AGAINST DARWIN:

WILLEM G. BRILL (1811-1896) ON THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

Jan NOORDEGRAAF

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

1. Introduction

Some ninety years ago, the noted Dutch philologist Jan TE WINKEL (1847-1927) remarked that nineteenth-century linguistic scholarship in Holland had produced only a few papers pertaining to the question of the origin of language (TE WINKEL 1905: 58). Until some years ago I found it difficult to contradict him given that, unfortunately, a comprehensive overview of the Dutch contribution to the debate concerning the origin of language is still lacking. Indeed, after browsing through the bulky two-volume Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache (GESSINGER & VON RAHDEN eds 1989), one might feel inclined to agree with the conclusion of my distinguished nineteenth-century predecessor. I hasten to admit that in the Netherlands the subject in question has never caused such a great deal of controversy as it has in other countries. Nevertheless, some years ago a thorough search through a diversity of periodicals brought to our notice more papers and books than previous scholarship seems to have discovered (cf. VISSER 1985). It appeared that in particular the 1860s and the early 1870s saw the publication of a relatively large number of papers devoted to the question of the origin of language. As is well-known, this is the period in which DARWIN’s The Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871) were published.
It is true to say that in the Netherlands evolutionary theory was accepted by and integrated into
the empirical sciences, modern theology and atheistic circles, whereas it was despised by
Orthodox Protestants and Catholics. It has been concluded that evolutionary theory worked
like a catalyst and caused polarization, to use a political term: it sharpened long-standing
controversies and brought to light the differences between the various positions (cf.
HEGEMAN 1970). In general, DARWIN’s theory was regarded as an argument pro or
contra current views, just because of the ideological conclusions that were drawn from it. What
were the reactions in Dutch linguistic quarters? As is only to be expected, opinions varied
greatly. Let me point out some of the contemporary standpoints.

Henri Ernest MOLTZER (1836-1895), an agnostic Groningen professor of Dutch language,
embraced evolutionary theory in the early 1870s. In 1871, he published a lengthy article under
the title of "De oorsprong der taal en de hypothese van Darwin" ('The origin of language and
Darwin's hypothesis'), concluding that whereas MAX MÜLLER (1823-1900) claimed an
essential difference between man and brute, linguistic science supported DARWIN's hypothesis.
Man and brute are of common descent; both language and man are involved in a process of
evolution. Any idea of a 'higher' origin is mere phantasy.

The Roman Catholic chaplain Wilhelmus WESSELS (1833-1900), on the other hand, defended
an orthodox position in a number of papers published in the 1860s. In his preface to WESSELS'
1869 book De wording der taal en der menschen. Eene bijdrage ter waardering van de
wetenschap der ervaring ('The Genesis of Language and Man. A contribution to the evaluation
of the science of experience'), the leading Roman Catholic man of letters and champion of
Roman Catholic emancipation J.A. ALBERDINGK THIJM (1820-1889) warmly commended
WESSELS for his fight against Darwinism and "the monkey theory". "You have done a good
job", ALBERDINGK THIJM (1869: I) remarked, "now you have launched an attack from the
standpoint of philosophical linguistics against those theories which are so much a subject of
discussion nowadays". Ending at the lingua Adamica, Wessels became a follower of Franz
Philipp KAULEN (1827-1907), a pastor from Bonn who had accused all the new linguists of
being heretical and godless (cf. KAULEN 1869-70; for details on KAULEN, see LEOPOLD
1989).
In the present paper I would like to focus on the contribution to the nineteenth-century debate on the origin of language made by the Dutch linguist WILLEM G. BRILL (1811-1896). In this context it might be interesting to know that he published papers on this question both before and after 'DARWIN'. Without any doubt BRILL, originally a Protestant theologian, was a religious man, but he should not be considered a representative of Protestant orthodoxy. [351]

