

## The Doctrine of Cycles

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#### Chapter 7: Language Cycles

Among other aspects of the doctrine of cycles as presented in the C19 pseudo-scientific & pseudo-historical 'New Religion' Theosophy, founded by Helena Blavatsky, Ross discusses 'language cycles'. Languages, like humanity *per se*, are regarded by Theosophists as 'evolving' in a cyclic manner, passing through phases, the basic aspects of which are often repeated in successive cycles. As far as languages are concerned, these happenings are seen in terms of growth from primitive origins into sophistication, followed by mixing with other languages, 'decay' and 'death'.

It should be stated clearly at the outset that these Theosophical accounts of ancient languages conflict with what has been learned over the last 240 years by historical linguists, and also involve very early events for which there is no worthwhile evidence at all. There is in fact no general pattern of specifically cyclic developments in language. Where an existing structural (especially grammatical) pattern becomes redundant or overly complex, and is simplified over time (not consciously, of course), new complex structures often develop so as to deal with certain contrasts which are still grammatically, psychologically or culturally important but which are not well catered for by the increasingly simplified patterns. But there is no tendency to revert to the older complex structures, as a cyclic theory would predict.

This can be exemplified by the Latin-derived Romance languages, which lost their noun-case morphology (subject, object, possessive etc) and underwent simplification of their now largely redundant systems of grammatical gender. The associated creole languages altogether lost gender marking. But Romance object pronoun systems, for example, acquired new, useful complexities, which do not resemble anything found in Latin.

Romance verb morphology was also simplified, and was later replaced by altogether new complex forms not resembling the older forms. For example, Latin future forms such as *amabo* ('I will love') were replaced by quite differently derived forms such as French *aimerai*.

In a broadly similar way, English lost much of its verb morphology during medieval times but acquired a compensating complex system of auxiliary verbs which did not exist in Old English.

In contrast, some languages may have undergone early changes but then remain 'typologically' stable over a long period; Chinese, with its long-standing very scanty grammatical morphology, is a good example of this. These languages too cannot be regarded as experiencing cyclic changes.

None of these changes are 'evolutionary' in the sense of adaptive. They do not make the languages in question more suited to ambient conditions (except where they are in response to cultural changes – which is rare). And modern languages are no 'better' than older languages, overall. Languages simply change over time. The term *evolutionary* is not properly used of known linguistic changes (see also below).

To turn to the specific claims of Theosophists: Blavatsky's highly non-standard story commences with the supposed languages of her supposed 'Atlantean' 'root-races', which were agglutinative in character (featuring long grammatically complex words) and (according to her) persist only in the tribal languages of the Americas. (This latter claim is in fact mistaken. Blavatsky was frequently wrong about the distribution of structures across specific languages.) As these older structures became less usual during the relevant cycle, humans were supposedly becoming less spiritual in

nature and more physical and intellectual. Their new languages were 'highly developed' and were inflectional in structure (nouns, verbs etc displayed ranges of grammatical forms, as in e.g. Latin).

Blavatsky presented no empirical evidence in support of this account of humanity and its languages, nor any justification for linking types of grammatical system with the mental characteristics of the users of the languages in question.

Going beyond all this, Blavatsky held that language *per se*, at any stage of any cycle, is often inadequate for expressing spiritual notions. She related the origin of language to that of hearing, supposedly the first of the human senses to be developed (but of course hearing already existed in the pre-human animal world). Becoming increasingly incoherent or at least unclear, she also proposed that language is 'coeval with reason', with pre-rational speech sounds representing only copies of natural sounds and thus not counting as linguistic. Apparently these early manifestations of speech were monosyllabic, although the relevance of such phonological/phonetic features is unclear. No such early quasi-linguistic systems are actually known or reliably reported.

Subsequently language allegedly became more highly developed along with other aspects of humanity. A principal focus in Blavatsky's work is upon Sanskrit, seen as the supreme example of an evolved inflectional language and obviously relevant in the South Asian context of much Theosophical material. In fact, Sanskrit, as its name (meaning 'elaborate') indicates, is a partly artificial language of the Indic sub-family, rendered more systematic and expressive for use in religious, literary and intellectual domains. Although it is indeed an inflectional language, it thus stands partly outside the general development of the Indic sub-family out of which it developed.

Contrary to the evidence, Blavatsky held that Sanskrit is in fact a 'divine' language of vast antiquity, and is thus uniquely capable of handling spiritual matters. Her view of the origin of Sanskrit is given in an anonymous article cited by Ross, entitled 'Was Writing Known Before Panini?' (included in the volume *Five Years of Theosophy*, pp. 419-20). This title itself is in fact incoherent. Panini (c 500 BCE) wrote a (very impressive) grammar of Sanskrit, but – as this author admits - was in no way responsible for the language, which existed in writing well before his day. And of course other languages were also written before this time; Greek is an obvious example. This article goes on to state (falsely) that Sanskrit was 'restored'/'perfected' (one must ask what *perfect* would mean in this context) by Panini and that it had previously existed throughout cycles (and would pass through other cycles later - which has not occurred). Sanskrit is known only from around 500 BCE.

The author also proclaims that for Sanskrit to have survived alone, among all languages, it must (obviously) have had its cycles of perfection and degeneration. But Sanskrit was never the only language, even within India. And there is no evidence of these cycles in the known history of Sanskrit. Neither does a language need to pass through cycles in order to survive; note the case of Chinese, mentioned above. It is also suggested that Sanskrit has survived as a 'dead' language (no longer having any native speakers) only because it has a special purpose in respect of immutable cyclic laws. But again no evidence is given for this. Many 'dead' languages are still learned and known, without having any such special purposes.

A further clearly false claim involves the idea that Sanskrit is now spreading in Europe and may 'again' become a universal language - which of course it never was in the past and shows no sign of becoming in the future, even at a time when Asian thought has itself become more popular in the West and some specific Sanskrit-based terminology has come to be used in a spiritual context.

The focus upon the preservation and supposed revival of Sanskrit is in fact associated with the Theosophical attempt to revive esoteric Asian (notably Hindu) ideas about the universe, hitherto relatively unfamiliar to western scholarship, under the name 'The Ancient Wisdom'. This movement dates back to 1875, when the Theosophical Society was founded. The promulgation of the Hindu and Buddhist notion of reincarnation is obviously linked with cyclic interpretations of cosmology and large-scale history. The Theosophical application of the notion of cyclicity to language is part of this programme.

Blavatsky and other Theosophical writers seem to have imagined that mainstream linguists regard the languages of technologically 'primitive' peoples as themselves 'primitive', befitting the supposed closeness of these peoples to pre-human evolutionary ancestors. They themselves proclaim in contrast that the most ancient human languages – like contemporary tribal languages - were highly sophisticated. They link this view with their cyclic model of linguistic history. But in fact linguists have long understood that within known human history there is no evidence of increasing linguistic sophistication. An aphorism runs: 'When it comes to linguistic complexity and flexibility, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the Assamese head-hunter', Genuinely 'primitive' pre-linguistic forms must surely have existed during the evolution of humanity out of non-human origins; but these 'languages' will have existed very long ago indeed, and naturally there are no records of them.

Blavatsky actually invented a primordial language called Senzar, for which there is no other evidence. See <https://www.theosophy.world/resource/ebooks/senzar-mystery-mystery-language-john-algeo>

Theosophy remains quite popular in the West. For example, the Melbourne Theosophists stage in-person and online talks and maintain a large library. But, all in all, and whatever the case might be for Theosophical ideas on other fronts, they have nothing useful to contribute to the study of human language.