AFTER EDEN: GULLIVER’S (LINGUISTIC) TRAVELS

BY ANN CLINE KELLY

The consequences of Babel fascinated a number of writers and thinkers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a time when concern with various aspects of language may have reached an historical peak in England. Commentators have explained the increased interest in reforming English as it existed or in creating new, more perfect languages (“language planning”) by ascribing it to the influence of scientific thought, the growth in trade, the influx of immigrants, the spirit of puritanism, new concepts of education, studies in the art of memory, the development of shorthand, etc., but what seems to me to be a dominant impetus, no: extensively discussed, is the psychological impact of England’s Civil War. Underlying many linguistic proposals of the period is the assumption—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—that a unified and purified language is a necessary condition for a unified and purified country.

Jonathan Swift, like others in the period, was troubled by the flaws of verbal communication: his explorations of language’s abuses continued from one of his first prose satires, A Tale of a Tub, to one of his last, Polite Conversation, and his interest in language reform is evident in the Proposal for Correcting . . . the English Tongue. In Gulliver’s Travels, however, Swift’s views on some aspects of the linguistic speculation of his day are most evident. Moreover, because Swift gives an abundance of details on the process of Gulliver’s language acquisition and the nature of his hosts’ language, as well as on the political system of each of the countries Gulliver visits, a reading of Gulliver’s Travels can illuminate Swift’s ideas on the association of language and governance—a theme which seemed to pervade the thought not only of language reformers, but of many others, as the next section demonstrates.

I

Treating the linkage of language and governance on a grand scale in Paradise Lost, Milton embroiders the biblical account of the
Confusion to join Nimrod’s rebelliousness with the building of Babel: thus, Nimrod’s dispossession of “Concord and law of Nature from the Earth” is mirrored in the “various Spirit,” the “jangling noise of words unknown,” the “hideous gabble” that ensued as a punishment for daring to erect the tower. In a similar way, Clarendon, in *The History of the Rebellion*, sees a parallelism between language’s corruption and domestic turmoil: instead of being understood in a uniform and true way by all Englishmen, terms such as “Religion, Law, Liberty, and Parliaments, (words of precious esteem in their just signification),” were at the heart of the conflict. The idea is evident at the beginning of *Hudibras* where Butler stresses the failure of language to unite men during this period: it was a time “When civil Fury first grew high, / And men fell out they knew not why; / When hard words, Jealousies and Fears, / Set Folks together by the ears. . . .” In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes also warns of the dangers of those “hard words,” or contentious terms: “hard words suffocate[] . . . understanding . . . [and] Distract the people” encouraging the state to fall under “Oppression or [to be] cast . . . into the Fire of a Civill warre.” John Locke notes in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that if “the imperfections of Language, as the Instrument of Knowledge, [were] more thoroughly weighed, a great many of the Controversies that make such a noise in the World, would of themselves cease; and the way to Knowledge, and, perhaps, Peace too, lie a good deal opener than it does.”

Accepting the idea that a failure of words promoted a breakdown in the ability of a nation to maintain its integrity, some thought that language reform was intrinsically related to a future of peace or prosperity. Milton, for instance, observes that he has “never heard that any empire, any state, did not flourish moderately at least as long as liking and care for its language lasted.” Because the Civil War introduced so “many fantastical terms . . . and many outlandish phrases,” Thomas Sprat suggested the establishment of an English Academy, patterned on the French Academy; in this way, he hoped that the English nation could achieve the cultural glories of the Romans at their height, for “it was in the peaceful reign of Augustus, after the conclusion of their long Civil Wars, that most of their perfect Historians appear’d.” John Dryden also proposed an English Academy, but advocated waiting until “the quiet of the nation . . . be secured; and a mutuall trust, betwixt Prince and people be re-new’d” before decisions on reform were made.

Many who saw the necessity for improving language were not
content, however, to patch the tattered fabric of English; the simplicity, the innocence, the cohesion, and significantly, the verbal stability of pre-Babel days had a great emotional appeal, especially in the shell-shocked days after the Civil War, and in part inspired an amazing number of language planners to set forth proposals for entirely new languages that they hoped were free of the pollution of Babel and that recaptured the linguistic purity of the Garden of Eden where words were intimate with the things they represented. Adam knew instinctively what to name the animals because he could “read” their names in their natures; in the Garden, too, God and humanity spoke a common tongue; moreover, the same language was universal among mankind. In an Edenic situation, theoretically, wranglings about meaning could not occur because the relation of res to verba was not problematical. Although most language theorists did not articulate their yearnings for Eden, many did. John Webster, for instance, in Academiarum Examen (1654) laments that “every creature understands and speaks the language of nature, but sinfull man who hath now lost, defact’, and forgotten it.”

To return to Primitive, or Original, linguistic conditions when language was not only universal but intimate with the reality it signified, some reformers proposed the fabrication a “philosophical language” whose logic would recapture the logic of Creation, thus regaining the harmony between word and thing that existed in the Garden. Looking at the words “poplar” and “maple” one cannot tell from the symbology or pronunciation that both are trees; in a philosophical language, these generic links would be clear, and so the linguistic world and the natural world could be all of a piece again. Because the system would regain the “natural logic” of things, it would easily become universal. This idea is expressed, for example, by Johan Comenius in The Way of Light (1668) where he says that “a universal language ought to be a universal antidote to confusion of thought. And it can only be that if [language’s] course is parallel with the course of things.”

