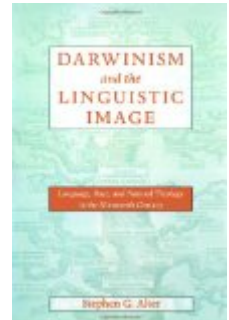


**Stephen G. Alter.** *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. xii + 193 pp. \$39.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5882-6.



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## Darwin and Historical Linguistics

The theory of evolution as expounded by Charles Darwin has been one of the most persistent themes for debate amongst scientists in the humanities and the natural sciences since the nineteenth century. It is an all-embracing theory and tends to fit in effortlessly (and with considerable controversy), with numerous perceptions of the self, society and science. Understandably the major themes up for discussion have been the compatibility between natural history theory of humankind and certain moral tenets subscribed to by people of strong religious convictions. In the natural sciences numerous investigations have added new perspectives to our understanding of Darwinism. In the humanities the need for similar investigations have been of a somewhat more inhibited nature.

In his work, *Darwin and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Stephen G. Alter explains from the perspective of historical linguistics how Darwinist theory thrived on the contemporary culture of imagery in nineteenth-century scientific thought.

Such imagery was beneficial for the theory of natural selection. Scholars are well aware of the impact of evolutionary theory on contemporary biological science. Alter claims this theory had an even greater impact on the study of linguistics. In short, fundamental change was the order of the day in scientific thinking across a broad spectrum of disciplines. Alter's study in particular deals with Darwin's intellectual influence on contemporary scientists and language scholars. Moreover, it deals with the intellectual investment the generation of the 1860's made in the image of evolution and the debates it generated (p. xi).

Alter identifies five stages of development. First, he considers linguistics in Europe prior to the period of Darwin. He then goes on to look at similar figures (of speech/language) appearing in the works of Darwin's contemporaries. The third phase deals with the subtle form of polemic in which authors were involved when they dealt with evolutionary theory, primarily from a linguistic perspective. Alter then describes the response the debate had on Darwin in his subsequent publications. In the final section the con-

cept of genealogy is explored as an integrative idea in both the biological and human sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (pp. xi-xii). The author, as a result of the comprehensive focus of the work and the disparate nature of investigation, is able to deal with these themes with varying degrees of success.

At the end of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment had a marked effect on the reception of academic endeavors in scientific discourse. This was particularly the case in Germany. It was an era when idealism and nomothetic scientific investigation prevailed. The trend was usurped later with the emergence of romanticism that dismantled, in an ideographic manner, much of the certainty with which scholars had formulated "laws" operating in a compatible fashion between the human and the natural sciences. The sense of certainty and confidence of natural science was called into question by theories of language. The discipline of Philology featured prominently in this context. Starting with Schleiermacher in the German tradition, language became one of the most dynamic fields of investigation for the study of cultural transformation and hermeneutical understanding.

Alter explains that Philology "was the most common English label for the linguistic field as a whole throughout the nineteenth century." (p. xii) What he does not point out is that a whole scientific movement of thought, especially in the humanities, hinged on this approach. It was Dilthey who would later make the major contribution towards our comprehension of the humanities and social sciences in respect of their relationship to the biological and natural sciences. The author's objective, however, is not to look at the evolution of the humanities and the central role of philology in nineteenth century Germany. Rather, he aims at focusing on the Anglo-Saxon (also the Anglo-American) linguistic environment that flourished at the time when Darwin was an influential thinker. It thus stands to reason that his focus

would be somewhat different from most conventional studies in the field. As Alter states, "Certainly in Britain, at least, the philologist and the antiquary were related from the start," (p. 2.), thus suggesting that the principles of historicism were a vital force in dealing with matters historical and linguistic. Moreover, Alter argues that geologists and paleontologists were also collaborating with antiquarians and philologists.

>From the outset Alter brings in a very particular narrative. He introduces the concept of genealogy, "the new discipline that was built around the idea of branching descent from a common ancestor" (p. 2). Genealogy might have been a new approach in the natural sciences. It was, however, an old discipline in terms of historical studies. In fact, it was a condensed and symbolic form of image transmission with the objective of introducing a hidden and almost invisible narrative discourse to secure the political hegemony of most monarchies in post-Napoleonic Europe. It is interesting that this form of abstraction was absorbed into scientific thinking to account for the creation of a hierarchy of natural origins. Biologically it makes sense. The structured images interact smoothly with the emergence of the idea of the national state. It helps in seeking identities of race in ethnological investigation. It was also aimed at locating root languages.

