# THE GENIUS OF LANGUAGE

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## 1 Introduction and background

The term *genius of language / génie de la langue / Sprachgeist* has been bandied around discussions on human language for at least the last 300 years and shows no signs of going away, at least on the part of philosophers and journalists. Thus in 2000 a collection of essays *Et le génie des langues?* appeared under the editorship of the French philosopher Henri Meschonnic (Meschonnic 2000) and in 2004 the president of the Spanish EFE news agency, Álex Grijelmo, published an entertaining if essentially rather anecdotal and prescriptive book entitled *El genio del idioma*. Academic linguists, on the other hand, have been primarily interested in the concept for historiographical reasons, consigning it in a rather embarrassed fashion to the scrapheap (cf. Simone 1998: 203 'this discussion is purely archeological for us today'), with the interesting exception of Adam Makkai (Steiner 1995: 97–109), who makes an apologia for Rudolf Steiner's rather quirky use of the term as part of a general attack on American structuralist linguistics of the 20th century. In the first part of this lecture I want to identify some of the various meanings this phrase has been given and assess their validity or otherwise, and then, in the second part, I want to explore, in rather greater depth and detail, some of its possible implications for an understanding of language change. I will illustrate my points from English, French and Spanish, not only because these are the languages I know myself most intimately, but because the notion of 'genius' has largely been developed on the basis of these and other languages of western Europe.

## 2 The various meanings of 'genius of language'

Although it is possible to trace a chronological evolution in thinking on the subject, it is remarkable how in fact the various conceptual strands in the use of the term are actually anticipated and recapitulated. It is also striking how much of the discussion, particularly in the critical literature, has taken place without much in the way of concrete linguistic exemplification, and so another of my aims is to provide such illustrations according to my understanding of the concepts involved.

### 2.1 Universal and particular

The term is generally considered as originating in Amable de Bourzeys's (1606–1672) *Discours sur le dessein de l'Académie et sur le différent génie des langues* (1635) (Christmann 1976; Schlaps 2004: 369). Here, reduced to its most basic level, 'genius' is the straightforward notion that every language has its own particular characteristics. One strand in this line of thinking finds expression today in the pursuit of language universals and conceives the differences among languages as the different setting of 'parameters', a direct echo of the rationalist stance that ideas, or reason, are common, but individual languages are

different, cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *L'Émile*: 'La raison seule est commune, l'esprit en chaque langue a sa forme particulière [Reason is common, the spirit in each language has its own particular form]' (Yaguello 1988: 66). But Bourzeys himself already takes this further, distinguishing not only individual rules which are particular from language to language (*reigles*) but also, more nebulously and more intriguingly, properties (*proprietéz*) and tastes (*goustz*). Edward Stankiewicz (1981) has pointed out that such concerns are actually anticipated in the Italian Cinquecento and echoed in France by Du Bellay (1522–1560) in *La deffense et illustration de la langue françoyse* (1549), although they do not use the term 'genius'. The Italian humanists celebrated the differences among languages, especially the vernaculars. They saw language as dynamic and therefore not susceptible of exhaustive principled description, and they drew attention especially, because it reflected their main preoccupation, to the impossibility of translation (the Italian adage *traduttore, traditore* is itself a nice illustration of this and probably dates from this time). They were therefore content to view some aspects of language as mysterious: Du Bellay famously used the phrase *je ne scay quoy* to capture the 'hidden' properties of individual languages:

> ...je ne croirai jamais qu'on puisse bien apprendre tout cela des traducteurs, parce qu'il est impossible de le rendre avec la même grâce dont l'auteur en a usé: d'autant que chaque langue a <u>je ne sais quoi</u> propre seulement à elle, dont si vous efforcez exprimer le naïf dans une autre langue, observant la loi de traduire, qui est n'espacer point hors des limites de l'auteur, votre diction sera contrainte, froide et de mauvaise grâce. (Livre Premier, Chapitre V, my underlining)
> [I will never believe that one can learn all that from translators, because it is impossible to render it with the same elegance as the author has used: the more so because each language has I do not know what particular only to itself, and if you try to express it straightforwardly in another language, observing the law of translation, which is not to go beyond the limits of the author, your discourse will be constrained, cold and inelegant.]