Before considering BRILL's views I would like to make a general remark with regard to the context of his papers. In the early 1850s, Matthias DE VRIES (1820-1892), a devoted follower of Jacob GRIMM (1785-1863) and professor of Dutch language at Leiden University, had introduced the historical method into the academic study of Dutch, the 'new school in linguistics', as it was later called, found a spokesman in DE VRIES, whose inaugural lecture of 1853 contained a plea for 'rigor', inspired by August SCHLEICHER's (1821-1868) *Linguistiche Untersuchungen* (1850). DE VRIES was a classicist by education. As a young student in Leiden, he was on friendly terms with BRILL when the latter was working on his Dutch grammar of 1846 under the influence of the new German studies on language. His linguistic views were formed by his contacts with BRILL during the 1840s (cf. DRUYVEN 1982). As to historical linguistics, both BRILL and DE VRIES were self-educated, and in their work we find traces of romanticism combined with the results of the new linguistic science. Thus, one could argue that the study of language in Holland at the time was still in a stage of transition, with historical linguistics gaining more and more ground. A few years ago, I discussed one of the major contemporary Dutch debates concerning the foundations of language study, a debate which reflects this transition very clearly (cf. NOORDEGRAAF 1990). The texts under discussion here should also be seen as part of another grand debate pertaining to the fundamentals of linguistic science.

2. The life and times of W.G. BRILL

Willem Gerard BRILL (1811-1896) was a well-known and influential Dutch scholar, whose grammatical work influenced a period of several decades. The name of one of his brothers was to be associated forever with a respectable Leiden publishing house. Following his study at Leiden grammar school, Willem BRILL studied theology at Leiden University, but eventually he decided not to become a clergyman. As the story goes, one of the reasons was that he was
not tall enough for the pulpit; in fact, I think. the crucial point was that he did not like the idea to be bound by certain doctrines of the official Dutch Reformed Church. Thus, he switched to the study of classical languages, obtaining his doctorate in 1837 with a dissertation entitled *Quaestiones selectae de comoedia aristophanea*. In the years 1838-40 he was associated to the Leiden Stedelijk Gymnasium ('municipal grammar school') as a 'preceptor', and with Leiden University as a 'lector' for modern literature. In 1840, he moved on to the city of Zutphen, where he taught Dutch, French, English and German at the recently founded municipal Gymnasium. In 1859 he was [352] appointed professor of Dutch language, literature and national history at Utrecht University, where he remained till his retirement in 1881.

In 1846 BRILL published his *Hollandsche Spraakleer* ('Dutch grammar'). In its preface BRILL remarked that a grammar which incorporated the results of German linguistics, in particular the results achieved by Jacob GRIMM, had remained a desideratum in the Netherlands (BRILL 1846:vi). His book, reprinted a few years later as the first volume of the extensive *Nederlandsche Spraakleer*, was strongly influenced by GRIMM and HEYSE (cf. BAKKER 1977: 133-136). The *Spraakleer*, designed as a textbook for grammar schools and similar institutions, is not a historical grammar, but a historically founded grammar of contemporary (written) Dutch, thus providing the normative study of language with a historical base. As to the question "What is good and proper Dutch?", BRILL showed himself rather traditionally-minded (cf. NOORDEGRAAF 1985:341-343). The *Hollandsche Spraakleer* deals with 'letters', morphology, and the parts of speech. The volume on syntax appeared under the revised title *Nederlandsche Spraakleer* ('Dutch grammar') in 1852, and in 1866 a third volume, *Stijlleer* ('Stylistics'), followed. In many respects BRILL followed J.C.A. (1764-1829) and K.W.L. HEYSE's (1797-1855) *Ausführliches Lehrbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1838-1849) rather closely. In fact, BRILL's syntax is nothing but an adapted translation of the work of HEYSE *père et fils*. At any rate, the bulky, three-volume *Nederlandsche Spraakleer* was a most influential work, which ran through several editions. Apart from his publications on linguistics, BRILL edited Mediaeval Dutch literary works, published much in the field of national history, and wrote articles about diverse subjects in various magazines. It has been pointed out that he had Spinozistic sympathies (cf. DRUYVEN 1982: 163). BRILL's views in general did not...
undergo any major change in the course of his life. The same can be said about his ideas on the origin of language.

3. BRILL on the origin of language

Two years before the publication of his *Hollandsche Spraakleer* of 1846, BRILL published a brochure, which was intended to be an extensive [353] introduction to the grammar: "About language, as a pledge of man's high rank in creation, and about the relationship between the greater or lesser intellectual capacity of a nation, and the higher or lower class, to which the language spoken by it belongs". Here we find, among other things, a discussion of several theories concerning the origin of language (1844: 5-18).