To achieve the integration of word and thing—ideal in Eden—numerous systems of “real characters” were devised, that is, sets of signs that contain their own meaning, such as mathematical symbols or musical notation (which, incidently, are virtually universal). Indeed, languages resembling mathematical formulae and musical scores were proposed. In addition, interest in a “real character” promoted discussion of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese characters because many thought that this type of pictogram

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could serve as a possible alternative to words composed of letters. This concept appears, for instance, in Francis Bacon’s *Advance-
ment of Learning* (1605), Herman Hugo’s *De Origine Scribendi* (1617), Gerhard Vossius’ *De Arte Grammatica Libri Septum* (1635), John Wilkins’ *Mercury* (1641), Johan Comenius’ *The Way of Light*, and John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), among others. Francis Lodwyck, who formulated a system of real characters in *A Common Writing* (1647), explains that “what is once written with this [system], will be legible and intelligible, in all Languages whatsoever.” George Dalgarno assures the reader that his *Ars Signorum* (1661), another plan for a real character, shows “a way to remedy the difficulties and absurdities which all languages are clogg’d with ever since the confusion, or rather since the fall.”

The differences which divide men would be removed by such ideal languages, recreating the unity of Eden; for example, John Wilkins in the Preface to an *Essay Towards a Philosophical Language and a Real Character* (1668) predicts that his plan will evaporate “some of our Modern differences in Religion, by unmasking many wild errors, that shelter themselves under the disguise of affected phrases.” As one can see, the pressure for language reform often had a very strong ironic thrust, which Benjamin DeMott thinks was imbied from Comenius, who came into contact with many English theorists. The hope that unity of language might eliminate the causes of strife underlies the statement of Wilkins above and is perhaps an echo of Comenius’ extravagant description of a world with a universal tongue where all men will become “as it were one race, one people, one household, one School of God.”

Considerations of an ideal language—immediately apprehensible and completely universal—involved not just a few isolated thinkers: The Royal Society vigorously pursued this issue, as did many other educated men in England and France. Among the people helping with the formulation of a universal language or commenting on its desirability were Isaac Newton, Marin Mersenne, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, John Wilkins, Robert Boyle, John Wallis, John Ray, Gottfreid Leibniz, Francis Lodwyck, Cave Beck, Thomas Urquhart, George Dalgarno, Johan Becher, Phillip Labbé, Seth Ward, William Petty, John Aubrey, Robert Hooke, Theodore Haak, Samuel Hartlib, John Webster, Johan Comenius, and others.

Although many thinkers tried to devise languages which would approximate the Original one, others held the hope that the Adamic language might be discovered in some obscure part of the world or in

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some existing language—i.e., that the Original language may have escaped the Confusion at Babel. Chinese, of course was frequently suggested because it seemed to be a real character. John Webb, in 1669, produced An Historical Essay Endeavoring the Probability that the Language of China is the Primitive Language. A half century later, John Mawe writes in The Progress of Language (1726) that “the first language must be sought for where Noah fixt himself, and we may without scruple affirm it was in China.”21 Others, such as Athanasius Kircher, argued that Hebrew was the Adamic language because a belief existed that the older a language was, the simpler it was: Hebrew is the oldest language, his logic went, because all the root words had three letters, and were thus monosyllabic.22 On this score, “Teutonic,” or Dutch and German, were also offered as candidates. Richard Verstegan, an author with whom Swift was familiar,23 stresses in A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence that “teutonic”—thought to consist of a concatenation of radicals “each having his own proper signification, as by instinct of God and Nature they first were received”24—must have been the first tongue. The prevalent association of a language’s simplicity with its efficacy informs Sprat’s famous injunction on style in the History of the Royal Society: to deliver “things, in almost an equal number of words,” “to return back to . . . primitive purity.” From Adam to Noah, Sprat remarks, “there is no mention of their Wars.”25

The concept of gesture as the “Lingua Humana” is suggested several times during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by various theorists,26 especially those interested in educating the deaf and mute to speak, but is developed in full by John Bulwer, whose Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand was published in 1644. Bulwer systematizes what in a way is an intuitive understanding: that gesture is an immediate, and usually unambiguous, conveyer of ideas. In gesture, sign and concept are united. Bulwer asserts that the “language of the hand . . . had the happiness to escape the curse at the confusion of Babel, so it hath since been sanctified and made a holy language by the expressions of our Savior’s hands. . . . And God speaks to us by the signs of his hand . . . when he works wonders which are the proper signs of his hand.”27 Gesture, then, according to Bulwer, seems to have all the qualities that characterized language in Eden: it unites sign and thing, man and man, and man and God. It is not clear to what degree Bulwer wants people to rely on gesture, but he makes great claims for it.

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The intuition that the Original language might be hidden in some remote region of the world, in part, created an interest in the languages of distant peoples which was fed by narratives of voyages, both real and imaginary.\textsuperscript{28} The Adamic language might be identified, to some degree, by the resultant harmony of the society that used it and by the accurate and revelatory way it signified reality. Thus on any one of his forays, Gulliver could stumble into a pocket of paradisal linguistic purity untouched by Babel's pollution. In Francis Godwin's \textit{The Man in the Moone} (1638) Domingo Gonsales seems to do this exactly when he encounters a culture where food grows without labor, where eternal spring smiles, where diseases are unknown, where moral law is revered, and where "You have few words but they signify divers and several things, and they are distinguished onely by their tunes that are as it were sung in the utterance of them"\textsuperscript{29}—in other words, "it seemed . . . a very \textit{Paradise}."\textsuperscript{30}

As one can see, schemes for creating new languages and reforming the existing language tumbled forth in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Gulliver's experiences in language acquisition and his observations on his hosts' languages seem to test some of the premises on which this linguistic theorizing was based: among others, that an effective language can eliminate domestic unrest; that a real character or language of gesture—what Bulwer calls the only "tongue and general language of human nature"\textsuperscript{31}—might provide better communication than conventional signification; that faulty words are responsible for misunderstandings; that a reform in language perforce would result in an improvement of human relations; that it is possible to recreate an Edenic language which would remove the Babel-induced barriers between man and man, and man and reality; that some place on earth might have escaped the Confusion.