Almost 300 years later, we find Edward Sapir (1884–1939) more or less recapitulating this position in *Language*:

> This type or plan or structural 'genius' of the language is something much more fundamental, much more pervasive, than any single feature of it that we can mention, nor can we gain an adequate idea of its nature by a mere recital of the sundry facts that make up the grammar of a language (Sapir 1921: 120, also cited in Schlaps 2004: 373).

This is all rather defeatist, a process too complicated to explain, the vagueness in which Grijelmo has recently delighted.

> ¿Quién es, finalmente, este genio de la lengua? No es nadie, no es nadie en concreto. Se trata, como bien sabemos, de un ser mitológico, un ente que sale de la lámpara maravillosa, un cuento. (Grijelmo 2004: 249)
> [Who is, finally, this genius/genie of language? It's no one, no one specific. As we well know, it's to do with a mythical being, a being who comes out of the magic lamp, a tale.]

One challenge for linguists is clearly to try and quantify this *je ne sais quoi*. Voltaire takes us a little nearer, I think, in the definition of *génie* given in his article on 'Langues' for the *Encyclopédie* (1757):

> On appelle *génie d'une langue* son aptitude à dire de la manière la plus courte et la plus harmonieuse ce que les autres langages expriment moins heureusement.
> [We call the genius of a language its ability to say in the shortest and most harmonious way things that other language express less successfully.]

What could 'success' in this sense mean? I will give two suggested examples of such a phenomenon.

The first is morphosyntactic. French, unlike Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, which have progressive constructions which are morphologically (though not functionally) rather like English *to be* + *-ing* (Sp. *estar* + *-ndo*, It. *stare* + *-ndo*, Pg. *estar* + *-ndo* or + *a* + infinitive) does not have such a construction but does have the more extensive paraphrase *être en train de* + infinitive. This French equivalent is, then, in a sense, 'less successful' than what we might see as the general Romance progressive, and it is rather less common; moreover, following up Voltaire's notion of 'ability', we may note that Spanish in particular has developed a number of such progressive constructions (*ando* + *-ndo*, *voy* + *-ndo*, *vengo* + *-ndo*, *sigo* + *-ndo*) which (apart from the last, *continuer à/de* + infinitive) are actually quite difficult to render in French and many other languages without recourse to even more elaborate paraphrases. In a very brief contrastive quantificational exercise, I took just 6,000 words from the editions of *Le Monde* and *El País* published on Saturday 22 November 2008, and found that *être en train de* appeared just once in the *Le Monde* sample, whereas in the *El País* sample *estar* + *-ndo* appeared four times, and there were also six instances of *seguir* + *-ndo*, 2 of *ir* + *-ndo* and one each of *acabar* + *-ndo* and *llevar* + *-ndo*.

My second example is lexical. While many European languages have a single word to express the notion of 'becoming', it is well-known that Spanish does not — in fact, to render economically ('heureusement') this idea in philosophy and linguistics, Spanish has latterly had recourse to a neologism, *devenir*, coined on the basis of French *devenir*, but belonging to very restricted registers and extremely low in frequency. Translating the notion of 'becoming' into Spanish is hence a difficult business: the commoner possibilities are:

> With a noun: *convertirse en*
> With a noun or adjective: *volverse* (neutral), *hacerse* (a natural or expected development), *llegar a ser* (implies achievement), *venir a ser* (implies casualness)
> With an adjective denoting a non-inherent state: *ponerse*

English similarly does have other ways of expressing 'becoming' besides the verb *become* itself — *get* and *grow* are very frequent with adjectives. But the difference between the two languages in structural terms is that Spanish does not have an overarching term with which syntactically or semantically more restricted expressions are in a hyponymic relationship: none of the verbs and verbal expressions in the above list includes the others.

I have been dealing here with what I think we should distinguish as 'structural genius', syntactic and lexical. In these cases, while the task of contrastive description which leads to the identification of 'genius' is by no means easy, it is clear that we need not be so pessimistic as to think that 'genius' is ultimately beyond definition. Even in these simple examples we have seen two dimensions of 'genius', however: what we might think of as the purely structural (differents in the exponents of a category) and the statistical (the relative frequencies of similar exponents).