BRILL is of the opinion that reason provides man with a special place in creation; in using language man places himself at the pinnacle of creation. BRILL mentions Johann Gotfried HERDER's (1744-1803) *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) as a source of inspiration, but he seems to have also been inspired by mystical thought as was current in German Romanticism.² According to BRILL, language is not a conscious invention by man, or a direct gift from God; nor are imitations of sounds, the expression of emotions or 'Lautsymbolik' a source of language.

Like HERDER, BRILL argues that man is the sole creature that is free, independent from nature. The essence, the idea of nature is inside him, man completely comprehends nature. Man looks around in creation, and when he finds the counterpart of something external in his internal nature then he has found a concept; this is called "to think". He gives this concept a body, using his breath, the "natural body of the spirit" (1844: 7). The whole range of the sounds used by man to give account of his thinking is called language. Language is the external sign of human thinking, and thus the pledge of his high rank in creation. I would like to stress this characteristic of BRILL's approach: he talks about an identification of what is externally perceptible, on the one hand, with the internal world of concepts which is already present in the mind, on the other hand - a sort of a priori complete knowledge of the world. Thus, BRILL

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² One of his fellow-students, the popular Dutch writer Nicolaas HEETS (1814-1903) jotted down in his diary on 12 June 1834: "Brill [is] completely mystical (...) His elevated standpoint makes him see the panorama he has in an unclear way and as in a fog (...). He considers matters a priori (...)" (VAN ZONNEVELD ed. 1983: 78).
presupposes innate notions, but I would like to add that in his opinion the linguistic sign is arbitrary (1844: 19; cf. 1846: 3, 1851: 62, 1861: 263), not necessarily reflecting mental knowledge. The communicative dimension of language is not based upon convention, but on love. In BRILL’s opinion the love between the very first man and his consort is sufficient to explain the social side of language (cf. BRILL 1851), but I cannot enlarge on [354] this here. The stage is now set for the confrontation with Darwinian ideas, although in BRILL’s papers references to foreign opponents are conscious by their absence.

From BRILL’s later publications I would like to highlight the following points. In 1861 he makes a sharp distinction in man between the physical and the spiritual side, of which language is a product, thus implicitly denying that anything spiritual could have developed from the material. Man can remain silent, which means he can free himself from nature. It is not the imitating animal in us that speaks, but the master of creation, the God within us; and that God is perfect within us, completely free from the power of nature (1861:259). By speaking man creates a spiritual world of his own and retains it by means of language. This principle has an absolute validity, not a gradual one: it is either present or it is not present. Thus, BRILL (1866:14) concludes, our earliest ancestors must have been in possession of the same faculty, and thus of "the pledge of language".

At the eighth Conference for Dutch Language and Literature at Rotterdam in September 1865, it was announced that Professor W.G. BRILL would present a paper under the telling title 'How a correct understanding of the essence of language can terminate many a theory concerning the genesis of language and the development of mankind". It is unfortunate for us that BRILL decided to deal with another topic; this subject, he said, be found too abstract for the occasion.4

Possibly provoked by the attention paid to DARWIN's *The Descent of Man* (1870) he expounded his "long-standing views " once again, this time in a theological periodical, "in order to influence kindred spirits" (1871: 325). What is more, at the twelfth Conference for Dutch Language and Literature in 1872, BRILL did not hesitate as he had done in 1865, and obviously wished to speak out very clearly on the subject. BRILL's paper is a summa of his

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3 This may remind one of, for example, the romantic views Otto JESPERSEN put forward on the same subject in his *Progress in Language* (1894). BRILL's theological-philosophical essay, however, is mainly inspired by statements made by Saint Paul.

4 Actually, a paper was given on the subject at this conference, viz. by Wilhelmus WESSELS. A reporter of a Dutch newspaper noted mockingly that the honourable speaker had put forward views that were "fully antiquated". WESSELS had argued that the first man must have been an adult person, fully-grown, both in body and mind, and that he therefore must have had a fully developed language from the very beginning.
views on the origin of language (DRUYVEN 1982: 163-164). It is clear how the phenomenon of language is used as an argument against the idea of evolution. Referring approvingly to the conclusions drawn by MAX MÜLLER in his [355] lecture Über die Resultate der Sprachwissenschaft (1872), BRILL turns against Darwinian ideas, this time very explicitly, when he states:

as language shows, man is the judge of all creation. And man does not become so, he is so from the very beginning. We see him grow in knowledge; however, nothing is actually taught to the mind of man: what we call learning is nothing other than a gradual process of becoming acquainted with our own mind, a step-by-step discovery of what is already present there from the very beginning. Thus man, with respect to the mind, is an everlasting being, hearing the image of God, understanding good and evil (BRILL 1873: 381-382).

