

Thomas Young an Wilhelm von Humboldt, vor August 1827

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Abel-Rémusat, Jean-Pierre Apollonios Dyskolos (Grammatiker) Blackstone, Sir William Burton, James Cobbett, William Georg IV., König von England Humboldt, Alexander von Milton, John Muhammad Ali Pascha Tattam, Henry Tooke, John Horne Burton, James (1825–1829): Excerpta hieroglyphica: or exact copies of various hieroglyphical inscriptions and sculptured monuments still existing in Egypt and Nubia, and at Mount Sinai, Kairo: Privatdruck Cobbett, William (1818): A Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters. Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in General; But, More Especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-Boys, New York: Printed for the author by Clayton and Kingsland Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1827): Lettre à Monsieur Abel Rémusat, sur la nature des formes grammaticales en général, et sur le génie de la langue Chinoise en particulier, Paris: Dondey-Dupré Tattam, Henry (1830): A compendious Grammar of the Egyptian language as contained in the Coptic and Sahidic dialects; with observations on the Bashmurić: together with alphabets and numerals in the Hieroglyphic and Enchorial characters; and a few explanatory observations: by the Rev. Henry Tattam, M.A. F.R.S.L. &c. &c. Rector of St. Cuthbert's, Bedford. With an Appendix, consisting of the Rudiments of a Dictionary of the Ancient Egyptian language in the Enchorial character: by Thomas Young, M.D. F.R.S. H.M.R.S.L. Foreign associate of the Royal Institute of Paris, London: Arch Tooke, John Horne (1786): #####. Or, the Diversions of Purley, London: J. Johnson [Erstausgabe]

My dear Sir,

I AM happy to tell you that our prospects of new documents from Egypt are very rapidly increasing: Mr. Burton has had the good fortune to discover at length, in a mosque, the triple inscription for which he has been some years in search; and he has been negotiating with the Pacha for its removal. From its magnitude and state of preservation, there is every reason to believe that it will rival the pillar of Rosetta in its importance; and I sincerely hope that it will tend to check the wildness of conjecture, which has been rioting without bounds in the regions of Egyptian literature. Mr. Tattam is printing a Coptic grammar, and I am preparing

an Appendix, which is to contain the rudiments of an Enchorial Lexicon: I ardently wish that [Mr. Burton](#)'s inscriptions may come to my assistance before I complete it. I have received nothing from France or from Germany for these four years past: even what is published seems by some fatality to have been withheld from me; and the booksellers send no answers to my commissions. I trust [your brother](#) will not forget his kind promise to think of me at [Berlin](#).

I have to thank him and you for your obliging present of your *Letter to Abel Remusat on the Genius of the Chinese Language*, which has greatly interested me: the best return that I can make will be to give you some remarks which have occurred to me on the language of hieroglyphics in general, and on the character of the English language, which seems to approach, in its simplicity, as you have yourself observed, to the natural structure of the oldest languages, immediately related to the hieroglyphical form of representation. I fear, however, that I must apologize to you for the want of method with which I shall be obliged at present to throw my fragments together: but it may be allowable to make some difference between a letter and a finished essay.

Hieroglyphics, in their primitive form, are scarcely to be considered in any case as simply a mode of expressing an oral language: they may be a direct and independent representation of our thoughts, that is, of recollections, or sentiments, or intentions, collateral to the representation of the same thoughts by the language of sounds. We find, in many of the Egyptian monuments, a double expression of the same sense: first, a simple picture, for instance, of a votary presenting a vase to a sitting deity; each characterized by some peculiarity of form, and each distinguished also by a name written over him; and this may be called a pure hieroglyphical representation, though it scarcely amounts to a language, any more than the look of love is the language of a lover. But we universally find that the tablet is accompanied by a greater variety of characters which certainly do constitute a language, although we know little or nothing of the sounds of that language; but its import is, that "such a king offers a vase to the deity;" and on the other side, that "the deity grants to the king health and strength, and beauty and riches, and dominion and power." It is common to see, in these inscriptions, a number of characters introduced, which are evidently identical with some of those in the tablets: and however some of them may occasionally have been employed phonetically, there can be no question of the nature of the changes which their employment must have gone through before they assumed the character of sounds: but this is altogether a separate consideration, and foreign to the present purpose.

