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## INVENTING THE NATIVE SPEAKER

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**Abstract:**

This paper argues that employing the designations “native speaker” and “native language” unreflectively is to engage in a gesture of othering that operates on an axis of empowerment and disempowerment. Bonfiglio examines the ideological legacy of the apparently innocent kinship metaphors of “mother tongue” and “native speaker” by historicizing their linguistic development. He traces the construction of ethnolinguistic nationalism, a composite of national language, identity, geography, and race, which informed the philology of the early modern era and culminated most divisively in the race-conscious discourses of the 19th century. Bonfiglio makes the case that scholarship should scrutinize the tendency to over-extend biological metaphors in the study of language, as even today these encourage, however surreptitiously, genetic and racial impressions of language.

**Keywords:**

native speaker ♦ mother tongue ♦ vernacular ♦ Middle Ages ♦ religion ♦ nationalism

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One of the most divisive issues in the discourse of operational multilingualism concerns the ideology of native speaker authority. To employ the designations “native speaker,” “native language,” and “mother tongue” unreflectively is to engage, from the instant of first perception, in a gesture of othering that operates on an axis of empowerment and disempowerment. Those born into the matrix of nation and language can often invoke, in conversations with someone foreign to that matrix, the notion of a birthright of linguistic authority, an authority that is configured as an infallible innate sense of the acceptable utterance. As Bourdieu has pointed out, such invocations may involve a certain inevitable intimidation; they include “a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is (to the extent that it implies no

*act of intimidation*)” (Bourdieu 1991, 51), a violence that “can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it” (51). Habituation forms a crucial part of the interaction between L1 and L2 speakers of the same language and renders invisible the dynamics of symbolic violence therein: one readily claims or yields authority, falling comfortably into place along the borderline of the master/slave dyad. Under the magnification of reflective linguistic inquiry, however, that borderline looms large, wide, vague, and porous and shows itself to be constructed upon layers of misprision and folkloric concepts of language. Indeed, there is nothing intrinsically linguistic about that borderline of native language nationality; it is erected by psychological, social, political, historical, and cultural anxieties that have been projected upon language.

These anxieties originate in a fundamental ethnolinguistic prejudice: “our native” language, which is “our birthright,” is seen as endangered by the presence of an other who is perceived as a biological contaminant and thus a threat to the matrix of nation, ethnicity, and language. Such ethnolinguistic prejudice continually lurks behind the apparently innocent kinship metaphors employed to describe the authority of the speaker who acquired the language in question as his or her first language. These are metaphors of nativity and maternity found in the locutions “native speaker,” “mother tongue,” “native language,” *langue maternelle*, *locuteur natif*, *Muttersprache*, *Muttersprachler*, *lingua materna*, *modersprake*, and so on.

On Thursday, July 12, 1990, the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times* listed the following advertisement: “Established private school urgently requires native speaking expatriate English teachers for foreign students.” By Saturday, July 14, the advertisement had been changed to read “Established private school urgently requires native speaking *Caucasian* English teachers for foreign students” (Kandiah 1998, 79). It does not require great powers of speculation to imagine the discussions at *The Straits Times* on that Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, an inauspicious day for the Anglophone applicants who did not look like they spoke English properly. This example belies the ostensible innocence and neutrality of the locution “native speaker,” which is used to indicate someone possessing natural authority in language. It shows that the semantic field of the term “native” clearly contains notions of race and ethnicity.

Native speaker authority is clung to tenaciously, in spite of quite obvious counterexamples, such as the number of American students whose papers are corrected by faculty who are not L1 speakers of English, and also in spite of the plenitude of scholarship problematizing the entire issue. Beginning with Florian Coulmas's anthology *A Festschrift for Native Speaker* (1981), Thomas M. Paikeday's *The Native Speaker is Dead!* (1985), Alan Davies's *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics* (1991), and Rajendra Singh's *The Native Speaker: Multilingual Perspectives* (1998), research has explored the gray area between L1 and L2 speakers and illuminated the prejudicial gestures of power and hegemony in the image of the native speaker. Although scholarship has succeeded in problematizing the issue, the concept of native speaker itself has never been historicized. My work historicizes the metaphors of nativity and maternity found in the locutions in question and illuminates the ethnolinguistic prejudices that generate the kinship metaphors employed to describe the authority of the L1 speaker. These locutions arose with the nation states in the early modern era as gestures of ethnolinguistic nationalism.

The genetic myths of "mother tongue" and "native language," especially in the service of exclusionary nationalism, were not present in antiquity. While the Romans and Greeks had clear standards of proper Roman Latin and Attic Greek, they did not articulate these standards in ethnic contexts. The Greek term for proper speech was *γλῶσσα Ἀττικὴ* (*glōssa Attikē*), Attic speech, which denoted speaking within the established tradition. Although language purism was widespread among the Greeks, there is no evidence that the performance of *γλῶσσα Ἀττικὴ* was connected to ethnicity or nativity. The collective identity of the Greek elite tended to be articulated through culture and language rather than race.

The Roman discourse of language also has little in common with current western notions of native speaker and mother tongue. The Roman term for proper speech was *sermo patrius*. This locution is regularly mistranslated as "native language" in spite of the absence of images of nativity in the original Latin. The term *sermo* refers to discourse in general, and *patrius* indicates speaking in the proper tradition of the forefathers. The massive digital library *Perseus* offers no examples of *sermo* in combination with derivatives of *mater* or of *natus*.

Ancient Greece and Rome were by no means exempt from racism, but ideologies of race and ethnicity were not present in the *discourse of language* at that time. One

can apply some of the theories in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to the historicization of the native speaker. The hegemony of Latin in the Roman Empire had made that language the monolithic medium of law, education, and culture in general. The same was true of the Latin Middle ages. From the Roman Empire, Christianity inherited in toto a massive infrastructural network and administrative monopoly that only needed rededication in religious terms. All texts of the church were produced in Latin, which was the language of instruction for all university students, as well. All were second language learners, and none could claim native language property rights. Hans Kohn holds that, in the middle ages, "People looked upon everything as not from the point of view of their "nationality" or "race," but from the point of view of religion. Mankind was divided not into Germans and French and Slavs and Italians, but into Christians and Infidels, and within Christianity into the faithful sons of the Church and heretics" (Kohn 1972, 7-8). The naissance of the mother tongue was to await the secular catalytic influences of the early modern period, the birth of the nation states, and the need to justify writing in the national vernaculars (Italian, French, German, Spanish, etc.), instead of in Latin.

