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Lectiones difficiliores –
Vom Ethos der Lektüre

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“Methodical, Energetic, Business-Like and Sober”.
Language Evolution and Constructions of Masculinity
in Otto Jespersen’s *Growth and Structure of the English*
Language

Ursula Lenker

- 1 § 2. It is, of course, impossible to characterize a language in one formula; languages, like
men, are too composite to have their whole essence summed up in one short expression.
Nevertheless, there is one expression that continually comes to my mind whenever I
think of the English language and compare it with others: it seems to me positively and
5 expressly *masculine*, it is the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish
or feminine about it. A great many things go together to produce and to confirm that
impression, things phonetical, grammatical, and lexical, words and turns that are found,
and words and turns that are not found, in the language. In dealing with the English
language one is often reminded of the characteristic English handwriting; just as an
10 English lady will nearly always write in a manner that in any other country would only
be found in a man’s hand, in the same manner the language is more manly than any
other language I know. [...] §. 17. [...] The French language is like the stiff French garden
of Louis XIV, while the English is like an English park, which is laid out seemingly
without any definite plan, and in which you are allowed to walk everywhere according
15 to your own fancy without having to fear a stern keeper enforcing rigorous regulations.
[...] §. 18. This is seen, too, in the vocabulary. In spite of the efforts of several authors of
high standing, the English have never suffered an Academy to be instituted among them
like the French or Italian Academies, which had as one of their chief tasks the regulation
of the vocabulary so that every word not found in their Dictionaries was blamed as un-
20 worthy of literary use or distinction. In England, every writer is, and has always been,
free to take his words where he chooses [...]. §. 19. To sum up: The English language is
a methodical, energetic, business-like and sober language, that does not care much for
finery and elegance, but does care for logical consistency and is opposed to any attempt
to narrow-in life by police regulations and strict rules either of grammar or of lexicon.

Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1905)¹

1 Tenth ed. with a foreword by Randolph Quirk, Oxford: Blackwell 1982 [first edition: Leipzig, London and New York: Teubner 1905], chapter I: “Preliminary Sketch”, pp. 1-16 (§ 2: p. 2, §§. 17-18: pp. 14-16). – Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) was a Danish linguist and professor of English at the University of Copenhagen from 1893 to 1925 and has without doubt been one of the most influential scholars in English linguistics.

One does not necessarily expect to learn anything about constructions of masculinity from an introductory textbook to the English language. Yet, in this passage taken from the first chapter (“Preliminary Sketch”) of the probably most widely read introduction to the English language in the 20th century – Otto Jespersen’s *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1905)² – it is “masculinity” which is identified as the most characteristic trait of the English language: Compared to “other languages” (l. 4, l. 12),³ English is “*masculine*” (italics in the original; l. 5) and “manly” (l. 11). As revealed by the pre-modifiers “positively and expressly (*masculine*)” (l. 4-5) and by the comparative “more (manly than any other language I know)” (l. 11-12), this masculinity is presented as a patently positive feature. Its contrast – characterizing, for instance, Italian (p. 3, p. 8) – is portrayed by the clearly negatively connoted collocation “childish or feminine” (l. 5-6). In this short study, it will be shown how these – not only at first glance rather odd – portrayals are grounded in Jespersen’s evolutionary conceptualization of language change reflecting ‘survival of the fittest’: this, in Jespersen’s view, becomes manifest when languages reach the highest degree of communicative effectiveness by the fewest and simplest means, a case of which – in Jespersen’s understanding – the *masculine* English language proves to be.

In obvious contrast to his claim, namely that “languages [...] are too composite to have their whole essence summed up in one short expression” (l. 1-2), Jespersen still chooses to rely on a single concept for this undertaking, which finds its verbal expression in the adjective “*masculine*” and synonyms such as “manly”, “male” (p. 4) or “virile” (p. 10). This conceptualization of English as masculine is – as far as I can see – unique to Jespersen and permeates *Growth and Structure*, and particularly its first chapter, as a megametaphor: “A great many things go together to produce and to confirm that impression [= the English language being masculine, having very little feminine or childish about it], things phonetical, grammatical, and lexical, words and turns that are found, and words and turns that are not found, in the language” (l. 6-8).