Gulliver's (linguistic) travels, discussed in Section II below, will provide the basis of ascertaining, in Section III, Swift's views on the possibilities of human communication.

II

When Gulliver awakens in Lilliput, he is greeted with the words, "\textit{Hekinah Degul}," which although they were repeated "several times"—as natives are wont to do with visitors who are ignorant of their language—Gulliver "knew not what they meant."\textsuperscript{32} This complete lack of appreciation does not seem to dampen the
Lilliputians’ energy in oratory—a preoccupation with form over substance that in the end will have dangerous consequences for Gulliver. After being unimpressed by two such speeches, Gulliver is exposed to a third, but this one communicates more than the others because the speaker “acted every part of an Orator” and transmitted some of his meaning in gesture; Gulliver, therefore, “could observe [italics added] many Periods of Threatnings, and others of Promises, Pity, and Kindness” (23). Gulliver replies in kind: “I answered in a few Words, but in the most submissive Manner, lifting up my left Hand and both mine Eyes to the Sun, as calling him for a Witness . . . [I put] my Finger frequently on my Mouth, to signify that I wanted Food. The Hurgo . . . understood me very well.” (23) Once this basis of communication is established, events proceed relatively smoothly: Gulliver “made another Sign that [he] wanted Drink” (24) and it was provided; after finishing the draught, “they made [him] a Sign that [he] should throw down the two Hogsheads” (24) and he does so.

At this point, the King appears and despite the absence of mutually understood verbal signs, communication between him and Gulliver is almost perfect: Gulliver says

[I] made a Sign with my Hand that was loose, putting it to the other . . . and then to my own Head and Body, to signify that I desired my Liberty. It appeared that he understood me well enough; for he shook his Head by way of Disapprobation, and held his Hand in a Posture to shew that I must be carried as a Prisoner. However, he made other Signs to shew me that I should have Meat and Drink enough, and very good Treatment. 

(25)

Gulliver has every expectation that his condition will improve when he can speak and comprehend the Lilliputian language and so he makes considerable efforts in that direction: at first he has to talk “part in Words, and part in Signs,” (33) but gradually he becomes fluent. Freedom, however, does not come with linguistic competency: because the Lilliputians are archetypal bureaucrats, using language to obfuscate and manipulate, Gulliver remains babyishly innocent to most of their meaning, which is usually buried deep in verbal complication. The narrative of the first voyage is interspersed with Lilliputian documents which reveal vicious pettiness cloaked in an intricately Grand Style. The Lilliputians’ semantic quibbles, perhaps not accidently, are mirrored in the “intestine Disquiets” (48) that keep them in a roil.

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As soon as Gulliver can speak adequately, he makes a simple request: his freedom. Eventually, after much bureaucratic feinting, the elaborate conditions of Gulliver’s release from chains are spelled out in legalistic language, some of the provisions being “not so honourable as [Gulliver] could have wished” (44). When his shackles are unlocked, Gulliver crows that he is “at full Liberty” (44). This is cosmic irony.

When Gulliver becomes a language speaker in this society, he leaves the special, indulged status of an infant whose needs center on biological necessity and enters a frightening world of physical and moral consequences: he is accused of having an affair with the minister’s wife, manipulated into serving the Lilliputians’ military aims, charged with polluting the royal palace, indicted with articles of impeachment, and condemned to be blinded. Gulliver never attains the “adult” mentality of his hosts because his boyish directness precipitates his departure: as Gulliver puts it, “I plainly protested [italics added], that I would never be an Instrument of bringing a free and brave People [the Blesfescudians] into Slavery” (53). Absolutely contradicting the “artful Manner” of the Lilliputians, “This open bold Declaration of mine was so opposite to the Schemes and Politicks of his Imperial Majesty, that he could never forgive me” (53). With the “primitive purity” of Gulliver as a relative measure, one can see that Lilliputian society, where the conformation of words to things represents a treasonous offense, is no ideal, but is manifestly stagnating under Babel’s curse.

When Gulliver is seized by the Brobdingnagian farmer, he employs the same mute sign which worked in Lilliput to ensure him humane treatment: “All I ventured was to raise mine Eyes towards the Sun, and place my Hands together in a supplicating Posture” (87). Although Gulliver and the farmer are unable to converse verbally, they make themselves known quite effectively through gestures. Gulliver signals the farmer, who “seemed to apprehend [his] Meaning” (88) that he would like to be put down; Gulliver seems to understand as the farmer calls his friends around and asks their opinions; Gulliver falls on his knees in front of them; Gulliver gestures to the farmer to take the money Gulliver has for him; the farmer makes Gulliver a sign to put the coins back in his purse; Gulliver pardons the boy who torments him by falling to his knees and pointing; Gulliver, through gestures, indicates to the farmer’s wife that he is not hurt by the rat; and finally, as Gulliver describes it, “my Bashfulness would not suffer me to express my self farther than

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by pointing to the Door, and bowing several Times” to indicate that he wanted to discharge “the Necessities of Nature” (93-94). This is the infantile, rather happily innocent phase of Gulliver’s stay in Brobdingnag, for Gulliver takes the place of Glumdalclitch’s baby doll: “Her Mother and she contrived to fit up the Baby’s Cradle for me against Night” (95) he reports. Just as in Lilliput, however, the intimacy between babylike Gulliver and his ersatz “parents” begins to disintegrate as he learns the language.