In 1304, Dante Alighieri wrote *De vulgari eloquentia*, in which he characterized the difference between the vernacular Italian and Latin such: "I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our wet nurses (*nutricem*). There also exists another kind of language ... which the Romans called *grammatica* ... few, however, achieve complete fluency in it ... Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular, because it was the language originally used by humans, ... and because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial" (Dante Alighieri 1896, Lib. I, Cap. I, 2-4). Dante thus situates the Italian vernacular as natural and Latin as artificial. The notion of a maternal connection is implicit in the word *nutrix*, which in the plural also stands as a trope for the breasts. Dante muses over the origin of language and is confronted with a problem; if we learn the first language from our wet nurses, from whom did Adam learn his language, since he must have been a "man without mother or milk" (*vir sine matre, vir sine lacte*) (Cap. 6, 1)? Here, the figures of the mother and of maternity become explicit. In the next paragraph, Dante uses, for the first time, the phrase "mother tongue" (*maternam locutionem*).

The observations of Dante on the superiority of Italian vis-à-vis Latin are indicative of a Copernican Revolution in the configuration and representation of the vernacular. The understanding of language in terms of metaphors of nativity

and maternity was to become the dominant linguistic episteme thereafter; it persists to the present day, not only in popular, but also in academic discourse. Following Dante, the Italian renaissance scholar Pietro Bembo, who authored *Le prose della volgar lingua* (1525), said that we drink the vernacular with “the milk of [our] wet nurses” (*latte dalle nutrici*) (Bembo 1525, III). These metaphors also find clear expression in the writings of Lorenzo de Medici, who defends, in 1554, his use of the vernacular Tuscan: “No one can blame me for having written in the language in which I was born and raised (*nato et nodrito*), especially if one considers that the Latin and Hebrew languages were, in their time, the wholly maternal and natural (*tutte materne et naturali*) languages of those who used them” (Medici 1991, 149). Despite his considerable poetic talents, Dante did not, however, fabricate these metaphors out of thin air. It can be demonstrated that they arose from the larger cultural, religious, and political milieu of the time.

This raises the question: how does one explain the shift from *sermo patrius* to *lingua materna*? The sudden appearance of maternal images in the discourse of language in the late middle ages, especially those connected with lactation, merits some reflection. It is important to remember that the intellectual discourse of the European middle ages was largely produced and consumed by ecclesiastics. The most important figure in medieval catholicism was clearly Jesus, the Son of God in human form, to whom prayers were to be directed; Jesus was seen to function as a mediator between humans and God. Also of great importance was the figure of Mary the mother of God, who also functioned as a *mediatrix* and to whom one could also address prayers; Mary’s role was to intercede in the presence of her son on behalf of the petitioner and mediate the request. Thus there was a kind of intercessional hierarchy beginning with Mary and culminating in God the Father. The maternity of Mary was a pivotal image in medieval painting and sculpture; she is often represented nursing the baby Jesus.

The medieval scholar Caroline Bynum has written extensively on the figure of Mary in the middle ages. In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Bynum observes that “women’s bodies, in the acts of lactation and giving birth, were analogous both to ordinary food and to the body of Christ, as it died on the cross and gave birth to salvation” (Bynum 1986, 30). This analogy acts to sanctify the very act of lactation itself and to foreground the essential family role of woman: “through lactation, woman is the essential food provider and preparer” (190). Bynum holds that “the cult of the Virgin’s milk

was one of the most extensive in late medieval Europe” (270). It is important to emphasize that the central image of lactation was also extended to Jesus and the church, as well. This cult generated some odd permutations, among which are found depictions of a “lactating Jesus.” A good example of this is the late fifteenth century painting *Redentore che comunica una monaca* (c. 1450–1500) by Quirizio da Murano, in which the wound in Christ’s side is positioned where a nipple would be; Christ bares the right breast while offering a eucharistic wafer, as if the wafer had its source in the breast wound itself. The parallel between Christ’s wound and Mary’s breast serves to expand the image of lactation to include the body and blood of Christ, which form the basis of the eucharistic sacrament. The image of the nourishment from the mother’s milk is thereby strengthened; it is not only physical, but also spiritual. Similarly, the painting *Christus und Caritas* (ca. 1470) depicts Jesus squirting the blood of redemption from the breast area directly into a chalice.

Bynum reminds the reader that “to medieval natural philosophers, breast milk was transmuted blood, and a human mother—like the pelican that also symbolized Christ—fed her children from the fluid of life that coursed through



Figures 1a and b: Benedikt Wurzelbauer, *Der Tugendbrunnen*, 1589. Lorenzkirche, Nürnberg. Photographs courtesy of Adam Lederer.

her veins" (270). And often, the allegorical figures of virtue were also depicted as dispensing virtue through lactation. A very good example is found in the sixteenth century *Tugendbrunnen*, or "Fountain of the Virtues" (1589, figure 1), in Nürnberg, in which all seven allegorical figures lactate.

Also, a painting from 1450, *Christus und Maria fürbittend vor Gottvater*, shows both Mary and Jesus pleading with a resplendent and bearded God the Father on behalf of sinners. In the act of intercession, Jesus points to his wound and Mary simultaneously presents her breast.

When the philologists of the Italian renaissance invoke mammary images in the discourse of the acquisition of the vernacular, they concurrently access the tremendous religious and cultural power of those images and introduce this power into the theater of language. Indeed, one could well speak of the presence of an implied reader in the configuration of these images, a reader who participates in the invoked ideology and who would be commensurately influenced by the meanings therein to regard the vernacular in a sacred context. Language became, in a sense, privatized and rearticulated in the relationship between mother and child, a relationship that was clearly facilitated by the cultural power of the image of the Virgin Mother. The Italian language became then valorized as the product of the unique and inviolable connection between Italian mothers and Italian children; this served as an algorithm into which the emerging nation states substituted their own designations of nationality and language. Thus it is within this period that one finds the first instances of the combination of "mother" and "language" or "tongue": the Icelandic *modurmal* ca. 1350; the Swedish *modhor male* (1370); the Low German *modersprake* (1424); and English *moder tunge* (ca. 1425). The High German *Muttersprache* first appears in 1522. The word "nation," in the modern sense, also appears at the same time.

The locating of the national language in the image of the ethnic mother is a reactive gesture that configures it as exclusive national property and insulates it from foreign access. This is a symptom of the anxiety of national identity in the newly nascent nation states. This anxiety is readable in the emergence of the image of the Tower of Babel, one of the most influential images in the generation of ethnolinguistic prejudice that serves as a conventional point of reference for claims of linguistic primordality and sanctity. There are only three known representations of the Tower before the end of the eleventh century (Eco 1995, 17), but there are roughly 140 representations between 1550 and the early

seventeenth century, a sudden appearance that correlates with the anxieties of the emerging nation state. The image of the Tower of Babel is symptomatic of the birth trauma of nation and national language. Europe is first born as a mosaic of linguistic orphanages, of languages bereft of the medium that had united their speakers in a supraregional whole. Umberto Eco observes:

Before this confusion there was no European culture, and, hence, no Europe. What is Europe, anyway? It is a continent, barely distinguishable from Asia, existing before people had invented a name for it ... Europe was an entity that had to wait for the fall of the Roman Empire and the birth of the Romano-Germanic kingdoms before it could be born ... How are we going to establish the date when the history of Europe begins? The dates of great political events and battles will not do; the dates of linguistic events must serve in their stead ... Europe first appears as a Babel of new languages. Only afterwards was it a mosaic of nations. Europe was thus born from its vulgar tongues. (18)

Vernacular language is at the heart of nation-forming and thus at the heart of nationalism and of the ethnic ownership of language.