In (a) to (d), some selected examples illustrating masculinity in “things phonetical, grammatical, and lexical” are listed together with the parameters Jespersen identifies as being of “symbolic significance” (p. 5) of such a masculinity:

2 *Growth and Structure* saw nine editions in 33 years (from 1905 to 1938), followed by many later impressions of the ninth edition. There have been no changes to this passage in later editions: It is thus the 1905 text.

3 In this paper, “l.” refers to the lines of the passage cited; all of the quotations and references marked by “p.” are taken from the first chapter (“Preliminary Sketch”) of *Growth and Structure*.

- a. *Phonetics – Parameter: Words Ending in Consonants*: [...] may perhaps characterize English, phonetically speaking, as possessing male energy, but not brutal force. (p. 4)
- b. *Phonetics/Morphology/Style – Parameter: Briefness*: If briefness, conciseness and terseness are characteristic of the style of men, while women as a rule are not such economizers of speech, English is more masculine than most languages. (p. 4sq.)
- c. *Morphology – Parameters: Monosyllabicity, Monomorphematism, Avoidance of Hyperbolic Expressions*: [...] so I may be allowed to add this feature of the English language to the signs of masculinity I have collected. (p. 8)
- d. *Grammar – Parameter: Word Order*: The business-like, virile qualities of the English language also manifest themselves in such things as word-order. Words in English do not play at hide-and-seek, as they often do in Latin, for instance, or in German, where ideas that by right belong together are widely sundered in obedience to caprice, or more often to a rigorous grammatical rule. (p. 10)

No-one today would have any substantial issues with the structural features of English described in (a) to (d): Features such as the monomorphematism of English and its briefness (a, b, c), its words ending in a consonant because of the loss of inflectional endings (a), the rigidity of SVO word order and its functional consequences (d) have become part and parcel of introductions to the English language (and are still often cited verbatim from Jespersen); *Growth and Structure* still counts as one of the most competent, knowledgeable and ingenious descriptions of the structural properties of English, thus doing justice to the second noun of its title, *Structure* (this, of course, anticipating later ideas of structuralism). The question remains, though, why Jespersen – in spite of his clearly brilliant understanding of the “essence” of English – still aims at couching this understanding in terms of masculinity. I hope to show that this is connected to his evolutionary ideas on language change, which are signaled by the first noun of the title, *Growth*.

From the selection of quotes above (of which there are many more throughout the book), we see that Jespersen’s conceptualization of English as “masculine” is not primarily based on genderlectal features⁴ attributed stereotypically to men or women, even though we occasionally find passages where English structures are equated to those Jespersen himself identified as properties of male

4 In any case “gender” rather than “sex”; cf. l. 9-11 on the masculinity of an English lady’s handwriting.

and female language (see (b) on the “briefness, conciseness and terseness” of both men’s genderlects and English).⁵

Mostly, however, the point of comparison is not of a genderlectal nature, but more general and profound in that Jespersen employs the very long and widely attested conceptual metaphor LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS,⁶ albeit in his very unique version LANGUAGES ARE HUMAN BEINGS with distinctions being drawn along the parameters MASCULINE/FEMININE and GROWN-UP/CHILDISH. Concerning the status of this metaphor, it is evident from Jespersen’s otherwise very plain prose style that metaphorical language here is not employed for aesthetic or artistic purposes, but – as suggested by cognitive approaches in the vein of Lakoff and Johnson – as a means of dealing with a cognitively difficult and complex domain; here, the “summing up of the essence of languages” is specified by Jespersen as being “too composite” (l. 2; *composite* ‘not simple in structure’, *OED*, s.v. A.1.a.). Jespersen, who is known to have been “opposed to all rhetorical embellishment”⁷, introduces this metaphor since other expressions seem to fail him.