Although speech, according to Swift, is supposed to be the “great Distinction between Men and Brutes,” Gulliver, ironically, is viewed more and more as an animal as he progresses in linguistic knowledge in Brobdingnag. At first, Swift causes the reader to feel sympathy with Gulliver as he is paraded through the provinces like a trained mouse, impressing audiences with the language he was in the process of acquiring. Gulliver is rescued from this degrading situation, however, and transported to court, where with the help of increased fluency and practiced rhetoric (he “wished for the Tongue of Demosthenes or Cicero” [127]), he proceeds to degrade himself, losing the sympathy of the King and of the reader, who has to agree somewhat with the King’s judgment of Gulliver and his ilk as “the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth” (132). As in Lilliput, therefore, “refinement” of language is paradoxically associated with atavism; this time, though, it is Gulliver who is little and animal-like.

The Brobdingnagians’ plain style is in sharp contrast to Gulliver’s chauvinistic orotundity; words and things enjoy a low ratio in Brobdingnag, as many language planners imagined they did in the Garden. Gulliver notes that “they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using Various Expressions” (137) and that “no Law of that Country must exceed in Words the Number of Letters in their Alphabet; which consists only of two and twenty” (136). “As well as the Chinese” (this comparison may not be accidental in view of the context described in Part I), the Brobdingnagians have been the masters of printing a long time, but due to their inability “to discover above one Interpretation” to laws and other ideas, their literary output “doth not amount to above a thousand Volumes” (136).

At the beginning of Chapter VII, which treats the admirable qualities of the Brobdingnagian language, Swift inserts Gulliver’s vile discussion of the glories of gunpower, proving accurate perhaps the associations made in Book II between Gulliver and a

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variety of small beasts (monkey, bird, mouse, vermin, tortoise, etc.). Swift could have ended the chapter with the discourse on the Brobdingnagians’ “clear, masculine, and smooth” style and the reader might conclude, especially with fallen Gulliver as a foil, that these creatures were the “giants before the Flood,” possessors of Edenic “primitive purity” in language. The chapter ends, however, on a note which rather modifies what has gone before. After describing Brobdingnagian writing in theory, Gulliver picks up a Brobdingnagian book; in it he finds one of the “usual Topicks of European Moralists”—that man must have been a superior being in days gone by. Gulliver notes, and I hear Swift’s voice here also, “how universally this Talent was spread of drawing Lectures in Morality, or indeed rather Matter of Discontent and repining, from the Quarrels we raise with Nature” (137). Even imperceptive Gulliver wonders why these creatures need such a large army (208,000), “But [he] was soon informed . . . they have been troubled with the same Disease, to which the whole Race of Mankind is Subject”—a contention for power, which in the case of Brobdingnag, has “more than once occasioned Civil Wars” (138). And, although the King “professed . . . to abominate and despise all Mystery, Refinement, and Intrigue” and “could not tell what [Gulliver] meant by Secrets of State” (135), he nonetheless, even without the “several thousand Books . . . written upon the Art of Government” in England, understands politics well enough to maintain the peace with the “Militia . . . [which] hath been . . . kept in the strictest Duty” (138) since the last Civil War (which occurred only two generations before), one of whose causes was the King’s striving for “absolute Dominion” (138). Thus, despite an absence of words denoting the mechanics of political science, the Brobdingnagians are able to practice the art; and despite the seeming perfection of their language, Brobdingnag proves no lost Eden: Swift’s specific levelling of the Brobdingnagian experience with the English experience through the mention of the “universal” theme of human pride and the ubiquity of Civil Wars indicates that the reader’s approval of the “big people” must be severely qualified.

Gulliver is inducted into Laputan society in much the same way he was into Lilliput and Brobdingnag: the gesture is the same—“I . . . put my self into the most supplicating Postures, and spoke in the humblest Accent, but received no Answer” (157). As before, however, gestures procure for Gulliver the basic necessities of life: “Although neither of us understood the other, yet my Meaning was
easily known, for the People saw the Distress I was in. They made Signs for me to come down from the Rock, and go towards the Shoar, which I accordingly did” (158). After this initial exchange, Gulliver begins to wither in isolation—not because he does not learn their language, for he quickly does—but because the Laputan nobility “are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others” without being hit repeatedly with bladders (159). Aside from the “vulgar”—“the only People from whom [he] could ever receive a reasonable Answer” (173) and Lord Munodi, who is considered crazy, Gulliver enjoys no society. Thus the people of Laputa—who think that they are unfallen creatures who can hear the “Musick of the Spheres” (162), a prelapsarian privilege—are more removed from nature and peaceful sociability than any other group Gulliver has visited.

When Gulliver descends to Balnibarbi, he sees in the Academy at Lagado the same abstract, irrevelant, and unhuman speculation he encountered in Laputa. With the perfect correspondence of words to things in the Garden as an ideal norm, the projectors’ “Engine” for writing books—utterly divorcing expression from both thought and nature—seems the exact antithesis. When Gulliver visits the “School of Languages” (185), he learns of a plan developed there that takes the relationship of signs to things to the other extreme by “entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever.... [S]ince Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on” (185). This, as many critics have pointed out, is Swift’s satiric comment on schemes to create a real character. After being exposed to the chaos and barbarity of the Academy, the reader can only laugh at the prospect of these projectors creating “an universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations” (186), for the Lagadans have no idea what either civilization or communication looks like.