It is language that makes it impossible to see man as the result of an evolutionary process. Language, an "indispensable garment", is the external sign of human thinking, and thinking gives man a unique place, separate from animals and plants. Man is a thinking being from the very beginning, and thus a being of a higher order.

It is evident that BRILL’s ideas concerning the origin of language show a remarkable continuity over the years; his discussion of Darwinian ideas follows naturally from the line of argument he had expounded in the 1840s. BRILL’s approach is reminiscent of MAX MÜLLER’S in several respects. I would like to emphasize, however, that BRILL had developed his ideas completely independently.

4. Final remarks

The ideas we have concerning the nature and the origin of language are of decisive influence on the direction and the aim of our study of language (BRILL 1851: 55).

I have only been able to give a very rough outline of BRILL's position. For example, I did not discuss BRILL’s views on what was the most original word (sc. a verb; cf. VAN DRIEL 1988: 165), and how language could develop further from its initial state. However, I venture to conclude that the relatively large number of statements concerning the question of the origin of language [356] that BRILL put forward in the 1860s and early 1870s should be seen as

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5 To be sure, MAX MÜLLER's Lectures on the Science of Language (1861-1864) were quite popular in the Netherlands in those days (cf. NOORDEGRAAF 1985: 420-421).
provoked by the debate about language and evolution in the 1860s. This simply prompted him to bring his ideas to the fore with more emphasis.

Willem BRILL was a scholar who was actively involved in the introduction of historical linguistics in the Netherlands. As his various articles on grammatical issues show, he kept placing his grammatical work within the framework of a philosophical way of thinking. As TE WINKEL (1905: 10) put it, BRILL often practised philosophical language psychology "in a Humboldtian vein". He was not a hard-boiled linguist like some of his contemporaries; his interest in the study of language was of a different nature. In the preface to the fourth edition of the first volume of the *Nederlandsche Spraakleer* (1871) he said farewell to linguistics, obviously without many scruples, and devoted himself further to what he called "more important studies". How could he leave linguistics like that? Well, of course we could stress the point that he was not interested in pursuing detailed linguistic research, but what seems to be more important to me is the fact that according to BRILL it is in any field that research can lead us to the very essence of things and the destination of man - and that is where BRILL's main interest lay.

BRILL's underlying philosophy has been characterized as idealist, pantheist, and theosophically coloured (CHANTEPIE DE LA SAUSSA YE 1897: 121). Such an approach did not fit in with the "Zeitgeist", which in *linguistica* demanded a method which was more and more oriented towards the prestigious natural sciences, "la méthode positive". As LEROY (1970: 38) remarked: "À partir des années 1870, la grammaire comparative prend une orientation nouvelle", and "des speculations métaphysiques" were met with suspicion (1970: 37). Characteristic of this change in intellectual climate is, for instance, Heymann STEINTHAL's (1823-1899) lament in a letter to G. GLOGAU in 1876: "Ich habe mit meinem Absagebrief an alles Transzendente lange gezögert. Jetzt bin ich ruhig. Ich kann alle Ideen stürzen sehen".

What is characteristic, too, - at least in the context of this paper -, is the fact that when BRILL retired in 1881, it was Henri E. MOLTZER who was to be appointed as his successor at the Utrecht chair of Dutch language and literature, some ten years after his public defence of "DARWIN's hypothesis".

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6 DE GROOT (1980) pointed out that from the 1840's on BRILL'S thinking was very much inspired by the ideas of J.W. von GOETHE (1749-1832). Although DE GROOT (1980) did not discuss BRILL as a linguist, I think that her conclusions can also be applied to BRILL's linguistic thoughts. In my opinion one can find GOETHE's concept of "das alte Wahre", e.g., in BRILL's remarks on the origin of language.
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