Before embarking on Jespersen’s challenging choice of the domain MASCULINITY, a closer look at the history of the conceptual metaphor LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS is called for.⁸ In a cognitive framework, metaphors are regarded as a means to better understand certain concepts: Sets of systematic correspondences between a source domain A and a target domain B in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of B correspond to constituent elements of A (technically called ‘mappings’) allow an understanding of how human thought is organized by understanding one conceptual domain (= any coherent organization of experience) in terms of another conceptual domain. The direction of conceptualization is commonly from a typically more concrete source domain (e.g. PLANT) to a typically more abstract target domain (e.g.

5 Jespersen was one of the first linguists systematically discussing genderlectal features, particularly in his – today often heavily criticized – chapter “The Women” in his most influential book, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, London: Unwin & Allen 1922, Chapter XIII.

6 This article follows the formal principles of cognitive linguistics in that cognitive domains are printed in capitals; italics are used for verbal expressions in particular mappings. On cognitive metaphor analysis, cf. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980; and, for a more recent overview, Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor. A Practical Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010.

7 Paul Christophersen, “Otto Jespersen”, in: *Otto Jespersen: Facets of his Life and Work*, edd. Arne Juul, Hans F. Nielsen, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins 1989, p. 5.

8 For surveys cf. K. H. Rensch, “Organismus – System – Struktur in der Sprachwissenschaft”, in: *Phonetica* 16 (1967), pp. 71–84; and Dieter Cherbim, *Sprachwandel. Reader zur diachronischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Berlin: De Gruyter 1975, pp. 7–17.

ORGANIZATION), such as, for instance, in the conceptual metaphor ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS. Through the respective mappings, conceptual elements of B (ORGANIZATION) are understood by linguistic expressions such as “the local *branch* of a bank”, “our company is *growing*”, a “*flourishing* black market” or the “organization was *rooted* in the old church”.

The domain PLANT/ORGANISM is among the universally most frequent source domains and has since very early also been used in linguistic thought, albeit with very diverse, culture- and time-dependent conceptualizations due to changes in the conceptualization of the source domain PLANT/ORGANISM in different cultures and times. Today, LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS is employed when we, for instance, talk about the “*death* of a language”, about “*branches* in a language (family) *tree*” or refer, as in the title of Jespersen’s book, to the “*growth* of a language”.

Even before the 19th century, when LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS became fundamental to linguistic thought in the wake of evolutionary theories, this conceptual metaphor was heavily employed with reference to vernacular languages. Bernhard Teuber prudently explicated for the transfer from the mediaeval to the modern period in *Sprache – Körper – Traum* that it was the conceptualization of “uncontrolled growth” of vernacular languages which, for most of the Middle Ages, set them apart from Latin (which is regulated by means of, for instance, grammar and is thus under the control of authorities). What has been celebrated as the “emancipation of vernacular languages” in the early modern period – i.e. their replacing Latin as the language of court, administration, education and also literature – can inversely also be seen as what Teuber calls “Umformung naturhafter Sprache zu einem Gegenstand kultureller Manipulation”⁹. Vernacular languages lose their naturalness and are pruned/tamed as they fall under the control of authority: Once used as high varieties, their natural growing capacities are restrained by their codification in grammars, dictionaries and, generally, prescriptive discourse traditions. Most prominent among the authoritarian institutions hindering natural growth are language planning institutions such as Academies.