The location of language in body and kinship does not, however, fully account for its naturalization, nor for its nationalization. Another ideology played a crucial role in the emergence of language as an implement of ethnic prejudice: the understanding of language by reference to local organic nature. This also begins in Italy in the work of the renaissance rhetorician Sperone Speroni (1500-1588), who was a principle member of the *Accademia degli Infiammati* and the author, in 1542, of a polemic advocating publication in the Italian vernaculars. Speroni speaks of “our mother tongue (*la lingua nostra materna*) ...which is, today, our own and belongs to no one else.” It was created by ancestors who “imitated our mother Nature (*la madre nostra Natura*).” Thereupon follow numerous organic metaphors: Italian “is still a short little branch that has yet to fully bloom and produce the fruits that it is capable of bearing.” Because Latin was dominant, Italians “did not sufficiently cultivate it, but, as with a wild plant, left it to age and almost die in the same desert in which it had been born without ever watering it, nor pruning it, nor protecting it from the brambles that overshadowed it” (Speroni 1740, 175).

Speroni’s organicism of language found significant reception in the work of his French contemporary Joachim du Bellay. Du Bellay was a member of *La Pléiade*,



the literary society that sought to ameliorate the French language. Du Bellay's manifesto *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise* (1549) constitutes the first instance of organic metaphors in the validation of French, such as images of herbs, roots, and trees, metaphors that he lifted, however, wholesale from Speroni (Villey 1908, 43). He observes that Latin "bore fruit," but French has yet to flower or fructify, because it was a wild plant that was not watered, pruned, or protected from brambles and thorns. One should cultivate the French language to beautiful fruition.

The locating of the national language in local organic nature is also a reactive gesture that roots it in the homeland. National (linguistic) identity becomes configured by metaphorical extension from the physical environment. As such it becomes relativized to a specific and unique ecology, into which the native is born, and to which the nonnative becomes foreign.

The first advocates of writing in the vernacular found themselves in a kind of linguistic orphanage. Latin and Greek had uncontested literary and philosophical traditions; the new runaway vernaculars must, by definition, have none. The answer to this dilemma lay in the invention of attributes for the vernacular that were outside of the intellectual tradition received from antiquity, and these attributes had to be local, for one had to differentiate one's own nation and national language from others, as well as from the tradition of antiquity. Thus the discourse of the superiority of the national language gravitated toward the corporeal and the organic, for here one could locate language in a personal and physical situation of intimacy, in "our bodies and our land."

The work of the French political theorist Jean Bodin, in his *Les six livres de la republic* (1579) views national characteristics as a product of climate and geography. Bodin divides countries into three groups: those within thirty degrees of the equator, "the burning regions," those between thirty and sixty degrees, "the intermediate peoples and temperate regions," and those above sixty degrees, "the excessively cold regions" (Bodin 1579, 464). The peoples of the middle region have the characteristics most conducive to governing. The peoples of the north are strong but not all that bright; those of the south are intelligent but lack physical force. The former have produced good armies; the latter good philosophy. Those of the middle regions, however, combine the best of both worlds, have excelled in government, and have established the greatest empires: e.g. the Greeks and Romans. Bodin places France clearly in the middle region

and chooses to emphasize the image of the French as natural mediators. One sees in Bodin the construction of a certain kind of nature, a psychogeography in the service of nationalist interests. Bodin's theories suppose a national character, naturalize it in local physical nature, and thus render it the organic personal property of the French people.

The nationalist configuration of the vernaculars of the emergent nation states is quite evident in the ideology of the first vernacular grammar printed in any language, the *Gramatica de la lengua castellana* of Antonio de Nebrija (ca. 1444-1522), published in 1492. Nebrija dedicates his grammar to Queen Isabella and characterizes it as a *compañero del imperio*. He claims that language has always been a companion of empire, as Latin was for Rome, and says that empires, like languages, grow, flourish, bloom, and wilt. Now is the time for the Spanish empire and the Castilian language, and his grammar will secure imperial power for Isabella. Thus the very first vernacular grammar configures language as organic and imperial at the same time: Castilian and Isabella's empire are the successors to Latin and the Roman empire.

These ideologies subsequently spread to northern Europe. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, vernacular speakers began to claim that their vernacular is the best of all living languages, if not the perfect language. In 1569, Jan van Gorp asserted that the Dutch language in Antwerp was the only one that displayed a perfect representational relationship between words and things. According to Gorp, Antwerp had been colonized by the descendants of the sons of Japheth, the son of Noah, who were not present at the Tower of Babel; thus Dutch was not confused by the dispersion of tongues. The Swedish physician and alchemist Anders Kempe conjectured that Swedish was the oldest language in the world. In 1638, he wrote *Die Sprachen des Paradieses*, in which God speaks Swedish, Adam and Eve Danish (an imperfect copy of the original), and the serpent French (Eco 1995, 97).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalist organicizing of language witnessed an intensification of the ideology of a primordial connection between the national language and nature itself. In 1641, the German baroque poet Georg Philipp Harsdörffer claimed that the German language "speaks in the languages of nature, quite perceptibly expressing all its sounds ... It roars like the lion, lows like the oxen, snarls like the bear, bells like the stag, bleats like the sheep, grunts like the pig, barks like the dog, whinnies like the horse, hisses like the snake,

meows like the cat, honks like the goose, quacks like the duck, buzzes like the bumble bee, clucks like the hen, strikes its beak like the stork, caws like the crow, coos like the swallow, and chirps like the sparrow ... nature speaks in our own German tongue. Adam would not have been able to name the birds and all the other beasts of the fields in anything but our words" (Harsdörffer 1968, 335).

The 17<sup>th</sup> century German grammarian Justus Georg Schottel, also called Schottelius, discussing the Tower of Babel, asks, "What name was it then with which the scattered humans wanted to indicate the true God? It is the name from which we Germans have our name ... *Teut*, ... which is thus the name of the true God itself, so that German (*Teutisch*) more or less means godly or god-like" (Huber 1984, 54). It is difficult to imagine an assertion more chauvinistic than that the name of one's language is the original word for God. Schottelius then evokes the image of a tree of language (*Sprachbaum*) in a confused and quite baroque morass of entangled analogies. Languages possess "word stems that, like juice-rich roots, hydrate the whole language tree, whose sprouts and twigs abounding in branches and veins spread high and wide in the most beautiful purity, steady certainty, and unimaginable variety ... the artful growth of our main language is comparable to an impressive fertile tree that has extended its juice-rich roots deep, far, and wide into the earth, so that, by virtue of its veinlets, it pulls the dampness and marrow of the earth into itself and hardens its roots with a fruit-rich juicy wetness" (Schottel 1663, 50).