## 2.2 Characteristics of individual languages

Not that writers on 'genius' made no attempts at all at quantification. From the suggestion that each language had its own distinctive properties, it was a short step to the attempt to speculate on what those properties might be. But it was often done in impressionistic terms with little objective linguistic detail and plenty of partisan value judgement. Voltaire's description of languages in the *Encyclopédie*, to which I have already referred, is characteristic:

> Le latin, par exemple, est plus propre au style lapidaire que les langues modernes, à cause de leurs verbes auxiliaires qui allongent une inscription et qui l'énervent.
> Le grec, par son mélange mélodieux de voyelles et de consonnes, est plus favorable à la musique que l'allemand et le hollandais.
> L'italien, par des voyelles beaucoup plus répétées, sert peut-être encore mieux la musique efféminée.
> Le latin et le grec étant les seules langues qui aient une vraie quantité, sont plus faites pour la poésie que toutes les autres langues du monde.
> Le français, par la marche naturelle de toutes ses constructions, et aussi par sa prosodie, est plus propre qu'aucune autre à la conversation.
> [Latin, for example, is more appropriate to the lapidary style than modern languages, because of their auxiliary verbs, which lengthen an inscription and irritate it.
> Greek, through its melodious mixture of vowels and consonants, is more favourable to music than German and Dutch.
> Italian, through much more repeated vowels, perhaps better serves effeminate music.
> Latin and Greek, being the only languages which have a true quantity, are better equipped for poetry that any other language in the world.
> French, through the natural functioning of all its constructions, and also because of its prosody, is more suitable than any other to conversation.]

Bourzeys had also made the claim, so closely associated with *génie* that it became one of its detracting features, that French had a particular 'eloquence' — though note that Bourzeys was actually at this time claiming an adequacy for French vis-à-vis Latin rather than against other vernaculars.

It is astonishing how difficult even modern scholars find tying such nebulous judgements down (assuming of couse that they can be). John Orr, in his review of Albert Dauzat's *Le génie de la langue française*, a latter-day defence of the supposed clarity of French in the dark days of the Occupation, makes a number of potentially rather interesting contrasts between the 'genius' of French and English respectively, of which I will examine just two. First, he claims that English words have a greater 'autonomy' than French words. By 'autonomy' Orr is referring primarily to English emphatic stress (*It is hot*, *She was pale*, are the sentences he quotes), and indeed, the same strategy cannot be used in French (${}^?$*Il fait chaud*, ${}^?$*Elle était pâle*), for which Orr gives the equivalents *Qu'il fait chaud / Il fait chaud, chaud*, *Qu'elle était pâle / Elle était pâle, pâle* (we might equally simply add an intensifier: *Il fait très chaud*, *Elle était très pâle*). We might extend this account by adding that, in English, stress can also be used contrastively while in French such contrast is also rendered syntactically, e.g. by a cleft construction or by dislocation:

> *I met him in the street / C'est dans la rue que je l'ai rencontré*
> *What do you think? / Et toi, qu'est-ce que tu penses?*

The real basis of the contrast, then, is not that the nature of words is different in English and French but that there is no emphatic or contrastive word stress in French. It is not that emphasis or contrast cannot be expressed in French, but that the means of doing so is syntactic or lexical rather than prosodic. English too has the means of expressing emphasis and contrast in some of the same ways (though not usually by repetition of a word) as French in such sentences as:

> *It's really hot / How pale she is*
> *It was in the street that I met him*
> *You, what do you think?*

Secondly, Orr says that French has a preference for substantival, as against verbal, constructions, illustrated by the contrast between English *I like reading* and French *J'aime la lecture*. What he says about *lecture* is worth scrutiny:

> In *J'adore la lecture* the word *lecture* is far less suggestive of the process of the action and far remoter, both in form and in function, from its companion verb. It is far more etherealized, more abstract (49).