Undermining the Lagadans further, Swift points out the alacrity with which they ask Gulliver to tell them about the linguistic practices of Tribnia, where he had “long sojourned.” There, “Artists [are] very dextrous in finding out the mysterious Meanings of Words, Syllables and Letters. For Instance, they can decypher a Close-stool to signify a Privy-Council . . . they can decypher all initial Letters into political Meanings.” (191) These ideas were accepted “with more Compliance than is usual among . . . those of the Projecting

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Species” (190-91), thus illustrating the common urge towards ignoring empirical reality and overt meaning in favor of intricate and ingenious schemes that unites Gulliver, England, and indeed all mankind, with the citizens of Laputa and the scientists of Lagado. The mere presence of a “School of political Projectors” (187) is enough to indicate that the “School of Languages” (185) has not proceeded very far in eliminating one of the greatest curses of Babel—factional division.

Ironically, despite their seeming incompetence in practical matters and their intellectual airiness, the Laputans and the Balnibarbians manage to fight one another with some concentration and efficiency. Gulliver is told that “If any Town should engage in Rebellion or Mutiny, fall into violent Factions, or refuse to pay the usual Tribute; the King hath two Methods of reducing them to Obedience”—he can cut off their sunshine and rain or he can physically crush them with the Floating Island (171). Such rebellions and mutinies seem to be common, judging from the discussion, and in a passage omitted from the initial printing of Gulliver’s Travels for obvious political reasons, Gulliver is told of an “Experiment” by which the Balnibarbians could bring down the Floating Island so that they could “kill the King and all his Servants, and entirely change the Government” (Textual notes, 310). Thus civil unrest, bursting almost to the point of revolution, exists in this kingdom where language reform is studied but where direct communication is rare.

In Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver’s first gesture is very different from the one of supplication with which he initiated contact in the previous three voyages: “at last I took the Boldness, to reach my Hand towards [the horse’s neck], with a Design to stroak it” (224). Bulwer expatiates on the symbolism of Gulliver’s action by saying it is a “gesture often used by men in sign of favor and encouragement to ingenious towards youths”35—in other words, a sign of condescension and familiarity.

After the horse haughtily removes Gulliver’s hand—a gesture explicit in its signification—another horse appears and the two “gently struck each others Right Hoof before,” (225) an ominous foreshadowing of the Houyhnhm solidarity that inevitably will force Gulliver’s involuntary exile. Bulwer glosses the action of striking right (hooves) this way: “TO STRIKE ANOTHER’S PALM is the habit and expression of those who . . . give a pledge of faith and fidelity, promise, . . . confirm a league.”36 “And verily, faith consists wholly
in the right hand [for] . . . the left hath no obligatory force or virtue in it.”

In Houyhnhnmland as in the other countries, Gulliver satisfies his elementary desires at first by gesturing, and as usual, passes through a period before he fully commands the new language when “Signs and Words” together are the medium of exchange (232). On first appraisal, it seems that Gulliver has finally been washed onto an island that has escaped Babel’s curse, and even the effects of the Fall. Not only does there appear to be peace, but Gulliver notes that “their Language expressed the Passions very well, and the Words might with little Pains be resolved into an Alphabet more easily than the Chinese (226); later, Gulliver stresses the affinity of the Houyhnhnml tongue with Teutonic—“In speaking . . . their Language approaches nearest to the High Dutch or German, . . . but is much more graceful and significant” (234). Swift, through Gulliver, links the Houyhnhnm language with two of the more frequently cited candidates for the Original language. In addition, the Houyhnhnms have no literature or books. Applying the experience of the previous voyages, one has seen that the more a culture writes, the more philosophically and morally it is confused. Of course, there were no books at all in Eden, nor a need for any. The Book of Nature was wide open to man.

In Book IV, Gulliver tells us more about the structure of the language than he has in previous voyages, and from the information provided, it seems that the Houyhnhnm language has the requisites of the “perfect Language” defined by Thomas Urquhart in Logopandecteision: “things semblable in nature, should be signified by words of a like pronunciation.” 38 In Houyhnhnmland, one is told, for instance, that words with negative connotations possess the suffix, “-yahoo” (275), and so, at first glance, the Houyhnhnm language seems to be based on a real character following “philosophical” principles, characteristic, it was supposed, of the tongue spoken by Adam and Eve.

The Edenic theme is specifically introduced in Book IV when the Houyhnhnm master asks Gulliver why he is wearing clothes; the horses, seemingly unfallen creatures, have no need of garments, nor do they feel any shame in their nakedness, for “why [should] Nature . . . teach [them] to conceal what Nature had given”? (237) Juxtaposed to this dialogue, however, Swift places a response in the horse master’s mouth that is calculated to cause the reader to suspect the Houyhnhnms’ unspoiled innocence. Although

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Gulliver tells the reader several times that the Houyhnhnms have no word in their tongue for “Lying or Falshood” (235) or “false Representation” (240), when Gulliver requests that “what the Sorrel Nag his Valet had observed, his Honour might command him to conceal” (237)—i.e., to perpetrate “the Thing which was not” (240)—Gulliver says the horse master “very graciously consented” (237).

