

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPEECH

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649163434

The philosophy of speech by George Willis

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE WILLIS

**THE PHILOSOPHY
OF SPEECH**

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BY

GEORGE WILLIS

AUTHOR OF

"ANY SOLDIER TO HIS SON."



LONDON : GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.
RUSKIN HOUSE, 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C. 1

First published in 1919

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The Philosophy of Speech

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF SPEECH

HERODOTUS tells us that the Phrygians and Egyptians both claimed to be the oldest nation on the earth till Psammeticus, King of Egypt, decided to settle the question once for all, and with that end performed the following experiment. He took two new-born infants and gave them in charge of a shepherd, who had orders to place them both in a lonely hut among the hills, to allow them the maternal attentions of a nanny-goat, and on no account to let them hear the sound of human speech. These instructions the shepherd carried out for two years, when one day on opening the door of the hut, both children rushed towards him with outstretched arms exclaiming "*Bekos.*" At first the shepherd took no notice of this demonstration, but when they repeated it at every

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subsequent entrance, he reported the matter to the king. The king ordered the children to be brought into his presence, and having assured himself that what the shepherd had reported was correct, he set enquiries on foot to discover if *bekos* was a word employed in any existing language, and found that it was a Phrygian word for *bread*. This result was supposed to have established the claim of the Phrygians to be the oldest nation on earth.

It must be regretted that the King of Egypt did not carry his investigation further and in a more scientific spirit, for in that case he might have solved for all time a far more interesting question than the relative antiquity of the Phrygians and Egyptians—the question of the origin of language. In no other way could a final answer be given to this tantalising problem than by isolating two or more human beings in the manner described by Herodotus, and by observing what means of communication they evolved by the single light of nature, and whether these had any points in common with the existing languages of to-day. The question, therefore, is not likely to receive any conclusive answer in our time, for among those nations which are imbued with sufficient scientific curiosity to desire a solution, such experiments with human

beings are forbidden alike by sentiment and morality.

At the present time the theorists on this subject are divided into two schools, who we may call the evolutionists and the agnostics. The former hold that language evolved from natural cries and ejaculations and from imitations of natural sounds. Thus the noun *ache* is merely the ejaculation "ach!" the cry of pain; the pronoun *me* is the ejaculation "ahem!" by which the intending speaker calls attention to his own presence (in Sanskrit "aham" = I). The evolutionists admit that the chain of association in the case of many words consists wholly of missing links, and content themselves with exhibiting those few which still exist in a perfect state.

The word whose interjectional pedigree has been most satisfactorily established is "ugly." Chance has preserved to us several fragments of old Scotch poetry which seem designed to confirm the evolutionist theory.

The rattling drum, the trumpet's shout,
 Delight young swankies that are stout,
 What his kind frighted mother *ugs* (i.e. views with
 horror)
 Is music to the sodger's lugs.

In a passage of Hardyng, it is related how the Abbess of Coldinghame, having cut off her