*Lecture* is certainly a deverbal nominalization of *lire*; but whether it is 'abstract' (let alone 'etherealized', whatever that might be taken to mean) is doubtful: it denotes an action, not an abstract concept such as 'reason', and, like English *reading*, it also has a concrete meaning as a 'portion of written text' (*readings in French literature / lectures de Racine*). Although French is able to form nouns from verbal forms (cf. *le rire*, *le sourire*, *le pouvoir*), it does so with only a minority of verbs, whereas English very productively forms nouns in *-ing* from verbs; furthermore, in English there is a coincidence between such activity nouns and verbal complements, so we can talk about *light reading* (noun) and *Reading Russian is difficult* (subject complement). This is the real basis of the contrast between the two languages, and it is essentially a morphosyntactic contrast. Again, there are alternative structures in both languages in the shape of *I like to read / J'aime lire*, where French uses an infinitive in (coincidentally) much the same way as English.

## 2.3 The priority of French

The promotion of the idea of the clarity of the French language is perhaps one of the greatest linguistic PR jobs of all time, and the association of French with clarity has been remarkably tenacious. It is tempting to sweep this idea away as being complete nonsense, cf. Wardhaugh (1999: 44):

> Only occasionally will a speaker of French admit that we should not be surprised that French seems to be the clearest of all languages to the French, for, after all, they have been using French all their lives and know it better than they know any other language. We should be surprised only if it were otherwise.

However, before we cheerfully follow down this path, it is worth noting that the pursuit of clarity has also on occasion been quantified. Jean d'Aisy, in the *Suite du génie de la langue française*, lists a number of syntactic features which contribute to Quintilian's notions of *emendata oratio* (purity of language) and *dilucida oratio* (clarity of language), of which I list a few here:

> Parentheticals and long sentences are to be avoided
> Anaphoric reference and the reference of relative pronouns must be clear
> Clitics must attach to the verbs to which they pertain
> *Pour* and an infinitive must not be separated
> An auxiliary verb must not be separated from its participle

These strictures are partly rhetorical or stylistic in nature and partly purely syntactic (indeed, a distinction between *genio grammaticale* and *genio rettorico* was to be made much later by the Italian Melchiore Cesarotti, 1730–1808, see Rosiello 1965: 381). I think it is worth attempting to assess the claim that such features contribute towards clarity, and I will take first an example in which I have recently been interested for other reasons (Pountain 2008), the reference of relative pronouns. Relative pronouns have a very interesting history and

distribution in the Romance languages. In the evolution of the Romance vernaculars from Latin, there was a major erosion of case, gender and number marking, as might be expected, with a consequent apparent 'inexactness' in function: this situation persists in the spoken Romance languages to this day, and has often been commented upon; staying with French as the exemplifying language, we can note such occurrences in modern spoken French as

> spoken                      written
> *C'est lui que je parle*      *C'est lui dont je parle*
> *à l'endroit qu'il est*       *à l'endroit où il est*
> (Pagliaro & Belardi 1963: 151)

The development of Romance relatives which were overtly marked for gender, number and, because of their ability to take a preceding preposition, case function (e.g. Fr. *lequel*, *laquelle*, *lesquels*, *lesquelles*) seems to have come about partly as a result of learned influence (these forms were originally interrogatives rather than relatives, but came to be used as relatives because of a perceived need to make unambiguous antecedent reference in certain text-types, notably chronicles: see Pountain forthcoming). On the one hand, it seems fairly plain that making the reference of relative pronouns unambiguous must contribute towards clarity. Yet how did and does French manage with the generalised use of *que* seen in the sentences above? The answer is that it does not actually need such transparent clarity because in such sentences the reference of the 'vague' relative is pragmatically quite obvious: the relation between *parler* and *lui* and between *est* and *l'endroit* cannot be other than indirect object and locative respectively. The meaning of these sentences is totally clear without further grammatical marking.

The prescriptive insistence on explicitness and consistency, perhaps even on transparency, may on one level be seen as contributing to clarity. Prescriptivism in France certainly reversed the 'clitic-climbing' that is still evident in Spanish (Fr. *je vais le voir / *je le vais voir*; Sp. *Lo voy a ver / voy a verlo*); but it is not apparent that the meaning of these two variant structures in Spanish is any less clear than French; I am aware of no case in which clitic-climbing in Spanish produces ambiguity, since the auxiliary's object slot (if the auxiliary is transitive, which it very often is not) is occupied by the non-finite second verb and any object argument therefore has to be interpreted as belonging to the second verb. All that has happened is that French prescriptivism has limited variation.