A closer look at the Houyhnhnms’ language reveals that it too is far from paradisal perfection: “false representation” is fundamentally inherent in it. Measured against an Edenic standard, their tongue is woefully lacking, for instead of being revelatory, it is error-producing; instead of being a transparent window through which to make empirical observation, it is an opaque wall that hides reality behind it, a condition characterized by Francis Bacon in “The Phantoms of the Market-place”\textsuperscript{39}—that tendency of the mind to create false orders that pride and ignorance enshrine. For instance, “truth” strikes the Houyhnhnms “with Immediate Conviction . . . because Reason taught [them] to affirm or deny only where [they] are certain” (267). In other words, if they know something is true, then it is true. No disagreements occur among them. There is never any “Heat, or Difference of Sentiments” (277) in their conversations: “Doubting or not believing, are so little known in this Country, that the Inhabitants cannot tell how to behave themselves under such Circumstances” (240). The semblance of Edenic peace here, however, is really the result of intellectual fascism: the horse master—who violates the absolute categories of Houyhnhnm “logic” by keeping “a Yahoo (meaning my self [Gulliver has to explain because it is not empirically obvious to the reader]) in his Family more like a Houyhnhnm than a Brute Animal” (279) even though Gulliver is clearly more like a Houyhnhnm than a brute animal—is condemned by the General Assembly and “exhorted” to mend his ways.

The manner in which the Houyhnhnms arrive at “truth,” therefore, belies the term. Much to Gulliver’s frustration, his true account of his travels is disbelieved: they “knew it was impossible that there could be a Country beyond the Sea, or that a Parcel of Brutes [their word for anyone different from them] could move a wooden Vessel whither they pleased upon Water” (235). In a like way, the General Assembly reprimands the horse master because “he was known frequently to converse with [Gulliver], as if he could receive some Advantage of Pleasure in [his] Company [empirically, he did (273)],” but most
importantly, the action was denounced because such a thing was never "heard of before among them" (279).

The Houyhnhnms' paranoid hatred of the Yahoos distorts their ability to see accurately: anything which is unhouyhnnmlike, by definition is "imperfect" since the etymology of the word Houyhnhnm is "The Perfection of Nature" (235) and there is "no Word in their Language to express any thing that is evil, except what they borrow from the Deformities or ill Qualities of the Yahoos (275). Perfection-Houyhnhnms, Evil-Yahoo, then, are their self-adulating moral poles. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Yahoos, who were not indigenous to the island, would be hated instantly upon arrival. In many ways the appearance of the Yahoos in Houyhnhnmland parallels the creation of Adam and Eve, for, according to Houyhnhnms lore, "many Ages ago, two of these Brutes [their word] appeared together upon a Mountain" (271). Instead of coming into a Garden supervised by a God in the same image who spoke the same language, and with whom a natural affinity would exist, the original Yahoos came up against creatures who immediately branded them as evil because they were different. There is evidence to suggest that the first Yahoos were not bestial by nature, so the Houyhnhnms were required to make them bestial by oppressive nurture; through a calculated policy of debasement they cause the word "brute" to cohere more perfectly with the thing it represents.40

The horse master's willingness to treat Gulliver like a Houyhnhnm, although he knows Gulliver has the body of a Yahoo, signifies a degree of intellectual complexity far beyond that of his colleagues, who, if they knew the "secret" would tie Gulliver's head to a beam and feed him carrion as they do the rest of his breed (229). Notably, after learning of Gulliver's concealment, the horse master "doubled the Pains he had been at to instruct [him]; he brought [him] into all Company, and made them treat [him] with Civility." The horse master genuinely likes Gulliver and learns from him, but he cannot admit this to his bretheren; instead, he has to tell "them privately [that his special indulgence of Gulliver] would put [Gulliver] into a good Humour, and make [him] more diverting" (238). This, too, is a concealment of sorts, for the horse master knows that in order to have Gulliver tolerated by Houyhnhnms society, he must make him as unyahoolike as possible.

The strategy fails, however, because the rest of the horses cannot comprehend the etymologically paradoxical description of Gulliver as a "wonderful Yahoo" who "spoke in a Language of [his] own, and

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had thoroughly learned theirs” (272) because they “know” that yahoo is synonymous with evil and that Yahoos cannot speak. Thus the idea of truth in Houyhnhnmland is so inverted that the horse master’s “concealment” and “false representation” of Gulliver as other than a “perfect Yahoo” in fact brings him closer to real knowledge than any of his fellows; by trying to understand “things that were not” in the artificially delimited Houyhnhnm universe, the horse master goes beyond “facts” that strike “with immediate Conviction.”

Instead of modifying the egoistic and simplistic categories they have created, however, the Houyhnhnms must banish Gulliver who is “the thing which was not”—for an articulate Yahoo is by definition a lie contrary to nature—to make their universe of things conform once again to their system of words and perceptions. Although the Houyhnhnms have no word for “lie” in their lexicon, their whole lives are lies, and although they claim that all they discuss is “friendship and Benevolence” (268), “the only Debate that ever happened in their Country,” (271), rehearsed continually, grows out of their malicious fascination with how to oppress and possibly exterminate the Yahoos. Civil strife, therefore, lies close under the peaceful, unemotional facade of Houyhnhnm life.

III

As is evident in the discussion above, Gulliver never finds an island of Edenic linguistic purity: in each country he visits, language to a greater or lesser degree is an barrier against reality erected by incomplete and irrational perceptions, and in each culture, some kind of domestic disharmony exists. Everywhere he goes, Gulliver encounters the linguistic problems he left behind in England.

