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Discussion

"Curiously parallel": Analogies of language and race in Darwin's *Descent of man*. A reply to Gregory Radick

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ABSTRACT

In the second chapter of *The descent of man* (1871), Charles Darwin interrupted his discussion of the evolutionary origins of language to describe ten ways in which the formation of languages and of biological species were 'curiously' similar. I argue that these comparisons served mainly as analogies in which linguistic processes stood for aspects of biological evolution. Darwin used these analogies to recapitulate themes from *On the origin of species* (1859), including common descent, genealogical classification, the struggle for existence, and natural selection, among others. Skeptical of this interpretation, Gregory Radick sees the naturalistic account of language formation in the *Descent* comparisons as reinforcing Darwin's idea that languages and the races of mankind have both undergone progressive development. (The opposite view was that modern-day primitive peoples had degenerated from an originally civilized condition.) Yet the details of Darwin's language–species comparisons, as well as the polemical context in which they appear, show that they were not aimed at so limited a function. Rather, they addressed issues related to species transmutation in general.

1. Introduction

In Chapter 2 of his book *The descent of man* (1871), Charles Darwin interrupted his discussion of the evolutionary origins of language and set forth a series of striking comparisons. In a single extraordinary paragraph, Darwin (1981 [1871], Vol. 1, pp. 59–61) described some ten ways in which 'the formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same' [revised edition: 'curiously parallel'] (ibid., p. 59; 1989 [1874], Vol. 1, p. 94).[1] These comparisons do not appear to contribute to the surrounding remarks about speech origins; indeed, as Gregory Radick (Radick, 2002, p. 8) has aptly said, they seem 'apropos of nothing'. Why then did Darwin include them? The question is important because it reflects on a much larger subject. That subject was not, however, as Radick suggests, Darwin's emphasis on the interconnection between linguistic and racial development—that is, an argument pertaining to *human* evolution. I argue, rather, that the parallelisms in *Descent* Chapter 2 point to an indirect form of debate involving Darwin and other leading scientists and scholars of his day, a debate in which linguistic processes stood for aspects of species evolution in general.

2. Rehashing old business

In an earlier work, I argued that Darwin used the analogies in *Descent* to recapitulate his views on a number of key topics from *On the origin of species* (1859). Among these were descent from common ancestors, genealogical classification, morphological homology and analogy, correlated growth, the appearance of 'rudiments' (vestigial organs), the struggle for existence, crossing, extinction, and natural selection. At the same time, Darwin was suggesting that these bio-evolutionary categories could quite handily 'explain' the development and diversification of languages. The result was a reciprocal, self-reinforcing pattern: the application of biological concepts *to language* enhanced the ability of

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[1] The paragraph containing the language–species analogy remained otherwise unchanged in 1874 and in the final 'revised and augmented' edition of 1877.

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linguistic phenomena to represent the bio-evolutionary process itself (Alter, 1999, pp. 100–105).

Questioning this interpretation, Gregory Radick asks why Darwin would reiterate in *The descent of man* themes from the *Origin* that had no direct bearing on human evolution—*and* do so by such obscure means (Radick, 2000, p. 123; 2002, p. 8). Why, for instance, replay (by analogy) his critique of transcendentalist morphology? The main proponent of that outlook was Richard Owen, Britain's leading expert on vertebrate homologies; the latter were similar structures having different functions, such as the bone pattern shared by the bat's wing, the whale's flipper, and the forepaw of the mole. According to Owen, this "unity of plan" revealed the imprint of divine intelligence. By contrast, Darwin attributed such phenomena to natural causes, making them the result of gradual transmutation and common descent (Darwin, 1964 [1859], pp. 206, 434–439). Yet Darwin had already argued this point in the *Origin*: why obtrude it again in *Descent*?

My answer to Radick's challenge is four-fold. First, Darwin did not leave his general evolution theory behind when he wrote *The descent of man*: he contended for all of its main elements in that later book. For instance, at the end of Chapter 1 (Darwin, 1981 [1871], Vol. 1, pp. 31–32), which concerned anatomical evidence for human evolution, Darwin restated his view of homologous structures in general. The controversy over this subject was still very much alive because Richard Owen's ideas had recently been re-popularized in the Duke of Argyll's *The reign of law* (1866). Hence it is not implausible to suggest that Darwin further reinforced his own viewpoint in the following chapter, albeit by indirect means. There he noted that languages contain verbal *homologies* (cognate words) and *analogies* (similar paradigms of grammatical inflection). For these parallel structures, Darwin said, arose from 'community of descent' (Darwin, 1981 [1871], Vol. 1, p. 60).

Second, two other items in *Descent*'s series of comparisons repeat actual analogies that Darwin had used in Chapter 13 of the *Origin*. One was the idea that species, like languages, would best be classified according to genealogical descent. The other was the idea that the silent letters in the spellings of many (English) words were analogous to vestigial organs—structures, such as the wings of the ostrich, that served no adaptive purpose but rather were holdovers from ancestral forms (ibid.).[2] Surely Darwin intended to keep the function of these parallelisms the same when he redeployed them in *Descent*.