One sees here the extremes to which the anxiety of vernacular authority can motivate the philology of nationalism. One arrives at a codeterminative intertwining of the trees of nature and the trees of language. This is the birth of the arboreal models of language that we are familiar with. The dominant model for the configuration of language was generated not by science, but by ethnolinguistic nationalism.

In subsequent permutations, this discourse becomes more abstract, but never leaves its folkloric and ethnocentric origins. Schottel was read extensively by Leibniz, who developed the philosophy of organicism; Leibniz influenced Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1755), applies Bodin's theories of climatology to language. Rousseau influenced his German contemporary Johann Gottfried Herder, who relates language and nation to climate. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German philologists Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Franz Bopp develop the distinction between analytic and

synthetic languages and view the synthetic ones (the European ones) as organic and superior. They introduce tree diagrams for language, which act to configure it genealogically. It is a family tree remapped onto language and planted in the ethno-national soil, where its ownership becomes exclusive. They begin to speak of language “families” that have “siblings” and “daughters.” August Schleicher (1821-1868), who supplied one of the first arboreal models for Indo-European (figure 2), applied biology to the study of language and saw languages as species and dialects as races.

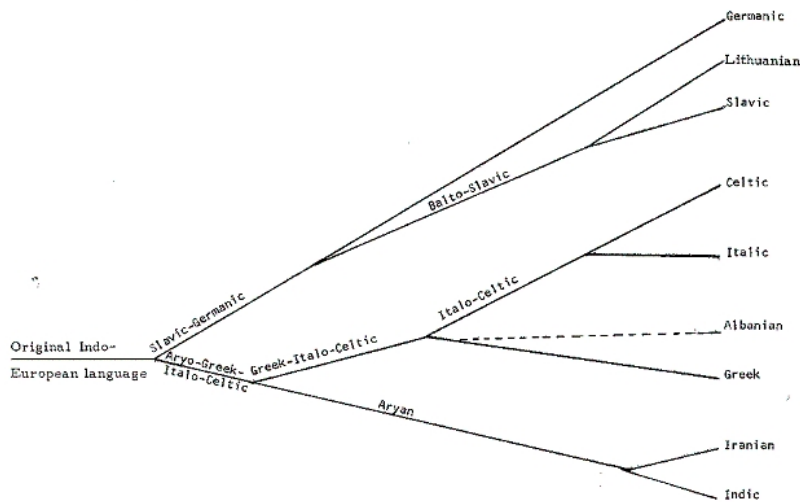


Figure 2: Schleicher's genealogical tree diagram.

The Swiss scholar Adolphe Pictet (1799-1875, figure 3) founded the field of linguistic paleontology, in which he views the words of a language the way a paleontologist views fossils, as incomplete records of older forms that one can use to reconstruct common ancestors. He concentrates on lexical items in an attempt to ascertain the original natural environment of the Aryan race: our language, our soil.

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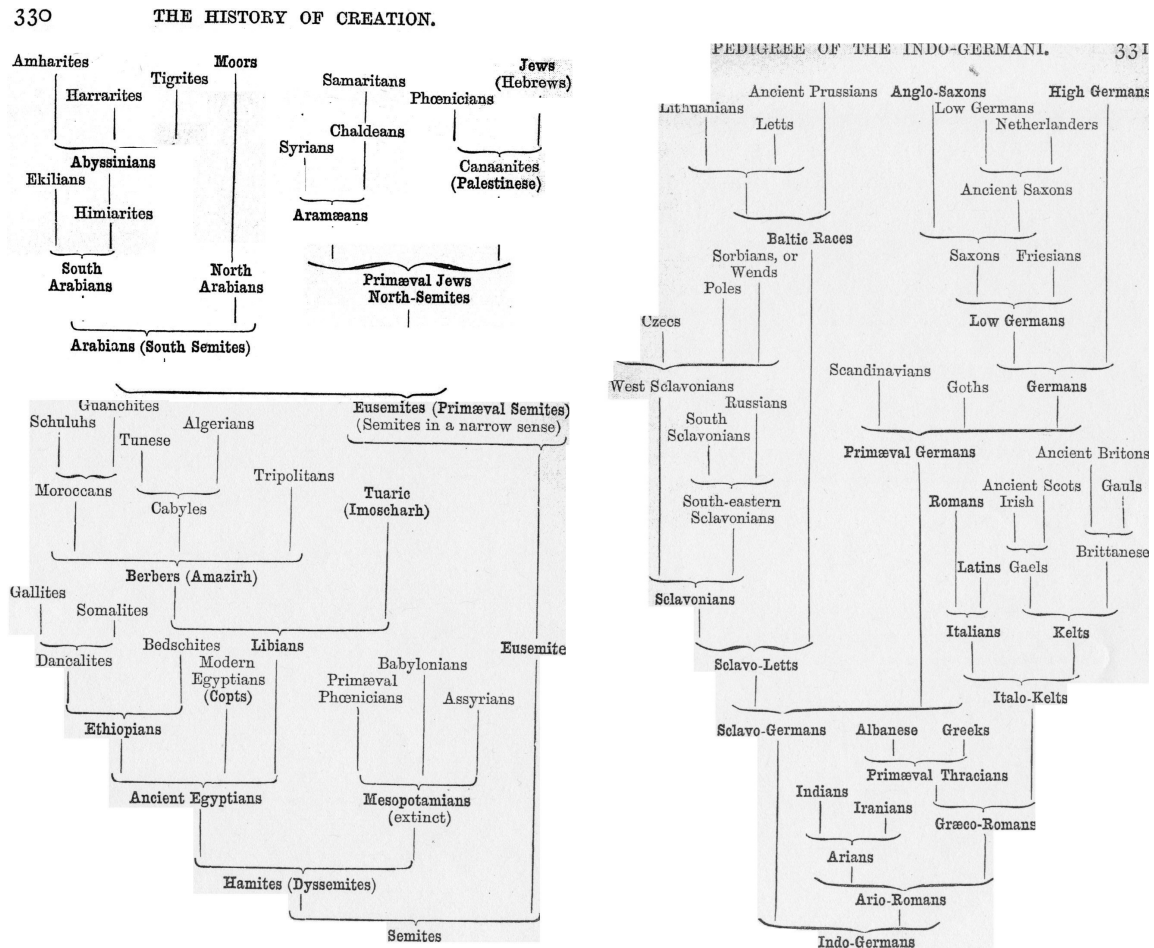
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Figures 3a and b: From the table of contents of Pictet's *Les origines indo-européennes ou les Aryas primitifs. Essai de paléontologie linguistique*.

The French religious historian Ernest Renan used philology to formulate a theory of the superiority of the Aryans over Jews based on a matrix of language, ethnology, and environment. For Renan, the ancient Jews “were nonetheless rooted in a desert civilization that was not only primitive and crude but incapable of evolution” (Olender 52-53). The desert does not evolve, and neither do Semitic languages.