But what I think was originally principally behind the traditional French claim to greater clarity is the declared opposition of French writers on 'genius' to hyperbaton (or *inversion*, as they came to call it), and insistence on what they saw as the 'natural' order of subject-verb-object. Placing the verb in final position was certainly a Latin-inspired feature of formal usage in Spanish and Italian, and was explicitly cultivated in some literary genres. To what extent it was a feature of the everyday speech of these languages is a matter of debate: it is not a feature which has survived in ordinary usage today. Preliminary work that I have done on 16th-century Spanish would suggest that inversion was a feature of upper-class, educated speech, in which hyperbaton was cultivated in imitation of formal prose.

So although French writers claimed a 'genius' of clarity for their language, it can be seen that, whatever clarity may be taken to consist of, it was more to do with prescriptive injunction which in some cases may have led to a better correspondence between the written language and speech but in others introduced distinctions and rules which the spoken language appears to have managed well enough without. What, however, we do see very clearly here, interestingly enough, is how such a prescriptive tradition may itself become part of the 'genius' of a language which is moving towards *Ausbau*, or elaborated status in the

sense of Kloss 1967. We also see a typologically different kind of 'genius' at work here, a genius which is rhetorical or stylistic rather than purely structural.

## 2.4 Association with national characteristics

The starting-point for the association of the 'genius' of a language with the 'genius' of a nation was Dominique Bouhours's (1628–1702) dialogue on 'La langue française' in *Les entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1682). Bouhours, who was also the arch-proponent of the anti-hyperbaton stance we have just been discussing, claims that language is the product of the 'genius' of a nation and reflects the nation's characteristics, and he ascribes apparently arbitrary and generally offensive characteristics to nations and their languages, compounded by their being metaphorised as women, claiming, for example, that Spanish is 'une orgueilleuse' and Italian 'une coquette toujours parée et toujours fardée' (Hüllen 2001: 243). But behind these unsubstantiated excesses there is another suggestive idea. Let us interpret 'nation' as 'speech community' (it could not have meant anything else: the idea that a 'nation' could have many languages never seems to enter the discourse of writers who subscribe to the idea of the 'genius' of a language mirroring the 'genius' of a nation) and focus on Bouhours's view that languages were the expression of a collective experience (Gambarota 2006: 288): 'chaque nation a toujours parlé selon son propre génie' [each nation has always spoken according to its own genius]. The 'genius' of a language, according to this view, depends not only on the usage of speakers but also on writers and the accumulated history of the language. We may be able to give further substance to such a notion. Stankiewicz (1981: 184) signals the importance to 16th-century humanist writers on language of the spoken language, which has been surprisingly often neglected as an object of interest in itself. Examining such writers as Erasmus (c.1466–1536), Juan de Valdés (c.1509–1541) and Benedetto Varchi (c.1502–1565), he points out their interest in idioms, proverbs and affective suffixes as the locus for the 'genius' of the language (Erasmus used the Latin word *genius* explicitly in this connection).

Now there is undeniably an association of certain linguistic features with what we might call cultural history or legacy. Idioms, because of their structural anomaly and idiosyncrasy, have not traditionally been regarded as interesting objects of systematic study, but are an obvious aspect of what makes one language different from another. They often have transparent cultural associations: one only has to think of English cricket idioms such as *to knock for six* or *to be on a sticky wicket*, or of Spanish religious idioms such as *en un santiamén* 'in no time' or *quedarse para vestir santos* 'to be left on the shelf', lit. ' to be left dressing saints'. Similar considerations apply to intertextual reference: English is well-known for set expressions which derive from Shakespeare and the King James Bible, such as *the milk of human kindness* and *the widow's mite*.

I think there is a case, then, for identifying a cultural 'genius' of language which is different in type from the structural and rhetorical geniuses that I have identified.

## 2.5 Genius dictates the way speakers think

I now want to turn to some strands of thought in the literature on genius which discuss what may more appropriately be thought of as the consequences or implications of genius.