Now it is obvious that objects, delineated with the intention of representing the originals to the eye by their form, must necessarily be nouns substantive; and that the picture, containing no verb whatever, can scarcely be said to constitute either a positive or a negative assertion. At the same time, it I must be allowed that a picture of [King George the Fourth](#)'s coronation, with the date 19 July, 1821, could scarcely be considered otherwise than as asserting a historical truth; and if any emblem of Truth were attached to it, or if it were deposited among the records of other historical facts, it would be equivalent to the expression, "[George IV.](#) crowned in July, 1821," which *scarcely* wants the verb *was* to convert it into a positive assertion of a fact.

Strictly speaking, however, there seems to be no direct mode of supplying the want of the verb *is* or *was* in pure hieroglyphical writing; and if any such sign was employed in the Egyptian or the old Chinese hieroglyphics, its introduction must have been arbitrary or conventional; like the employment of a postulate in mathematics. Every other part of a language appears capable of being reduced, with more or less circumlocution, to the form of a noun substantive; and the English language appears to approach to the Chinese in the facility with which all the forms of grammar may be shaken off.

There is, however, often occasion, in such cases, for a certain degree of metaphor approaching to poetical latitude; and hence it may happen that the least literary nations are sometimes the most poetical. It is, in fact, impossible to exclude metaphor altogether from the most prosaic language; and it is frequently difficult to say where metaphor ends and strict logical prose begins; but by degrees the metaphor drops, and the simple figurative sense is retained. Thus we may say *liquid ruby* with the same exact meaning as *crimson wine*; and yet *ruby* would never be called an adjective, though employed merely to express the colour: in *coral lips*, however, the *coral*, first used metaphorically, is converted by habit into an adjective, and the expression is considered as synonymous with *labri corallini*.

The general custom in English is to place the figurative substantive, used as an adjective by comparison, or by abstraction, before the name which retains its proper sense: thus a chesnut horse is a chesnut like or chesnut coloured horse; a horse chesnut is a coarse kind of chesnut: and in this manner we are enabled to use almost every English noun substantive as an adjective, by an ellipsis of the word *like*, which, if inserted entire or abridged, would make a real adjective of the word, as *warlike*, *friendly*. But this omission of the termination, like other figures of speech, is easily forgotten in the ordinary forms of language; and the Germans, as well as

the English, make use of almost all their substantives in the place of adjectives, though they are more in the habit of continuing them into single long words. When, however, the substantives are so used, they generally become by abstraction real adjectives: for we seldom think of a *chesnut*, in speaking of the colour of a horse; but the idea of a light brown coat, with an ugly pale-red mane and tail, and a fidgety temper, is very likely to occur to us: and in a horse chesnut the idea of a horse is out of the question; we only think of a coarse fruit which a man cannot eat: so that the true sense, in both these instances, is that of a quality; but *coral lips* and *ivory hands* are rather elliptical expressions, composed of two substantives, which might fairly be represented hieroglyphically by the assistance of a branch of coral and an elephant's tusk. But to describe an abstract quality by any hieroglyphic character, representative of form only, would be generally impossible: colours might be imitated, if we supposed coloured figures to be employed; but other simple ideas, such as those of sound or touch, could never be immediately presented to the eye; and some circuitous invention would always be required for their representation.

[Horne Tooke](#) has shewn,^[a] with considerable felicity of illustration, that all the parts of speech may be resolved into the noun and the verb; but he has not pointed out so clearly that every verb may be resolved into a noun and the single primitive verb is or was, which, in this sense, may be said to be the only essential verb in any language; as we find, indeed, in the Coptic, that almost every noun becomes a verb, either by the addition of PE, or sometimes even without it. Thus, *the morning BLUSHES* is synonymous with *the morning IS red*; *he loves justice*, with *he IS a lover of justice*; and *I AM an Englishman*, with the *person now speaking IS an Englishman*. But this must be understood of is, was, or will be, in all its tenses; the idea of time, if expressed, being an essential part of the verbal sense.

I confess that some of these reflections have occurred to me in looking over a very singular work, which I had the curiosity to take up, in order to see what kind of information could be possessed by a person notoriously and professedly ignorant of the origin and relations of the language which he attempts to teach; and, in short, what kind of light could be diffused by an apostle of darkness. Blunders, and some of them ridiculous enough, must, of course, be found in the works of such a person, but most of them are such as every schoolboy might correct; and there really is so much of sagacity in some of [Mr. Cobbett](#)'s remarks on the errors of others, that they

a) |Editor| Gemeint ist wohl Horne Tookes #####. Or, the Diversions of Purley, zuerst erschienen in [London](#) im Jahr 1786. [FZ]

well deserve the attention of such as are ambitious to write or speak with perfect accuracy.