Ernst Haeckel, the famous nineteenth century biologist, published *The History of Creation* in 1868. The work begins with single-celled organisms, proceeds to the vegetable and animal kingdoms, then to the mammals, finally culminating with a study of humans. One chapter is entitled “Migration and distribution of mankind. Human species and human races” and contains only one large

diagram. It is entitled “Pedigree of the Indo-Germani” and is situated on two opposing pages. The left side depicts the “Semites” and the right side the “Indo-Germans” (Haeckel 1876, 330-331). The organization of this diagram is quite revealing; the opposing pages visually separate the two human families and effect an othering of the “Semitic race” (figure 4). This is an example of language as race and racism.



Figures 4a and b: Haeckel's diagram “Pedigree of the Indo-Germani”

The ideological elements in these gambits are evident; under the guise of scientific inquiry, language becomes biologized in the service of ethnolinguistic prejudice. Umberto Eco makes an astute observation on the rise of Indo-European philology: “But are we really able to say that with the birth of the modern science of linguistics the ghost of Hebrew as the holy language had finally been laid to rest? Unfortunately not. The ghost simply reconstituted itself

into a different, and wholly disturbing, Other ... When the image of the Hebrew language and civilization was torn down the myth of the Aryan races rose up to take its place" (Eco 1995, 105).

In the early modern period, the notion of language as a botanical entity entered into the cultural habitus; the accustomed understanding of language as such aided in its enracination and configuration within the matrix of race and ethnicity. The nursery that gave rise to the arboretum of language progressively generated intellectual sublimations of the arboreal model into organicist theories of language that intermingled with the images of maternity and lactation. The botanical configuration of language became more and more abstract, but the generalizing gestures always recovered and reinforced language-specific ethnic ideologies. The dominant occidental episteme saw Aryans as having a natural primeval organic language. The genealogical model of language "families" was used to sketch broad ecolinguistic distinctions between "Semitic" and "Aryan" and to separate Christians from Jews; this generated Ernest Renan's curious statement that organic languages cannot grow in the desert.

The biologizing of language, however, still persists today. One finds a continuance of models of language in current scientific discourse that encourage ideologies of innateness, however surreptitiously. The culprit in the discourse of ethnolinguistic prejudice is the racializing of language and the unreflective grafting of genetic and genealogical models onto it. The innumerable interlanguage borrowings—lexical, phonetic, grammatical, and syntactic—problematize the hierarchical genetic model and argue for the inclusion of horizontal patterns of language evolution. Interlanguage borrowings constitute *acquired characteristics* for the receiving language. These phenomena are then passed down in a Lamarckian fashion to subsequent generations of speakers. How could one characterize a phenomenon as consisting of genetic organisms if development proceeds in a Lamarckian fashion, and if data from one "organism" can change a different "organism" at one and the same time?

Jonathan Hope critiques the "single ancestor-dialect" hypothesis of the rise of standard English, which "places the chosen dialect in a direct genetic relationship to Standard English: one evolves from the other in the linear way than man evolves from one of the early primates" (Hope 2000, 49-50). This nationalist hypothesis desires to see the east midland London dialect as the cradle for the standard. Standard British English did not, in fact, arise from a

single dialect; instead, its features can be traced to a wide range of dialects. Hope points out that “the success of this hypothesis is also due in no small part to the parallels it draws between evolutionary biology and linguistic change ... languages and dialects are not equivalent to biological species: the metaphor of the family tree is inappropriate as a way of representing their development” (50). The reason for the inappropriateness of the biological model here lies in the concept of a species. Separate species cannot exchange genetic material. Humans cannot naturally exchange genes with birds, so as to develop wings. Hope observes, however, that “linguistic structures *can* be mixed and recombined across dialect and language boundaries ... it is very easy to mate linguistic sparrows with rats to get bats” (50-51). Creolized languages clearly demonstrate that language contact opens up an immense range of possibilities for phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic interlanguage adoption.

There is an entire subfield of biology called cladistics, which is devoted to the study of tree diagrams in taxonomic description. Genetic trees are indispensable to phylogenetic classification, and the mechanics of remapping from one structure to another are facilitated by the support of numerous homologies. Their metaphorical application, however, to the study of language is problematic. Roger Lass observes that the family tree model of language lineage is parthenogenetic, as it traces descent from a single parent: for instance, the Latin language alone generated the entire “family” of Romance languages. This metaphorical discourse generates maternal images that continually invoke references to mothers and wombs; these are, however, incommensurate with human genealogy, which is exclusively biparental.

Linda Wiener observes that the dynamics of lateral language influence correspond, in biology, to the field of reticulate evolution, which studies horizontal networks. Wiener holds that “there have been no good, realistic methods for dealing with both the hierarchical and the reticulate aspects of language evolution” (Wiener 1987, 224). She says, “Languages are all hybrid to some extent, while most organisms only occasionally produce hybrids. Also, there is no necessity for close genealogical relationship for hybrid formation in language groups, while this is essential in organisms. The features of a language are not adaptive and do not determine its relative success. Rather, the spread of a language character is dependent upon the social status of the people who use it” (225).



The reticulate model is resisted because it confronts the national language with its own hybrid nature and the reality of foreign incursions. If a given nation participates in the superstitions of ethnic purity, it will tend to reject outright, and sometimes violently so, any notion that its stem population could be hybrid. It will be comfortable with vertical genealogical narratives of race and ethnicity. This structure will then be transferred to concepts of language, and the genealogical narrative of linguistic descent will be found in both popular and professional spheres. Thus the horizontal model is favored because it insulates “our native” language against allophone influence.

A recent and unabashed example of the overextension of the genetic model to the study of language can be found in Luigi Cavalli-Sforza’s *Genes, Peoples, and Languages* (2000). One of the most interesting aspects of this text is its recursive narrative structure, which consists in continual attempts to represent race as a viable classification that are then followed by ironic reversals, a kind of forward motion that is dependent upon backpedaling in order to advance. For instance, having stated that genetic dissimilarity in populations increases with distance, he then qualifies this by saying, “the variation between two random individuals within any one population is 85 percent as large as that between two individuals randomly selected from the world’s population” (Cavalli-Sforza 2000, 29). He then concludes as such: “It seems wise to me, therefore, to abandon any attempt at racial classification along the traditional lines. There is, however, one practical reason for keeping an interest in genetic differences” (29). Thus he says that local populations can be classified genetically, but with only 15% variability, ergo, it is better not to classify them as such, but there is still good reason to do so. He then embarks upon a lengthy discussion of the “genetic distances between continents” and offers numerous tree diagrams illustrating the “gene geography” of Africa, Asia, America, Europe, and Oceania.