The first is the notion that the genius of language determines the way in which speakers think, probably first propounded, as Gambarota (2006) points out, by Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), who turned Bouhours's views on their head by claiming that it is the 'genius' of a language that determines the character of the speakers of that language rather than the reverse. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780) also espoused this position (Schlaps

2004: 374). Yaguello (1988: 68), who pleads for moderation in the concept of *génie de la langue*, similarly states that

> Les langues diffèrent par ce qu'elles nous imposent de dire, par le type d'information que véhicule obligatoirement leur structure grammaticale
> [Languages differ in what they force us to say, in the kind of information which their grammatical structure obligatorily carries.]

She points out how in the corresponding sentences in French and English

> *L'ouvrier travaille / The worker works ~ The worker is working*

French forces an interpretation of *l'ouvrier* as male which English *worker* does not, and English *works ~ is working* forces a choice of verbal aspect (habitual or progressive) which French *travaille* does not. We can think of many such examples: the choice between the Spanish copulas *ser* and *estar* which makes overt, for example, the distinction between an event noun and entity noun:

> *La clase es en aquella aula*
> *La clase está en aquella aula*

or between stative or dynamic passive (associated too in this example with punctual and imperfective past)

> *La puerta fue cerrada*
> *La puerta estaba cerrada*

This aspect of 'genius' has sometimes been linked with linguistic relativism, but in fact, despite some of the rather inflated claims made, it is an extremely very weak form of relativism. With regard to the examples given, it is not the case that English speakers cannot distinguish between male and female, events and entities, states and actions, or that French speakers cannot distinguish between habitual and progressive. The point is that they do not do it in the same way, and that, because of the structural properties of their languages, they are not always required to make these distinctions overt in comparable contexts.

## 2.6 Genius is responsible for linguistic creativity

Another implication of the 'genius' of language as a particular kind of organization of the creative faculty is that it determines the nature of innovation. Rosiello (1965: 376) observes that the term is used in 18th-century linguistic debates in Italy to indicate the peculiar organization of the formal elements of a language which permits certain innovative processes but does not tolerate others. In France, Condillac (1715–1780) wrote in his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746):

> Mais je demande s'il n'est pas naturel à chaque nation de combiner ses idées selon le génie qui lui est propre; et de joindre à un certain fonds d'idées principales, différentes idées accessoires, selon qu'elle est différemment affectée? Or ces combinaisons autorisés par un long usage, sont proprement ce qui constitue le génie d'une langue. (219–220)
> [But I ask if it is not natural for each nation to combine its ideas according to the genius that is particular to it, and to join different accessory ideas to a certain core of principal ideas according to how it is differently affected? It is these combinations, authorised by long usage, which are precisely what constitute the genius of a language.]

Schlaps (2004: 376–379) identifies the notion of the active 'genius of language' most forcefully with Jacob Grimm (1785–1863). Grimm speaks of

> der Macht des unermüdlich schaffenden Sprachgeistes, der wie ein nistender Vogel wieder von neuem brütet, nachdem ihm die Eier weggethan worden (1819: xv, cit Schlaps, 366–7).
> [the power of the unflaggingly active genius of language which, like a nesting bird, will breed again when its eggs have been removed]

'Genius' is therefore seen as a determiner of the direction of linguistic change. If this notion can be given any substance, it would be of great interest to historical linguistics, since it would provide, in part at least, an answer to the 'constraints problem' identified by Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968: 183). Are there long-term directions implicit in the structure of a particular language which determine or constrain its development? An example of this might be the well-known propensity (or 'genius'?) of English to convert nouns into verbs, new instances of which can be appreciated on an almost daily basis. We can showcase new products, bus children to school, party all night or text a friend, and, I have recently learned, leverage funding.

Strongly connected to this basic notion is the use of 'genius' by prescriptivists to argue against certain kinds of change, especially contact influence. Rufino José Cuervo's (1844–1911) remarks on the *ser* + past participle passive construction in Spanish have been echoed on many occasions since.