In Laputa, Swift satirizes the possibilities of a real character, which like the proposed use of gesture, was an indirect means of returning to the Garden where word and idea interpenetrated. What Swift seems to indicate through his satire is that in trying to recreate the Childhood of the Race, man only makes himself childish; in trying to achieve the imagined simplicity of Eden, polluted man can only be simplistic. Thus the Lagadan “speakers” with objects in their packbacks resemble toddlers with their toy boxes; they enact the premise of some of the language planners that “in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns,” (185)—a description that equally as well fits the language of one and two years olds, among whom nouns are the prime basis of “discourse.”
Against the claims made for gesture in the commendatory verses prefacing Bulwer’s *Chirologia*—e.g. “Tongue and heart the intention oft divide: / The hand and meaning ever are allied”41; “*Chirologie* redeems from Babel’s doom, / And is the universal idiom”42; “What Babel did deny / To lips and ear, th’ast given the hand and eye”43—one must measure Gulliver’s experiences. He does attain a perfection of sorts when he communicates in gesture, but Swift shows its limitations: without speech, Gulliver is unable to convey anything beyond his biological desires. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish Gulliver from any other sort of animal during these periods and in fact, one of gesture’s most attractive features to Bulwer is that it could create a greater converse between mankind and the beasts, “a kind of knowledge that Adam partly lost with his innocency.”44 If Gulliver appears as a human at all during his gesturing periods, it is only as a human baby, and though entering the adult world is not a comfortable progression, as Gulliver repeatedly discovers, Swift would seem to argue that it is only through fulfilling this natural destiny that man can exercise any of the rationality of which he is capable.

Beliefs that a perfect language might be discovered anywhere in a fallen world or that men could fabricate a language congruent with the nature of Creation would strike Swift as supremely arrogant and misguided. The Lagadans’ grandiose hopes for a universal language to link “all civilized Nations” are mocked by their intellectual isolation and their barbarity. Fortunately, the scientists at the Academy are too inept to enforce their system. In *Houyhnhnm*land, however, one sees the horrifying effects resulting from an efficient application of a “philosophical” language evolved to rationalize ethnocentricity. Thus, through the satire in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift shows the ludicrousness and the danger of limited, potentially base creatures thinking that they can order language toward a “higher” harmony. Moreover, Swift implicitly criticizes the premise of some of the language planners that a reform in language would automatically produce a reform in human behavior. Gulliver can learn a relatively ideal language in Brobdingnag and corrupt it by wishing for the tongue of Demosthenes or Cicero, and in contrast, he manages to protest plainly in the Lilliputians’ language despite its apparent capacity for circumlocution.

The elimination of concepts by the elimination of the words signifying them is another recurring idea in linguistic speculation that Swift seems to contest. In each book, Swift specifically points out certain words that are lacking from that country’s language. These

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always prove to be ironic. For instance, in the first voyage, Gulliver notes that the parochial Lilliputians have a geographical vocabulary comprising only two countries: their own and Blefescu (49); in voyage two, absence of political vocabulary is remarked upon, and yet politics is not absent from Brobdingnag; in voyage three, Gulliver says that the ideas of “Imagination, Fancy, and Invention, [the Laputans] are wholly Strangers to, nor have any Words in their language by which those Ideas can be expressed,” (163) yet everything they think is either imagined, fancied, or invented. In the last voyage, the omission of words for “false representation” proves to be a symptom of the Houyhnhnms’ urge for self-deception.

One can see through Gulliver’s linguistic travels that Swift seems to disagree with the prevailing notion that language reform could bring an improvement of national affairs. In Lilliput, a debased language is correlated with a debased people, yet in Brobdingnag, a seemingly effective language, vigilantly guarded, is not enough to prevent recurring civil war. Clearly Swift is arguing that no mechanical solution—such as the regularizing of language—can ease the problems of human dissension. Swift certainly does not make any such idealistic claims in his Proposal for Correcting . . . the English Tongue. Unlike Dryden who urged that reforms be undertaken only when the nation was at peace, presumably so as not to incorporate aversions in the language, Swift specifically enjoins Harley to begin in spite of domestic tension—a typically realistic perspective.

Underlying all of Swift’s attitudes on language and language reform is the premise that divisiveness and obscurity are generated by people, not by the words they employ. Removing controversial words, defining terms more strictly, organizing the language’s grammar could not in and of themselves, Swift would think, provide cures for social and philosophical misunderstandings. Swift, therefore, seems to disagree profoundly with those advocates of a universal language who argue that the differences between men are merely semantic. These projectors hypothesized that if humanity spoke a single language no disagreements would occur, because as John Wilkins puts it, “men do generally agree in the same Principle of Reason . . . [and have] the same Internal Notion or Apprehension of things.” Swift, I think, is more in John Locke’s camp on this issue, for Locke is convinced of the powers of individual irrationality to give unique definitions to words so that meanings cannot easily be understood in common: “I am not so vain to think, that any one can
pretend to attempt the perfect Reforming the Languages of the world, no not so much as that of his own Country, without rendring himself ridiculous. To require that Men should use their words constantly in the same sense . . . would be to think, that all Men should have the same Notions. . . .”

What Swift would offer as the antidote to Locke's rather nihilistic view that men are isolated one from another because of differing perceptions and differing terms is the exercise of lively, disinterested conversation. Barring any mechanical or external solutions to the problems of communication, Swift in many essays, poems, and satires consistently points to the virtues of ordinary talk, undertaken in a spirit of goodwill and humility, as a means of establishing the bounds of common sense, drawing people together, informing them about the world, and achieving the heights of reason of which they are capable. Because he thought that the give and take of a spirited discussion (in contrast to Houyhnhnm exchanges where no “Difference of Sentiments” exists) could winnow out errors and reinforce truths, Swift saw conversation as an epistemological as well as a social necessity: in talking together, men can make their terms and meanings clear. Polite Conversation dramatically illustrates what happens when conversation ceases to be organic and becomes systematized: the Three Dialogues are chaotic and stultifying, indicating that the small society of the parlor and perhaps the larger society beyond the parlor, are near collapse.