His goal in this journey is to arrive at a structural homology between genetic trees and language trees, an imagined intercontinental biolinguistic correspondence, and his itinerary involves numerous examples of the same ironic reversals used in the justification of genetic classification, for instance: “Linguists have had trouble reconstructing relationships above the family level—we have yet to agree on a single tree linking all of the existing families. In fact, many linguists believe that the question of the unity or diversity of modern languages can never be answered” (134); but an all-inclusive arboreal structure of all language “families” will be erected nonetheless. The reader is informed of

the correspondences between Amerindian languages and fossilized teeth (136), as well as among glottochronology, the “linguistic clock,” and the “molecular clock” (138). The text makes use of the dubious concept of linguistic superfamilies, monolithically lumping Nostratic (said to include Indo-European, Uralic-Altaiic, Semitic, and Dravidian), Amerindian, and Sino-Tibetan under the category of “Eurasian” (141). There are several amusing speculations in the text; one of them suggests “that modern Basques and Cro-Magnons would not be able to communicate if they had the chance to meet” (142); another proposes that there is “at least one word all the linguistic families share: the root *tik*. It means finger, or the number one” (142). The overall thrust of the text is not as innocuous as are such ruminations, however.

The similarities that Cavalli-Sforza seeks to illustrate become graphically represented in arboreal form. The discussion culminates in the proposal of “a comparison of genetic and linguistic trees” (144); on the left is a diagram of all human populations and on the right a diagram of all “linguistic families,” each branching out from a single original point (figure 5). The parallelism is highly intentional, and he reinvokes the idea of geographic proximity, saying that “populations that are adjacent in the genetic tree usually speak languages of the same family” (145). And again, a subsequent critical reversal provides the tension for advancement: “There is no reason to think that genes influence the ability to speak one language over another ... modern humans possess the capacity to learn any language, and the first language learned is a function of the time and place of birth” (150). The reason given for the “similarity between biological and linguistic evolution” (149) is that isolated populations become genetically and linguistically different from other isolated populations. This is an apparently innocuous rationale that seems to safely separate the two phenomena; its effect, however, encourages slippage between them. The coupling of the term “evolution” to each word can only act as a bridge, over which impressions are transferred from biology to language. This is indeed the telos of the text; it lists numerous examples of “genetic and linguistic replacement” in populations, one of which is the assertion that “Finns speak a Uralic language but they have very little, perhaps 10 percent, of Uralic genes” (153). Nonetheless, it is still asserted that “we can still find sufficient coherence in the modern linguistic and genetic jumble to reconstruct a common tree for the two evolutionary tracks” (154-155).

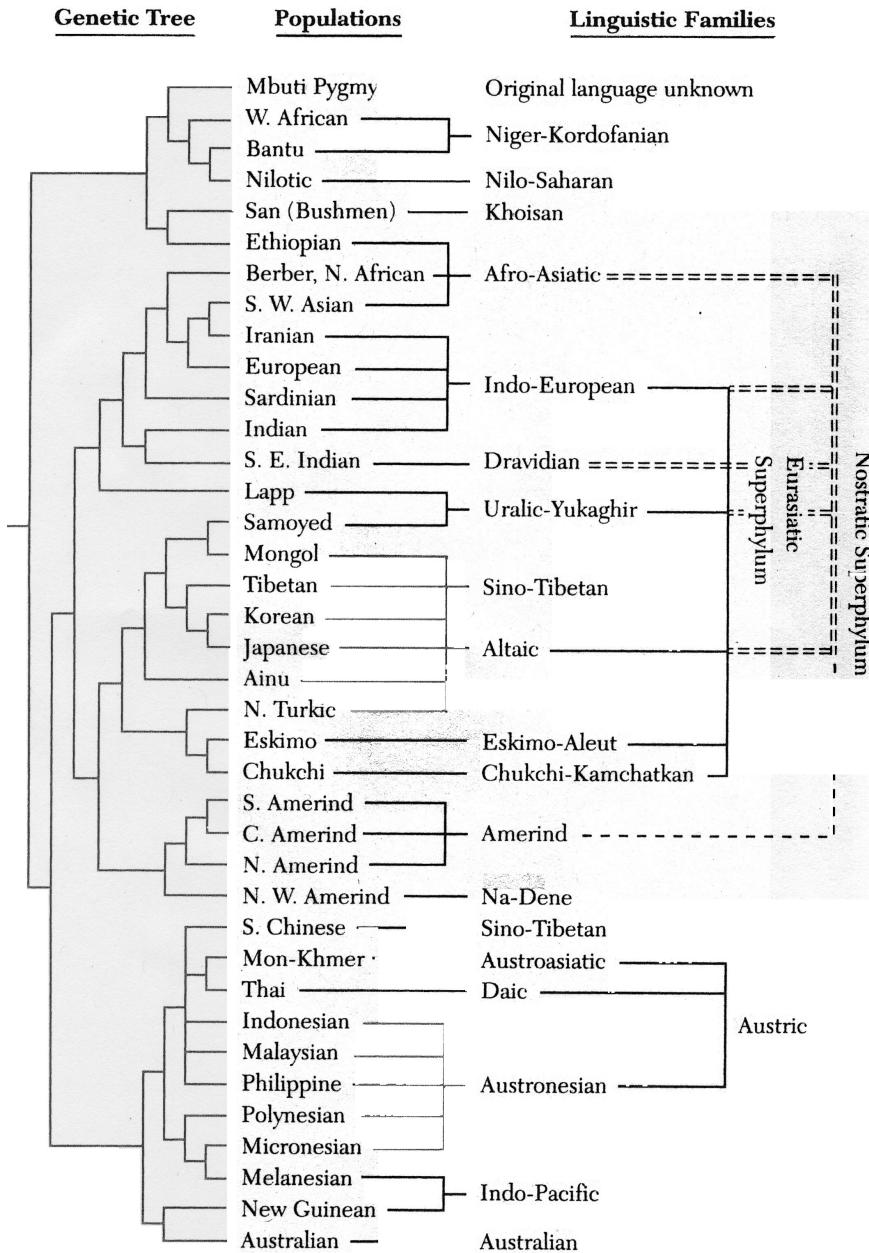


Figure 5: Cavalli-Sforza's diagram for "a comparison of genetic and linguistic trees"

Cavalli-Sforza's work serves as a good example of a simultaneous rejection of racism, alongside a persistence of modes of inquiry that encourage the construction of race-conscious correspondences. Despite numerous qualifications and reversals, the text persists in drawing parallels between genomes and languages, which cannot help but encourage the reader to view language genetically, not only in its abstract form as competence or *langage*, but also in its performative aspects, those of *langue*. It goes well beyond the generativist model of an innate capacity for language per se, for it draws repeated connections

between specific populations and specific languages and thus acts to enracinate the characteristics of the languages of those populations. A much more judicious treatment of the adaptive and evolutionary aspects of language can be found in Maggie Tallerman's anthology *Language Origins: Perspectives on Evolution* (2005), the contributions to which remain safely within metalinguistic parameters; they investigate the evolution and natural selection of language structures but never transgress into the sphere of the performance of specific, discrete languages.