> Hay entre nosotros escritores, por otra parte apreciables, que, afectando claridad, usan a cada triquitraque las construcciones: *fue combatida la idea, son recibidas las cartas, era oída la misa*, etc., en lugar de *se combatió la idea, se reciben las cartas, se oía la misa o combatieron la idea, recibimos las cartas,* etc.. Aunque este modo de expresarse es en sí correcto, su abuso es una de las cosas que más desfiguran el genio de nuestra lengua, y que más dan a un escrito aire de forastero, quitándole todo sabor castizo. (Cuervo 1885: 340)
> [There are amongst us writers, otherwise estimable, who, affecting clarity, use at every touch and turn the constructions... instead of... Although this way of expressing oneself is correct, its abuse is one of the things which most disfigure the genius of our language, and which most give a text a foreign character, taking away from it every native flavour.]

To be more precise, in my terminology it is the statistical dimension of structural genius that seems to be at issue here. Spanish does have a *ser* + past participle construction, and it is used in some registers more than others (Green 1975), but Spanish has other ways of expressing 'passive' notions, especially the reflexive, which are much more frequent, particularly in the spoken language, where the *ser* + past participle construction is rare.

However, 'genius' can also be consistent with popularly accepted innovation. In 1997 an article appeared in *La Presse*, a Montreal French-language daily, with the intriguing title 'La femme du boulanger et le génie de la langue française' by Marie-Éva de Villers. It was occasioned by the Secretary of the Académie Française, Maurice Druon's, objection to the fact that four female French ministers had demanded to be called 'Madame la Ministre' (instead of 'Madame le Ministre'); Druon objected that French usage required the masculine and that a feminine such as *l'ambassadrice* denoted the wife of an ambassador, not a female ambassador. De Villers lines up authorities such as Grevisse, Brunot and Damourette and Pichon to conclude that the use of a masculine noun to denote a female person is in fact contrary to the *génie* of French, which indeed is convincing, since in French there is a longstanding association between gender and reference to the sex of animate referents, which such a usage as *Madame le Ministre* contravened.

## 3 Genius and language change

The aspect of 'genius' which has fascinated me most is related to this last notion of 'genius' as ongoing creativity (see Pountain 2003: Chapter 5), and I want to devote the final part of this lecture to the examination of what I think is a particularly instructive case study. I apologise for the detail in which it must be presented, but I think that it is necessary to go into such detail if the processes I am discussing are to be fully understood and evaluated. I will take as my starting point the following observation by Edward Sapir, who, as we have seen, took the notion of 'genius of a language' seriously:

> All languages evince a curious instinct for the development of one or more particular grammatical processes at the expense of others, tending always to lose sight of any explicit functional value that the process may have had in the first instance, delighting, it would seem, in the sheer play of its means of expression. (Sapir 1921: 60)

This is phrased, as so often with statements about 'genius', in an anthropomorphic way; but cast more objectively ('In all languages one or more particular grammatical processes develop at the expense of others...'), and attributing to speakers of the language rather than to the language itself the sensation of delight, what this suggests is that the distinctive characteristics, or 'genius', of a language are, in part at least, the product of a cumulative series of choices, or, as I have suggested elsewhere (Pountain 2000a), 'capitalizations'.

### 3.1 Romance reflexives

The Romance reflexive represents a capitalization which seems to have been played out to a very considerable extent: I identified the main stages in this in Pountain 2000b. We can imagine an almost certainly arbitrary starting point, amply represented in Latin and continued in Romance, where a reflexive pronoun had a literal meaning, coreferential with the subject of the verb, in a direct or indirect object function (I deliberately illustrate with the third person pronoun, which is the only personal pronoun to have a distinctive reflexive form; note that there is no distinction in this pronoun between singular and plural, or between direct and indirect object):

    (1)    *Juan se lava*
            Juan 3-REFL washes-3sg
            'Juan washes himself'

    (2)    *Juan se dijo que no volvería*
            Juan 3-REFL said-3sg that NEG would-return-3sg
            'Juan said to himself that he would not return'

The range of functions of the reflexive extend in the following ways. As a direct object, the reflexive may be only weakly referential and have a conventionalised or figurative meaning:

    (3)    *Juan se levantó*
            Juan 3-REFL raised-3sg
            'Juan got up'

Note that (3) does not mean 'Juan raised himself' and cannot be reinforced in Spanish by the emphatic prepositional phrase *a sí mismo*, corresponding to the English contrastive or

emphatic _himself_.  Some reflexive expressions, such as _verse_, seem to permit either a literal or a conventionalised meaning.