I shall not attempt to enter into a regular criticism of this *Grammar*^[b]; I shall merely make a few miscellaneous observations, as they have occurred to me in reading it, several of which would be equally applicable to the best of the existing works of a similar nature.

In Letter III. we are told that *long and short*, though adjectives, do not express *qualities*, but merely dimension or duration; from a singular misconception of the proper sense of the word *quality*. We find, in Letter IV., the rule given by most grammarians, though not by all, that the article A becomes AN, when it is followed by any word beginning with a vowel; but it is surely more natural to follow the sound than the spelling, and, as we should never think of saying an *youthful* bride, it seems equally incorrect to say an *useful* piece of furniture; for the initial sound is precisely the same. In the same manner A *unit* and A *European*, seems to sound more agreeable than AN; and the best speakers appear to adopt this custom.

Letter VIII. gives us a rule for doubling the last letter of a verb in the participle if an accent is on the last syllable; but it should be observed that the L is doubled, whether accented or not, as in *caballing*, *travelled*, *levelled*, *cavilled*, *controlled*. The same letter contains a "List of verbs, which, by some persons, are erroneously deemed irregular,"^[c] and which have been so deemed from the time of our German and Saxon ancestors, though [Mr. Cobbett](#) thinks it would be more philosophical to conjugate them regularly. Thus we may see at once that *freeze* may as well give us *frozen*, as *frieren* gives the Germans *gefroren*; that *hang* may make *hung* or *hanged*, according to its sense, as in German we have *hienge* from *hangen*, and *hängte* from *hängen*, to execute. For *sling* and *slung*, we have authority in *schlingen*, *geschlungen*, for *spring* and *sprung* in *springen* and *gesprungen*; for *swollen*, *swam*, or *swum*, and *swung*, in *geschwollen*, *geschwommen*, and *geschwungen*. And it is quite clear from these examples that "the bad practice of abbreviating, or shortening," has nothing to do with the matter.

In Letter XIV. we have a very distinct examination of a rule in punctuation which has been commonly adopted by good printers, without so distinct a description of its foundation. "Commas are made use of, when phrases, that is to say, 'portions' of words, are 'throwed' into a sentence, and which are not absolutely necessary to

b) [Editor] Siehe zu Cobbett und seinen Sprachstudien: F. Aarts (1994): William Cobbett's Grammar of the English Language. In: *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 95, Nr. 3, S. 319–332. [FZ]

c) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 60. [FZ]

assist in its grammatical construction."^[d] In a word, two commas are very nearly equivalent to the old fashioned parenthesis. Again, "the apostrophe ought to be called the mark not of elision, but of *laziness* and *vulgarity*;"^[e] a remark made in truly classical taste, which might have been extended with perfect propriety to the subject of the next paragraph, the *Hyphen*, the insertion of which is, to make it uncertain whether the words united by it are one word or two. He goes on admirably in the next page. "*Notes*, like parentheses, are *interrupters*, and much more troublesome interrupters, because they generally tell a much longer story. The employing of them arises, in almost all cases, from confusion in the mind of the writer. He finds the matter *too much for him*. He has not the talent to work it all up into one lucid whole; and, therefore, he puts part of it into *Notes*."^[f] "Instead of the word *and*, you often see people put &. For what reason I should like to know. But to this & is sometimes added a *c*; thus, &*c*. *And* is, in Latin, *et*, and *c* is the first letter of the Latin word *caetera*^[g], which means *the like*, or *so on*. This abbreviation of a foreign word is a most convenient thing for such writers as have too much indolence or too little sense to say fully and clearly what they ought to say. If you *mean* to say *and the like*, or, *and so on*, why not say it? ... The abbreviation is very frequently made use of *without the writer having* any idea of its import."^[h] But it is surely a mischievous maxim, never to "think of *mending* what you write. Let it *go*. No patching; no *after painting*."^[i] On the other hand he is right in protesting "against the use of what, by some, is called the *dash*. Who is to know what is intended by the use of these *dashes*? It is a cover for ignorance as to the use of points; and it can answer no other purpose."^[j]

In Letter XV. there is a singular conceit with regard to the keeping up a distinction between *a* and *an*, where it is insisted that we must not say "*a* dog, cat, owl, and sparrow," because owl requires *an*; "and that it should be a dog, a cat, an owl, and a sparrow;"^[k] which is certainly better, and would be so, even if there were no owl in the question.