This controlling function by Academies is highlighted by Jespersen when he refers to “any attempt to narrow-in life by police regulations and strict rules either of grammar or of lexicon” (l. 23-24) or to a fear of “a stern keeper enforcing rigorous regulations” (l. 15), something English never had to fear because “the English have never suffered an Academy to be instituted among them like the French or Italian Academies, which had as one of their chief tasks the

⁹ Bernhard Teuber, *Sprache – Körper – Traum. Zur karnevalesken Tradition in der romanischen Literatur aus früherer Neuzeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 1989, p. 22.

regulation of the vocabulary so that every word not found in their Dictionaries was blamed as unworthy of literary use or distinction" (l. 17-20). Authoritative control is also evoked in the similes in l. 12-15, where French is compared to "the stiff French garden of Louis XIV" (l. 12-13), while English is described as "an English park, which is laid out seemingly without any definite plan" (l. 13-14). These similes, of course, also play on the conceptual metaphor LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS. While French and Italian have been interfered with by authorities hindering natural growth, English is clearly described in evolutionary terms. It is "laid out seemingly without any definite plan" (l. 13-14), i.e. – in Darwinian terms – "designed without a designer".

By this reasoning English is – in the terms of Spencer – an example of a 'survival of the fittest', and this is an anchor of reference for GROWN-UP in ENGLISH IS A GROWN-UP MASCULINE HUMAN BEING. Generally, Jespersen's linguistic thought was shaped by his admiration of evolutionary ideas (in particular Herbert Spencer's but also Charles Darwin's), to which he was first introduced as a freshman at Copenhagen University. These evolutionary ideas shape all his work and lead to what has been called his "naïve progressivism"¹⁰, a stance that has to be understood as a vehement reaction to one of the most influential schools of his time, August Schleicher's view of language change as decay. For Schleicher (1821-1868) and his followers, the historical development of any language is a story of decay: The further we go back in the history of a language (from, e.g. Latin or – in the context of Germanic languages – Gothic), the higher its linguistic perfection, a view grounded in Schleicher's contempt for the modern vernacular languages and his admiration for the ancient languages, in particular Latin. In all of these aspects, Jespersen takes the opposite stance: He loved the vernacular languages (earned his master's degree in French, with English and Latin as minors) and came to hate Latin more and more. (Already as a student he had tried to abolish compulsory Latin at Copenhagen university, and he was finally successful as a professor!)

Jespersen's choice of the constituent element GROWN-UP thus has to be seen against the backdrop of the dominance of Latin (and ancient languages) in his time. In his evolutionary framework, he therefore proposes a re-interpretation of the conceptual metaphor LANGUAGES ARE ORGANISMS, with English being an organism in the Spencerian and Darwinian framework, for which no authoritarian regulating force has been needed to make it "fit" (or even the "fittest"). This independent progress is presented as a contrast to the pruning and domestication of vernacular languages through authorities (Latin grammar,

10 Hans Frede Nielsen, "Jespersen's View of Language Evolution" in: *Otto Jespersen*, edd. Juul, Nielsen, p. 72.

vernacular grammars based on that model, spelling conventions, dictionaries, codification of discourse traditions) by, for instance, Academies. This move towards perfection without any deliberate or artificial interference is thus a process of 'wise natural selection', which vernacular languages can take once freed from the straightjacket of Latin grammar and its discourse traditions.¹¹ English attests to the 'survival of the fittest', having reached the highest degree of communicative effectiveness by the fewest and simplest means.¹² It is the "briefness, conciseness and terseness" of the English language which make it into one of the 'fittest' (not (yet) as fit as Chinese, though; p. 10), features which, however, also entail little care for "finery and elegance" (l. 23).

