the English lexicon up to half a million; e.g., most of the 75.000 words in Dorland's *Medical Dictionary* don't appear in the *American Heritage Dictionary*; and a similar situation exists with specialized dictionaries in chemistry, biology, physics, aero-space, cyberwork, and slang (for fecundity, see *The F Word*, ed. Jesse Scheidlower, 1995).

Increase in words may be better noted as development of richness rather than of complexity. Lexical complexity results not from a mere number of words, but from the sources of those words. College students and other moderately enlightened people will have trouble defining these English words - these examples chosen because each comes from a non-English language, the first from a pacific rim country and then the others from countries as we undertake an eastward trek from Asia to Europe to America: tsunami, kowtow, suttee, babushka, baksheesh, chador, shibboleth, janissary, palaver, bowdlerize, mugwump, and mana.

Anglo-Saxon had none of these words. For new concepts, it would combine words already in the language. The following list indicates the Ango-Saxon words, their meanings, and their replacements by words from other languages.

rim-craeft	number-craft	arithmetic
earth-craeft	earth-craft	geology
laece-craeft	leeth-craft	medicine
tungo-craeft	star-craft	astronomy
tungol-witegan	men wise about the stars	magi
heah-boda	high-spirit	archangel
heahfaeder	high father	patriarch
frumweorc	beginning work	creation
fielleseornes	falling sickness	epilepsy
thriness	three-ness	trinity
gospel	God-spell	evangel

As indicated in the pair gospel-evangel, often enough the Old English words survived with its non-English synonym: god-deity, sin-transgression, doomsday-Judgment Day, dipping-baptism, withstand-oppose.

German is a closer kin to its Anglo and Saxon dialect relatives than is modern English. German continues declensions, gender notification, and other grammatical traditions dropped as Old evolved into Medieval and then Modern English. As for vocabulary, German has been much more fond of using its own elements for creation of new words than English has been. For example, to pluck words relating to what we're all doing at the moment:

Latin or Greec source	From Ur-German
aspirate	Hauchlaut
appraise	abschätzen
probe	sondieren
question	Frage
hilarity	Ausgelassenheit

If increase in words is to be taken as a sign of an evolved complexity, than attention has to be paid to metaphors and to parts of speech. To sastisfy an ordinate requirement for evicence, one could list 100,000 metaphoic meanings. One example will do: window. And there is nothing iffy about English pleasure in making a new part of speech - as making verbs out of "table", "chair", and "bull". Attention will also have to be paid to tracking down the lexicons of dialects in the various manifestations of global English, for example Cockney, Creole and Hibero-English. And dialects within the U.S. not only sport their own peculiar pronounciations, but also their own lexicons. A couple of neighborly examples will suffice in specification of lexical abundance, which need not be labelled complexity.

First, Nyork, obviously a handy blending of "New York". A Chinese linguist, Weiju Zhu, now Chair of the Harbin University Department of Foreign Languages, in Worcester four years ago was introduced to a booklet distributed by the Democratic Party ("Democratic Party" itself a euphemism for "Republican Party"). This booklet was to insure the survival of delegates attending the Democratic National Convention, enabling them to understand communication from taxi-cab drivers and deli servers. Linguist Zhu was so much impressed by the words that he immediately memorized them and their meanings, e.g., "boid", "thoid", "vahs", "chalk-lit", "cwafee", "poor" (for "paw"), and "porn" (as in the name of a shop to which customers bring goods as security for loans). Professor Zhu still amuses his colleagues by asking them "Jeat?" as an invitation to dinner, and by assailing them with the Yiddish lexicon more common in Nyork than in Dallas, Texas, e. g., "megilla", "schlock", "kitsch", "glitzy", "shtick", and "spiel"; "kibbutz", - "kvetch" and "yenta"; "nosh" and "schmaltz"; "schmooze", "mazuma"; "putz", "schmuck" and other terms lacking in affection for schlemiels who would schlep the political mavens' suitcases, agendas, and other tchatskas.

Secondly, the most recent evolutionary expression of dialect vigor: Ebonics. To those who don't speak Ebonics, the language seems complicated to the point of being incomprehensible. On web sites, such as Ebonics Lectric Library, the cybernaut can cruise into classics such as "Paradise Lawst", "Rime o da Auntshint Marimer", and "Damlet", by William Snakeshit, from which four passages will suffice as illustrations of this new simplification or complication of English:

Scene: Ah Elsinore sheeit. A platform before de damn castle. Sheeit.
Bernado: Who's dere?
Francisco: Nay, answa' me. Dig dis: stand out and unfold yourself. What is it, Mama?
...
Damlet: O, dat dis too too solid flesh would melt,
Daw and resolve itself into some dew. Right on!
Or dat de damn Everlastin' had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughta! O God. Right on! God. Right on!
...
Polonius: Dis above all, dig dis: 't dine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as de night de damn day,
Dat dou canst not den be false to any dude.

If this is too easy to translate, the serious student is advised to see Airplane, wherein Ebonic conversation between two passengers is translated in accompanying captions.

Unlike Hebonics, Ebonics has become a source of cultural controversy as well as amusement for honchos. The Oakland, California, School Board ordered recognition of Black English by public school teachers. To some, such as the Language Society of America, recognition of vernacular of pupils is a good procedure to teach them the value not only of their own true selves, but also the value of standard English. To others, such as politicians and voters favoring Senate Bill 205, any reference to any non-standard vernacular is crap.