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- d) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 78. [FZ]
 - e) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 81. [FZ]
 - f) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 83. [FZ]
 - g) [Editor] Bei Horne 1818, S. 83 steht korrekt: *cetera*. [FZ]
 - h) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 83f. [FZ]
 - i) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 85. [FZ]
 - j) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 85. [FZ]
 - k) [Editor] Horne 1818, S. 87. [FZ]

Letter XVII. The criticism on [Milton](#)'s "than *whom* none higher sat,"^[l] is perfectly correct. *Than* is never a preposition, and is simply a variation from the older *then*, both in English and in German. *John is better than James* means simply John is good first, then James: *er* is *eher* or *e'er*. *Who* would sound awkwardly, but would be more grammatical.

Letter XIX. gives a definition of the ellipsis, which would be a lesson to [Apollonius](#) himself: the compasses, it seems, "do not take their sweep all round, but leave out parts of the area or surface." The objection to [Blackstone](#)'s language is very questionable. "The very *scheme and model* WAS settled,"^[m] may, perhaps, be defended, because *scheme* and *model* are considered as one thing, the words being intended to illustrate each other, but not to point out different attributes of the administration of justice; and both words may be admitted, as a collective term, to govern a singular rather than a plural verb. It seems also to be an error to make *with* a conjunction rather than a preposition, and to say, "The bag, with the guineas and dollars in it, *were* stolen,"^[n] or "zeal, with discretion, *do* much."^[o] "I expected to have seen," is justly noticed as a common error for "I expected to see."^[p] The meaning of an active verb is erroneously confounded with that of a *transitive* verb, in the remarks on the word *elope*, which means to go off, or to run off, and we should naturally say *was* gone off, but *had* run off.

The nature of the subjunctive mood is dismissed in the same Letter without better success than has been obtained by former grammarians. An essay was published about thirty years ago in a periodical work,^[q] which brings the subject into a small compass; suggesting that the subjunctive mood ought always to be considered as a *conditional future*. The examples given are, "If the Elbe *is now* open, we shall soon have the mails, and *then*, if there *be* any news from the army, I will send it you immediately." "If Catiline *was* generous, it was in order to serve his ambition." The subjunctive past, if I *were*, becomes present, by being the future of the past; going back to the time when the present was future, and therefore contingent; and this conditional sense involves no difficulty, except when a mistaken adherence to the fancied rules of grammar forces it in where it has no business: thus the rules

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- l) |Editor| Horne 1818, S. 106. [FZ]
 - m) |Editor| Horne 1818, S. 123. [FZ]
 - n) |Editor| Horne 1818, S. 129. [FZ]
 - o) |Editor| Horne 1818, S. 129. [FZ]
 - p) |Editor| Horne 1818, S. 136. [FZ]
 - q) |Editor| Diese Quelle ließ sich nicht ermitteln. [FZ]

of some grammarians would lead us to say, if Catiline *were* ambitious; which is totally contrary to the true sense of the subjunctive. Mr. Cobbett seems to have some such distinctions in view when he says that "*if* has nothing at all to do with the government of the verb. It is the sense which governs." By this he means that *if* does not require a subjunctive unless it relates to a *future contingency*. He is right in saying "Though her chastity is becoming, it gives her no claim to praise:" but most decidedly wrong in adding "she would be criminal if she *was* not chaste;" for *was* is here used as relating to the present circumstances, which are the future of the past, and therefore require the subjunctive *were* to denote the condition intended. He has, however, done signal justice to the cause of this injured verb, by introducing it for *was*, in his sixth lesson, where he says it should have been "Your lordship *were* apprized of every important circumstance."

Such errors as this, however, are easily corrected, and many of the acute remarks which have been here copied are well worthy the attention of practical grammarians; at the same time enough has been said, without any disparagement of Cobbett's talents, to show that a man cannot be well qualified to teach that which he has not had the means of properly learning. For although the English language appears at first sight to be extremely simple and philosophical in its structure, it has in fact been derived from a variety of heterogeneous sources; it has undergone a variety of vicissitudes, and has served for the expression of a multiplicity of discussions on the most refined subjects in literature and history and science, for the feelings of oratory, and the passions of poetry, and it has been worn away by degrees, as the crystal in the stream is worn to a pebble, till it has returned to a simplicity which wears the aspect of the immediate offspring of the Chinese or Egyptian or Mexican Hieroglyphics. But with all this, it has still some spots, some idioms, which invariable custom obliges us to retain; and which can only be distinguished from corruptions and vulgarisms by tracing their history through the different stages of its progress, including, of necessity, the corresponding idioms in the parent languages out of which it has arisen.

Believe me always, my dear Sir,
Your's very sincerely,

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