Alter argues in a convincing manner that "Charles Darwin was not acting as an isolated thinker when he came up with analogies to illustrate his species theory. Rather, he participated in a close-knit discursive world, whose shared theoretical concerns and rhetorical usages were already promoting a sense of philology's natural resonance with other scientific fields" (p. 14). It is not easy to come in an outright manner to this conclusion. As a result of the focus of the work one of the primary problems was, according to the author, that a distinction had to be drawn between the language-species analogy and speculation, at the time of the actual origin of language

(p. 3). Alter, however, aims to get to the essential elements of what he describes as "comparative philology", based on the groundbreaking researches of Friedrich Schlegel, who himself was of the opinion that there was a basis for comparison between the Indian language and wisdom. Schlegel however preferred the terminology of a "comparative grammar" (p. 9.) The new trends in philology, particularly comparative philology as practiced by Frans Bopp (1791-1867) and Jacob Grimm 1785-1863), started seeping into Britain from Germany in the 1830's.

An interesting history of ideas starts unfolding when Alter explains that it was Darwin's cousin, Hensleigh Wedgwood (1803-91), an etymologist for the first New English Dictionary, who first put the evolutionist on to philological theory. Darwin found in linguistics indications of the gradual evolution of language as phenomenon. It opened up vistas much wider than merely the phenomenon of language. He was able to perceive in the "tree of life" (a symbol of significance for genealogy), a symbol for the family tree of language (p. 20). Apart from the similarities between related languages, Darwin also noted there were some dissimilarities, such as the English word "bishop," which in French was "evequ." Both were derived from the Greek "episkopos" (p. 21). The cultural rootedness of language made it possible for the idea of ethnicity and the sense of national identity to permeate the evolutionary theorization of Darwin in the period leading up to the publication of *The Origin of the Species* in 1859.

Darwin's work had a profound impact on evolutionary thinking in many disciplines. Charles Lyell, who published *Principles of Geology* in 1831-3, could see thirty years later that for the first time progress was being made in the field of transmutation. For Lyell language increasingly represented "the embodiment of divine intelligence through the course of organic history" (p. 46). The critics of Darwinian theory were articulate. The Swiss zoologist, Louis Agassiz, working

in the United States, constructed substantial arguments in opposition to Darwin. These were considered quixotic and consequently ridiculed by those within the Darwinian circle. More substantial criticism came from F. Max Muller, who partially in response to *The Origin of the Species*, started research into the origins of speech.

In the narrative leading up to the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), Alter explains how evolutionary theory permeated German science circles. August Schleicher, a leading comparative linguist, and the young zoologist, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1920), became the leading spokespersons for the theory in the German language. So convinced was Haeckel that he forced "Darwinismus" into regions of biological and philosophical theorizing that Darwin himself tried to avoid (p. 73). Schleicher in turn would go on to draw up a genealogy of the Indo-European languages in his *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft* (1863). In Britain the theologian and language scholar, F.W. Farrar (1831-1903), was tolerant towards the theory of natural selection. It was he who would promote a debate on the way in which language was analogous to the evolutionary biological processes. Increasingly, moves were afoot to elevate the discipline of philology as one of the major fields of scientific endeavor (also in the natural sciences) (p. 87). In this section of the work Alter comes up with sound historical scholarship. By consulting Darwin's original notes, texts and relevant contemporary articles in journals he opens up to the reader Darwin's perceptions on language and racial descent. The strength of the work as a whole is situated in this part of the work.

The penultimate chapter deals with the divergence of scientific thought along the lines of evolutionary theory. Alter goes into slightly more detail on the effect of Schleicher and Haeckel. A comparison between illustrations of zoological and linguistic genealogies strikingly illustrates the convergence of ideas. It was now possible for nat-

uralists, working from *The Descent of Man*, to draw analogies more confidently than before (p. 121). Branching evolution (symbolized by a tree with profuse branches) opened up the way for theorizing in comparative anatomy, comparative embryology, systematics, and biogeography. For the human sciences the most marked effect of evolutionary theory was in biblical scholarship, where comparative linguistics made it possible for Julius Wellhausen (1814-1918) to provide a comparative genealogy for the sources of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (p. 140). Other disciplinary developments were comparative jurisprudence, comparative mythology (a field pioneered by F. Max Muller in an 1856 lecture), and linguistic paleontology.

*Darwin and the Linguistic Image* is by no means an easy read. There are numerous gaps in the narrative due to the fact that Alter fails to consider the full impact of Darwin's theories in less prominent disciplines. The author could also have noted the impact of historicism on scientific thought in nineteenth-century Germany. Consideration of these subjects would have made German responses and researches more comprehensible. The work, however, is a compass in a growing sea of intellectual thought on Darwinist theory. Alter is neutral and aims at narrating a discourse on the historical development of theoretical thought and the impact it had on the thinking of people in a number of disciplines. The fact that Darwin inspired many scientists to look beyond the sharp distinction between human and natural science is itself an exemplary act of scientific endeavor. For the discipline of linguistics it evidently proved to be a fertile landscape of historical discovery and creativity.

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