With respect to our overarching question, namely why Jespersen chose to characterise English by its masculinity, we may perhaps identify this stereotypical lack of "finery and elegance" in men as a trigger for the "one expression that continually comes to my mind whenever I think of the English language and compare it with others: [...] *masculine*" (l. 3-5). When having a look at the verbal expressions used by Jespersen for the conceptual metaphor A LANGUAGE IS A MASCULINE HUMAN BEING, it becomes clear that in this case the transfer does not primarily allow a better understanding of the target domain LANGUAGE by a set of correspondences with a (concrete) source domain. MASCULINITY is certainly not more concrete (nor has more precisely defined constituent elements) than ENGLISH. Jespersen's account – though pretending differently – in inverse relation thus rather provides an insight of the constructions of the source domain (MASCULINITY) in terms of the target domain (LANGUAGE), since Jespersen indeed presents MASCULINITY as a fully-fledged conceptual domain, i.e. as a coherent organization of experience. A summary of its constituent elements is given in the concluding sentence of the passage cited (l. 21-23) by "methodical", "energetic", "business-like", "sober" and "logical" and is similarly invoked by adjectives such as "business-like and virile" (d) or phrases such as "male energy and not brutal force" (a). From the whole of the first chapter, the following set of constituent elements of MASCULINITY as a "coherent organization of experience" emerges (in alphabetical order):

Adjectives: *business-like* (p. 6, 10), *clear* (p. 2, 3), *free* (p. 15), *logical* (p. 11 (2x), 12, 13), *precise* (p. 9, 12), *sober* (p. 8 (2x)), *vigorous* (p. 6 (2x))

11 On more details, cf. Christophersen, "Jespersen", p. 7.

12 Such a definition of communicative effectiveness, of course, disregards, for instance, processing benefits of concord and all kinds of redundancies and, above all, functions of language beyond "communicative effectiveness".

Nouns: *business capacities* (p. 9), *clearness* (p. 5 (2x)), *energy* (p. 3 (2x), 4), *freedom* (p. 13 (2x)), *force* (p. 5), *liberty* (p. 13, 14 (2x)), *logic* (p. 11 (2x)), *power* (p. 5), *seriousness* (p. 9), *sobriety* (p. 7), *strength* (p. 6), *vigour* (p. 3)

An even richer picture of the constructions of masculinity is gained by charting the respective negatives and antonyms:

Adjectives: *not harsh* (p. 4), *not rough* (p. 4)

Nouns: *less caprice* (p. 4, p. 11), *no obedience to caprice* (p. 10), *loss of elegance* (p. 5), *no brutal force* (p. 4), *free from narrow-minded pedantry* (p. 13), *not care much for finery and elegance* (p. 16), *less rigidity* (p. 10, p. 11), *freedom from pedantry* (p. 17)

What a beauty of a man!

I will refrain from further intruding into the organization of Jespersen's thoughts concerning his gender conceptualizations. Without intending to exonerate Jespersen from what not only from today's perspective is a clearly sexist stance, the collection of adjectives and phrases shows clear correspondences to the discussion above. With regard to evolutionary theories, the terms "free / freedom from / liberty" are of crucial importance (l. 21): In Jespersen's teleological view of a drive towards linguistic perfection based on 'natural selection', it is the independent development of vernacular languages which is of utmost importance. Independence here not only refers to an escape from the straightjacket of Latin as in the teaching of grammar, but also to the authoritarian prescriptive interferences of discourse traditions, which are summarized as "narrow-in life by police regulations and strict rules either of grammar or of lexicon" (l. 24) in the concluding sentence of this passage. Similarly, the lexical set "energy / power / strength / vigour" attributed to both masculinity and English refers to the unique capacity of a language reaching communicative efficiency without any designer, i.e. without any authority showing undue pedantry. English has – without such a designer – grown and become "methodical, energetic, business-like, and sober" (l. 22), i.e. communicatively efficient.

The mappings used for ENGLISH IS A GROWN-UP MASCULINE HUMAN BEING may seem a bit forced – and may have seemed so already to Jespersen, because he, even in the course of this chapter, often seems to have to push himself to relate his structural descriptions to MASCULINITY (see (a) "may perhaps", or (c) "I may be allowed") and also because he at times loses track of this being a conceptual metaphor and not just a parallel to genderlectal stereotypes (see (b)). By spelling it out, however, Jespersen at least provides us with a construction of MASCULINITY by one individual at the beginning of the 20th century, to which "energy", "sobriety", "no pedantry" and "liberty" are central – certainly not an inappropriate collection of terms in the context of this volume.