Third, Darwin used one of the analogies from *Descent* Chapter 2 yet again at a later point in that book—where, presumably, its function went unchanged. In Chapter 6, on 'The affinities and genealogy of man', he again surveyed the merits of a genealogical arrangement for classifying species in general. The method would be similar to that used in establishing linguistic kinship: 'If two languages were found to resemble each other in a multitude of words and points of construction, they would be universally recognized as having sprung from a common source, notwithstanding that they differed greatly in some few words or points of construction' (ibid., pp. 188–189).[3] Darwin's goal was to suggest that humans could be classed with the higher animals based on many features of bodily resemblance. In this context, the linguistic element was purely analogical: it had no bearing on the origin or development of human speech. It was intended only to reinforce a point that had already been made in the *Origin*.

Fourth and finally, the paragraph in *Descent* Chapter 2 explicitly responded to works by other writers who had commented on Darwin's species theory via analogy-based arguments. First, Darwin praised Charles Lyell's *Geological evidences of the antiquity of man* (1863) for its 'very interesting parallelism between the development of species and languages'.[4] Lyell had devoted an entire chapter of his book to presenting an analogical case for the theory of evolution—albeit giving that theory a natural-theological interpretation (Alter, 1999, pp. 56–64). Darwin also referred to two articles that had appeared the previous year in the scientific journal *Nature*, one by the Oxford linguistic savant Friedrich Max Müller and the other by the Anglican churchman Frederic W. Farrar. Again, each of these works had drawn elaborate linguistic analogies as a way to comment not on *human* evolution but on Darwin's general theory of biological descent: Farrar (1870) was for, Müller (1870) against.

Although Gregory Radick acknowledges that Darwin and others had used such analogies in earlier polemics, he does not believe that the parallelisms in *Descent* served this purpose (Radick, 2000, pp. 123, 124). Yet Darwin had good reason to respond to each of the writers he cited (plus Owen, whom he did not cite) in view of things they had said in the years prior to the publication of *Descent*. He expressed approval, for instance, of one of Max Müller's linguistic comparisons, yet he took it out of its anti-evolutionist context and used it in his own favor; he did the same with Lyell's 'design' version of evolutionism (Alter, 1999, pp. 79–88, 102–103). Darwin thus continued a familiar pattern in which each party tried to turn the language–species analogy to his own advantage. To overlook this function of the *Descent* parallelisms is thus to ignore the intellectual context in which they appeared. It is, in effect, to dismiss the linguistic analogy-making practiced by many of the leading figures in the post-Darwinian debates of the 1860s. These included not only Lyell, F. W. Farrar, and Max Müller, but also T. H. Huxley, Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, August Schleicher, and Ernst Haeckel.[5] In other words, Darwin's comparisons in *Descent* were the culmination of a battle that had begun with the *Origin* itself.

3. Progress of language/scale of mind

Radick's own interpretation of *Descent*'s parallelisms focuses on their relation to the paragraph immediately following. There Darwin confronted the recent revival of the notion that modern-day primitive societies had degenerated from the civilized condition in which all of mankind supposedly had been created (Stocking, 1987, pp. 44, 149–150, 179–180).[6] Darwin (1981 [1871], Vol. 1, p. 61) focused on the linguistic component of this thesis, particularly as summarized by the anthropological writer Charles S. Wake (1868, pp. 97–102). Wake described the highly regular and detailed grammatical systems found in the languages spoken by the native peoples of America, Africa, and Australia, as well as by groups such as the Laplanders and Basques.[7] These, he said, were vestiges of humanity's originally high state of mental culture.

Darwin responded by inverting Wake's standard of linguistic 'perfection'. To illustrate, he pointed to the Crinoid, a simple-bodied sea creature that nevertheless had an extremely complex, 150,000-piece shell. The lesson here was that appearances could

[2] Darwin, 1964 [1859], pp. 422–423, 455. Darwin previewed these analogies in his 1844 'Essay' and his 'species book' manuscript of 1856–1858: Darwin (1987b), p. 176; and Darwin (1975), p. 384S. See Alter (1999), pp. 19–22.

[3] Here Darwin repeated almost verbatim Sir William Jones's 1786 comment about how Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin had 'sprung from some common source', and hence were elder sisters in the Indo-European family of languages. See Jones (1807), Vol. 3, p. 34.

[4] Darwin (1989 [1874]), p. 106 n. 67. This footnote in *Descent*'s original edition (Darwin, 1981 [1871], Vol. 1, p. 59 n. 42) contained a transcription error: it referred to Lyell's 'very interesting parallelism between the development of speech and languages'. The second edition changed 'speech' to 'species'.

[5] For context, see Hoenigswald & Wiener (1987); Taub (1993).

[6] The Anglican archbishop Richard Whately reasserted this theme in the 1850s and the Duke of Argyll updated it in the 1860s. See especially Argyll (1868), pp. 56–62.

[7] Darwin highlighted these pages in his copy of Wake's book and wrote in the margin: 'Man: on high art in languages of'. See Darwin (1990), p. 832.