Swift stresses in Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation that mutually enlightening discussion is “in every Man's Power . . . . For Nature hath left every Man a Capacity of being agreeable.” Reasonable talk requires only the native common sense which all possess. No education nor special regimens are necessary to practice it. While in Laputa, Gulliver finds no one capable of conversation except the “unlearned”—“Women, Tradesmen, Flappers, and Court-Pages” (173)—and it is only the recalcitrance of the “common People” that stops the projectors’ enthusiastic linguistic schemes from being applied (185).

In his Proposal for Correcting . . . the English Tongue, Swift eschews the advice of the nominally elite and lettered, i.e., “illiterate Court-Fops, half-witted Poets, and University-Boys.” The Proposal contains no grand plans for creating a new language nor radically altering the old. Its arguments are wholly based on pragmatism: “conversation” with authors of previous ages (and Swift uses the term “conversation” in this sense also) which provides a
sense of a culture’s tradition is not possible if the language continues to shift. The Proposal’s suggested remedy—the establishment of an Academy with conservative functions (to fix, to ascertain, to correct)—is easily attainable. With this truly modest proposal, Swift sought to prevent the nightmare of the Struldbruggs, who because their language was in a constant state of flux, could not talk to Struldbruggs of other ages, and thus lived “like Foreigners in their own Country” (213).

Unlike Wilkins who trusted his real character to dissolve the “Modern differences in Religion,” Swift looks to good discussion to elicit the rationality and sociability necessary for understanding at all levels. For history’s sake, he thought that words needed to be ascertained and fixed, but as for the language to be used in ordinary discourse, he makes few stipulations, stressing instead that no elaborate decorums need to be practiced. A candid give and take in which all participate equally and considerately was Swift’s ideal. Such conversations are rare in Gulliver’s Travels: irrationality, primarily in the form of pride, continually affects either Gulliver’s or his hosts’ ability to achieve a mutually agreeable and informative discussion. The pleasant and illuminating colloquy with Lord Munodi, for instance, stands as a foil to the general pattern of the talk in the book.

Swift’s solutions to the problems of misunderstanding are less mechanical that Wilkins’ and therefore, in theory, more difficult to attain, yet a maxim in the Swift-Pope Miscellaneous expresses the height of Swift’s hopes, which like Wilkins’ center on the melting of artificial, “religious” differences between people: “There is nothing wanting to make all rational and disinterested People in the World, of one Religion, but they should talk together every Day.”51 This is an Edenic vision—hedged severely, but nonetheless idealistic. The microcosm of discussion that simultaneously embodies social and verbal coherence, Swift suggests, is as close to regaining the Garden as man may get. Gulliver’s conversation with his English horses at the end of the Travels, then, is not evidence that he has acquired that “knowledge that Adam partly lost with his innocency”—an ability to talk with animals—but a fulfillment of Aristotle’s dictum that one in (verbal) isolation is either a beast or a god. Swift, ever aware of men’s limitations, would never allow that they could become god-like; how easily they could become beast-like, he appreciated very well.52

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FOOTNOTES

1 This useful term was coined by Vivian Salmon in the “Introduction” to The Works of Francis Lodwick (London: Longman, 1972). Salmon’s lengthy introduction provides a very useful survey of seventeenth century linguistic theory.


10 Sprat, p. 44.


12 John Webster, Academiarum Examen (London, 1654), p. 27.


14 Paul Cornelius, Languages in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Imaginary Voyages (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1965), Ch. II.

15 Francis Lodweycz, A Common Writing (1647; rpt. Menston: The Scholar Press, 1969), Sig. A2r.


17 John Wilkins, An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language (1668; rpt. Menston: The Scholar Press, 1968), Sig. blr.


19 Comenius, p. 198.


23 See Swift’s Discourse to Prove the Antiquesty of the English Tongue.


25 Sprat, p. 113; A4r.


27 John Bulwer, Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric (1644), rpt. ed. James W. Cleary (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1974), p. 19. Interestingly, one writer of commendatory verses to Chironomia makes the link between the language of gesture and the Civil War: “Another summer has now passed in civil wars, / And the sad earth luxuriates with...”

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new blood. Yet you are safe, nor does the enemy’s sword terrify you; Your measured hand of hands defends you.” (p. 149).

28 See Knowlson, Universal Language Schemes, Ch. IV; Cornelius, Ch. II and “Epilogue”; and E. Seeber, “Ideal Languages in the French and English Imaginary Voyage,” PMLA, 60 (1945), 586-97.


30 Godwin, p. 61.

31 Bulwer, p. 16.


33 Jonathan Swift, Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation in The Prose Works, IV, 94.

34 Many critics have wondered at the strange illustration of the “word machine.” In fact, the “frames” look very similar to the charts that Wilkins supplies in his Essay where various squiggles and lines represent different classes of things. The illustrator of Gulliver’s Travels may have taken one of these charts and merely added handles with which to crank out literature.

35 Bulwer, p. 67.

36 Bulwer, p. 77.

37 Bulwer, p. 83

38 Thomas Urquhart, Logopandecteision (1653; rpt. Menston: The Scolar Press, 1970), Sig. A4r.


40 This is the thesis of my article, “Swift’s Explorations of Slavery in Ireland and Houyhnhnmland,” PMLA, 91 (1976), 846-55.

41 Bulwer, p. 9.

42 Bulwer, p. 10.

43 Bulwer, p. 11.

44 Bulwer, p. 18.


46 I was aided in developing this idea by reading two articles by Margreta DeGrazia: “The Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century” and “Shakespeare’s View of Language: An Historical Perspective,” forthcoming in JHI and SQ respectively.

47 Wilkins, p. 20.

48 Locke, p. 509.

49 Swift, Hints, pp. 87-88.

50 Swift, Proposal, p. 13.


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54 Gulliver’s (Linguistic) Travels