The sign of the nursery functions as a useful nodal point here, as it accesses both the botanical and the maternal. In the current discourse of language, it is not only the botanical-genetic model that persists; the image of infant-mother bonding lingers, as well. The earliest voices in the gestation of ethnolinguistic nationalism invoke images of maternity that function as a major conduit for the enracination of the national language. From the late medieval *mater lactans* to permutations of the modern *Muttersprache*, the image of the connection between mother and child has forged one of the most powerful icons in the protectionist, isolationist, and ethnocentric configuration of the sovereignty of the national language. This association still persists in the current era, albeit in secularized form, and informs both popular and academic discourses on the nature of language.

One of the current cultural phenomena that contribute to the persistence of the ideology of the mother tongue and the privileging of the native speaker can be found in the issue of infant-directed speech, which is commonly known as "motherese." This term indicates a type of speech that is generally recognized in occidental cultures and refers to the manner in which adults address babies and toddlers. It consists in highly simplified, melodic, amplified, and repetitive utterances that often include nonsensical lexical elements. While the existence of this type of speech in the western world is not in debate, there is a controversy surrounding its origin and function, for there are some voices, some of them scholarly, but most of them popular, that attribute to infant-directed speech a significant role in the acquisition of language.

The generativist linguist Steven Pinker critiques the issue of motherese in *The Language Instinct*. For Pinker, the idea that language acquisition is dependent upon motherese is readily disproven by the fact that infant-directed speech is not universal; there are cultures in which parents begin to converse with children only after the children are capable of dialogue; nonetheless, these children

acquire language just fine. (Pinker 2000, 278-279, 290). There have been studies to support this. Schieffelin and Ochs (1983), for instance, discuss the absence of infant-directed speech among the Samoans and the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea. Pinker also admonishes the scholarly community to “do away with the folklore that parents teach their children language” (39). He offers a tangential observation that is not without merit; he relates the folklore of motherese to the structures of parenting in middle-class American culture: “The belief that Motherese is essential to language development is part of the same mentality that send yuppies to ‘learning centers’ to buy little mittens with bull’s-eyes to help their babies find their hands sooner” (39-40). This ironic comment implies that, just as children will find their hands on their own, so will they come to language independently; parental guidance is superfluous.

The present study critiques the folklore surrounding motherese because it contributes to the surplus and surreptitious biologizing of language and the mystification of the native language and its native speaker. It can be seen as contributing to the notion of the native speaker’s private ownership of the national language: when the authority of the native speaker becomes retraced to the milieu of the crib and cradle, then to contest the authority of that speaker becomes at once an affront to nation, ethnicity, and motherhood.

The Florida State University anthropologist Dean Falk is currently researching the connection between language and evolution and also views infant-directed speech as aiding in the development of human language. A discussion of her ideas is found in in the *Research in Review Magazine* of Florida State University (2005). The title of the review article has interesting biblical overtones: “Motherese: over the eons, mom’s babbling to babies begat language” (Pool 2005, 38). This surpasses the implication that infant-directed speech is auxiliary; it is represented here as the creator of language. The assertion does seem to be circular, however, and leaves unanswered the question as to who it was who babbled to the first infant in the first place. Nonetheless, infant-directed speech is seen here as the catalyst for human linguistic evolution. The review asks, “Why did humans evolve this ability to talk when other animals did not? Dean Falk believes the answer can be found in “motherese,” the simplified, singsong language that mothers everywhere use to communicate with their infants” (38). The review summarizes Falk’s interpretations of the anthropological facts of human bipedalism and prolonged postnatal infant dependence. The explosion in human brain size necessitated premature birth, in order that the infant could

pass more easily through the birth canal. Consequently, a large part of human brain development is postnatal, which causes infants to take longer than other animals to develop motor skills. Newborn horses, for instance, can stand and walk soon after birth. The concerns of motherese use this fact to present a novel etiology of human speech. Infant dependence meant that mothers had to carry infants with them. But mothers also needed to forage as well, which necessitated leaving the infant on the ground nearby. Falk is quoted as saying: "When the mother put the baby down to pick or dig for food, she would 'talk' to it. Mothers substituted voices for cradling arms." This phenomenon of "infant parking" is also said to have constituted the "cradle" of language. The reviewer reports that mothers began to use "sounds and gestures to comfort and control a baby from a short distance." Gradually, "evolution would have favored those mothers with better communication skills. Over time, then, motherese would have developed from simple sounds and gestures into a more complex form of communication" (38). One sees here an interesting persistence of the ideology of the primacy of maternity.

It would not be an overstatement to say that this review consists in rearticulations, in biological and evolutionary discourse, of the ideas first put forth by Dante, for whom the act of breast feeding constituted the Eden of language. In both cases, language acquisition is born in the interactive moment of infant nurturing; for Dante, the moment in question is centered on lactation; for the current example of motherese, it is centered on maternal protection and food gathering. Both serve, however, to anchor language acquisition within a relationship of mother-infant physical proximity and intimacy, which acts to attribute bodily aspects to language. From this model, one would be forced to conclude that male speech is but a permutation of the primary maternal genesis of language, for initially, it was not men who were the instruments of language acquisition, but women, in relationship to whom all humans developed the capacity to speak.

Falk's "Prelinguistic Evolution in Early Hominins: Whence Motherese?" appeared in 2004 in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. A crucial assumption in her thesis is that infant directed speech and motherese are coterminous. A bit of reflection yields the insight that not only do mothers engage in infant directed speech, but so do fathers, women who are not themselves mothers, men who are not themselves fathers, and other children, as well. One could well say that Falk's thesis is gratuitously matricentric, implying that prehistoric babies

communicated exclusively with foraging mothers. Clearly, extended time off from foraging would have afforded the infant plenty of opportunities to react to a host of other verbal situations involving adults and children in the primitive community, including the father's triumphant return from hunting the woolly mammoth, the older brother's performance roasting the newly slaughtered wild boar, the claims on the child's own personal space made by other curious toddlers, etc.

Falk's article is followed by numerous short commentaries. Derek Bickerton believes that Falk still does not address the genesis of the human faculty of symbolic expression, for which speech is but one permutation, and about which the discussion of motherese tells us precious little (Bickerton 2004, 504-505). Heather Bortfield wisely prefers the term "caretakers," to "mothers," a choice that opens up numerous possibilities for the role of the infant's babbling interlocutor (Bortfield 2004, 505-506). In fact, Steven J. Gould discusses an adaptive argument for the fact that human societies did not select against homosexuality; gays could have been beneficial to the primitive community, in that they tended to stay around the settlement and thus offered auxiliary day care (Gould 1977, 266). Similarly, Paul Boussiac sees Falk's thesis as reductive in its limitation of language to the mother-infant dyad (Boussiac 2004, 506-507). Robbins Burling also reproaches Falk's thesis for being reductive, in that it equates language with prosody. There is a massive leap from "primate calls" to the appearance of the "lexical, phonological, and syntactic features" of language (Burling 2004, 509), in short, its structural properties, which the motherese model leaves unexplained. Agustín Fuentes observes that "it is far from clear that adult female hominins, especially early members of the genus *homo*, foraged alone, or even relatively alone, with their offspring ... mothers may have been accompanied by older children or related adults, thus siblings or other kin may have played a role in infant care" (Fuentes 2004, 513). Fuentes also suggests a kind of daycare model, in which infants may have been attended to communally while mothers were off foraging. John L. Locke adds: "Unfortunately, anthropological accounts indicate that most hunter-gatherer mothers rarely put their babies down, and then did so for no more than a few seconds, usually remaining within a meter ... when infants cannot be carried, they are usually left in the care of others" (Locke 2004, 516).