Signals of evolving simplicity are given by what's happened to grammar and syntax. The impregnation of English with French as a result of the Norman conquest generated a new English, 1200 usually taken as the year for the beginning of Middle English as distinct from Old English. The Anglo-Saxon language was fond of declensions. It had, for

example, the following declensions of OE originals "stone", "hunter", and "gift".

	Masculine a-stem	Masc. consonant stem	Feminine
Singular N.	stan	hunt-a	gief-u
G.	stan-es	hunt-an	gief-e
D.	stan-e	hunt-an	gief-e
A.	stan	hunt-an	gief-e
Plural N.	stan-as	hunt-an	gief-a
G.	stan-a	hunt-ena	gief-a
D.	stan-um	hunt-um	gief-um
A.	stan-as	hunt-an	gief-a

Similar complexities in adjective declensions, in articles, and in personal pronouns characterized Old English, and the interested reader can find these specified in the source from which this chart was taken: Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*. A tiny bit of simplification is achieved by no longer mandating "an" as the article form before an "h"; a historical simplification a little more important is the decay of the subjunctive, as though that mode was no longer necessary for circumstance of contingency.

Simplicity, the movement towards converting English into an analytic language like Chinese, resulted most dramatically from the obliteration of gender and case inflections, which process of declining declensions may have been initiated in English before Frenchification.

"Ain't", which has been knocking at the door for admission since Willy Snakeshit's time, is an example of simplicity in that it achieves economy by eliminating "am", "is", and "are". But it survives only in the low talk of low people, as does "don't" for attachment to singular subject, and the "f word" for attachment to anything.

Strong candidates for admission to proper English are "they" and "their" for reference to singular as well as plural subjects. "One" has been operative for two millenia, but it is too formal for low places like the street or the classroom, and is more at home in the office of a teacher desirous of demonstrating what a lout the conferring student - he or she or he/she - is. "They" for singular allows writers to avoid not only "one" but also "he" and "she", and especially "he/she", which sounds like a

bar of chocolate, and "s//he", favored by feminists and perhaps also by anti-feminists because of its homophonic hint.

Now to complications. Some impositions don't cause much trouble nowadays for the native speaker of English because they [sic!] quickly enough learn to ignore the intrusive unpronounced "g" in

"light" (< OE *liht*)	"might" (<OE *meahte*)
"night" (< OE *niht*)	"right" (<OE *riht*)
"sight" (< OE *sihth)*	origin of "blight" is unknown

The "b" in "debt" and "debtor" is more reasonable because it's a vestige of the ancestral form wherein it was pronounced: L. *debitum*. The point of this excursion is that the new dietary hope implicit in "lite" actually brings the concoction so designated closer to its original Anglo-Saxon than "light", though "beer" today is probably a diminution of A-S *beor* in inspiring mayhem.

The evolution of "whom" is a surprise. It seems as though it's a product of a prescriptive grammarian such as Bishop Lowth in 1762, an un-English imposition of "m" for objectivity. But it actually is a descendant of OE *hwam*, its kin "him". Teachers from elementary through graduate education have devoted many hours on a tremendous mission to teach students and themselves the difference between "who" and "whom", a mission which has over the centuries and the globe cost millions of dollars. The investigator will find evidence of continued confusion over which to use in everything from a paper by Joe (or Joan) Schmo to plays by Shakespeare to a novel by Eric Ambler.

A complexity which has become standard in the U.S. today is the imposition of an apostrophe for mere plural. An adventure I participated in four decades ago is so pertinent that a momentary lapse to autobiography may not be impertinent. It happened in an Illinois supermarket. Noticing the sign "deposit bottle's here", I pursued a boy clerk and copped his pencil, the eraser of which I employed to correct the error. When I returned to the store the following week, a week spent cheerfully because I had actually achieved a reform in a world resistent to that process, I saw that the apostrophe had been re-installed. I resisted the impulse to strangle the boy clerk when he informed me that he had put it back – and asked him WHY? He said that most people expected that thing there before the "s" - and I left despondently muttering that he was

nothing beyond a half-s himself.

Then ten years ago another one of these apostrophe adventure's. This took place in a store near Worcester, Spag's - famous then as the seller of more electric hand-tools than any other store. Over one alcove of the store, the shelves full of little bottle's, was an eight-foot wooden crescent reading "SPICE'S". I wrote a letter to the manager informing him of the error and was rewarded with the owner's sending me a large carton of oranges and grapefruits - in appreciation of my helping correct the error. The citrus fruit was so tasty that I still don't mind seeing that "SPICE'S" still displayed. I guess customers expect it. That the apostrophe tail is attached to mere abbreviations, such as of dates and titles, has been understood by most Ph.D's during the 1990's.

On apostrophes, "it's" as genitive is much more common among college students than "its". And few of them can understand the difference. Pointing out that "it's" as genitive is as dumb as "hi's" results in some students from then on using "hi's" as an improvement over "his". I suspect that if they were ever smart enough to refer to a genitive female form, it would be "her's", as in "That's her's if she wants it". This is similar to the use of the apostrophe just about everywhere in referring to someone's relative or friend, as in "Newt Gingrich is actually a partner of Bill Clinton's". You can find that grammatical error which inspires the implicit question (a partner of Clinton's what? his wife? his daughter? his Buddy?) in this week's *New York Times*.

Heuristically speaking, then, the paradigmatic dimensions of lexical, grammatical, and syntactical diversity suggest to a commentator of propaedeutic inclination that English is no longer a tot.

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