This perspective is also supported by Rosenberg et al., who concur that infant parking is very rare among primates and especially among humans, and they

offer a very pregnant observation: “Western cultures today provide a wide range of devices in which to place a small infant (cribs, swings, playpens, infant walkers, bouncy seats), but such behavior is rare cross-culturally” (Rosenberg et al. 2004, 522). They leave this observation uncommented, but it raises an interesting issue. Could the matter of motherese be generated in part by a backreading of current American conventions of child care into prehistory, by the persistence of a matricentric ideology of vernacular language, here rearticulated in the discourse of scientific analysis? The phrase “infant parking” itself also has some interesting surplus meanings that evoke images of suburban vehicles, child seats, and the current concerns of child care in general.

For Rosenberg et al., “the norm is that mothers (or other members of the family) carry their infants in their arms or on their bodies most of the time for the first year” (Rosenberg et al. 2004, 522). Addressing language per se, however, they also they also cast doubts upon the adaptive utility of infant-directed speech and, instead, recommend that the direction be reversed: “it seems to us that a much higher selective premium would have been on linguistic communication *in the other direction*. That is, there would have been a real advantage to babies who could communicate specific information to their mothers” (522). It seems more probable that *adult-directed* speech would have been selected for in infants. There would have been no benefit in the mother warning the infant of danger, if the infant was as yet incapable of responding to it, but there would have been great benefit in the infant alerting the mother to possible dangers, such as its own hunger or the imminent arrival of stampeding elks. This situation would therefore necessitate a more advanced stage of linguistic performance on the part of the infant.

The most primitive form of adult-directed speech would be infant crying, and Sokol and Thompson ask, “Why should so loud a vocalization ever be deployed in so intimate a relationship as that between an infant and a mother who bears that infant pressed to her body 24 hours a day?” (Sokol and Thompson 2004, 523). They posit a “co-rearing strategy,” in which “infants are left in the charge of some mothers and juvenile females while other mothers join foraging partners in gathering for the group. Under these circumstances, infants are put down, but in the familiar surroundings of a home base, not in random points in the bush” (523). In this daycare model, the loudest infant screamers would have been more likely to receive attention and would have thus been selected for.



Some valuable work on infant-directed speech is being done by Anne Fernald, whose article “Human Maternal Vocalizations to Infants as Biologically Relevant Signals: An Evolutionary Perspective” is especially productive for the present inquiry. She cites examples of infant-directed speech in Latvian, Japanese, Comanche, and Sinhala, but restricts the study to data from French, Italian, German, Japanese, British English, and American English. Interestingly, she finds that, in using infant-directed speech, “American middle-class parents show the most extreme prosodic modifications” (Fernald 1992, 399). For Fernald, the function of infant-directed speech is to elicit attention in the infant and to express parental approval, prohibition, and comfort (401). The melodic strategies in question have been shaped by natural selection to enable parents to communicate effectively with prelinguistic children. Infant-directed speech is thus one example of “parenting behaviors” that “are adaptations for the immediate survival of the young during infancy, an obvious prerequisite for reproductive success,” and that may have, as well, “adaptive advantages extending beyond the infancy period” (420-421). She speculates that they also aid in developing the child’s skills at reading physiognomic and auditory emotional signals. For Fernald, motherese can best be seen as a permutation of language, not its *raison d’être*.

In 2002, the American television network PBS aired the series *The Secret Life of the Brain*, which contains a segment on the child’s brain entitled *The Purpose of Motherese*. The program clearly represents motherese as enabling language acquisition. It shows several examples of happy white middle-class mothers babbling to their infants. The opening scene portrays a mother counting from one to three to her child; subsequently, the commentator says that, for babies in such situations, motherese puts “a mental map in place, and they know what dimensions to ignore and what dimensions to pay attention to.” Thus infant-directed speech is said to provide children with a mental map for language that is constructed by cues supplied by the mother. These are the cues that the baby needs to pay attention to “in order to form the maps for speech.” These cues are also said to have “produced a brain that is a very, very different one than we saw four months earlier.” This implies that motherese can actually contribute to brain development, and thus to competitive intelligence, which is clearly one of the major American middle-class parenting concerns of the current era. By implication, this serves to empower motherese not only with the acquisition of language, but also with a role in the development of intelligence itself. One of the

commentators also holds that language will not be acquired without such practice sessions. It is also interesting to note that the program leaps from a demonstration of counting to the imprinting of a mental map for language. Programs like this PBS special clearly serve to empower the mother-infant relationship with the capacity for language, but they do so in an interesting way. The capacity for language becomes narrowly situated in one of the most intimate contexts imaginable, that between mother and child. Moreover, it also thereby becomes romanticized in a precognitive, emotional, spontaneous, natural, and bodily matrix, one that can move in free association from lactation to language, from breastfeeding to language feeding.

The ideology of motherese is most profoundly connected to the mystified notions of the power of the native speaker, as it is based on notions of maternity and nativity, and here quite literally so, for this ideology invokes the etymological meanings of innateness as much as or perhaps more than any other ideology of the primacy of the mother tongue and the native speaker. It is literally based on the fact of birth and the postnatal connection between mother and child. It must therefore be fundamentally protective of the “native speaker” and also exclusive of the second language learner. Framed as original, inculcative, and didactic, the ideology of motherese acts to deepen the notion of the exclusive ownership of the mother tongue.

Nationalism itself was born, in the early modern period, *of* and *in* language and articulated in the apparently innocent kinship metaphors of maternity and nativity, as well as in the ideology of a natural connection between national character and national geography. Organic metaphors were thus taken from body and nature to construct the myths of imagined congenital communities that still persist today. The nationalist adhesives that fuse self and nation are fabricated from myriad ideologies of ownership and exclusive possession. The notion of the linguistic birthright of the native speaker, communicated in maternal and organic metaphors of nativity, is but one of the contributory ideologies. It is, however, in its prejudicial aspects, among the least perceptible and most embedded forms of nationalism. It is dissolved into the discourse of quotidian life and letters to the point where it is taken for granted as self-evident and neutrally descriptive. Invoked reflexively, its performance remains transparent. It interrupts liberal circulation in the international theatre of multilingualism and maintains the allophone at a safe distance from the nativist center.

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