    (4)    a.    _Juan se vio en el espejo_
                     Juan 3-REFL saw-3sg in the mirror
                     'Juan saw himself in the mirror'

               b.    _Juan se vio en dificultades_
                     Juan 3-REFL saw-3sg in difficulties
                     'Juan was in difficulties'

               c.    _Juan se hizo famoso_
                     'John became famous', not 'John made himself famous'

The same process can occur in English (_He found himself in difficulties_), but not as extensively, which means that parallels between Spanish and apparently similar English verbs are inexact, since many Spanish conventionalised reflexives seem to to preclude a literal reading: _Se hizo famoso_ (4c) is 'he became famous' rather than 'he made himself famous'. The next stage in the process is that a Romance reflexive verb may be used with a subject which is not its semantic agent: in (5) _problemas_ is the subject and patient of the verb _plantear_ ' to pose':

    (5)    _Estos problemas no se pueden plantear de este modo_
              These problems NEG 3-REFL can-3pl pose in this way
              'These problems cannot be posed in this way'

Again, there is some parallel to this in English (_The following problem presents itself_), though again such constructions appear not to be used as extensively as in Spanish as in English.  So far the differences between Spanish and English appear to be differences of degree, what I have referred to as the statistical dimension of structural genius.  It is perhaps appropriate to observe at this point that what may permit such metaphorical, essentially creative, extensions of the reflexive function is in fact the general pragmatic impossibility of literal interpretation: in the (4b) Juan is unlikely literally to see himself in difficulties.  The same is true of (5): problems, being inanimate, do not act as the agent of _plantear_ or _present_, or, at least, we would not understand there to be a significant difference between a problem metaphorically presenting itself and it being presented to us by an unspecified agent.  I will return to this point again.

    It is also arguably possible for reflexives like (5) to have an agent expressed in Spanish as if they were passives, and indeed, such constructions are sometimes referred to as the reflexive passive.  I say 'arguably', because there is some prescriptive resistance to such sentences, although they can easily be found:

    (6)    _Lo que ahora se plantea por el Gobierno es lo que UGT ha exigido desde un principio_ (www.ugt.es/Revista_Union/numero205/p8-9.pdf)
              'What is now being proposed by the Government is what the UGT has demanded from the start'

However, the process has not gone so far as to allow any 'passive reflexive' verb to take an agent in this way.  The reflexive is closer in meaning to what might be called a 'middle voice' than to a dynamic passive: hence (5) means that the problems 'get posed' rather than

that they are dynamically posed, just as *present itself* in English is closer to 'got presented' than 'was presented (by someone)'. Here, then, the capitalisation process in Spanish could have further to go — as it has done in Romanian, where the reflexive does function as a dynamic passive and takes an agent unproblematically.

Where Spanish really diverges from English, however, is in the next stage of the process, where the reflexive comes to be used to express an indefinite subject. Functionally, the relation with the passive reflexive is clear: one of the chief functions of the passive is precisely to leave the agent unexpressed. Structurally, when an inanimate noun is involved and the verb is singular, there is in practice little difference between the passive reflexive and the indefinite subject construction except, syntactically, in terms of word order:

(7)     a.     *El problema se solucionó*
                The problem 3-REFL solved-3sg
                'The problem was solved / got solved'

        b.     *Se solucionó el problema*
                3-REFL solved-3sg the problem
                'Someone solved-3sg the problem'

        c.     Fr. **S'est résolu le problème*
                3-REFL Perf-3sg solved the problem

        d.     Fr. *On a résolu le problème*
                INDEF Perf-3sg solved the problem
                'Someone solved the problem'

Because in Spanish subject and verb have no fixed order (from the purely syntactic point of view at least) we can explain this expansion of function as a reanalysis of a structure like (7b). But this is the point of a significant divergence between Spanish and French, where at the crucial time in its evolution, word order was more highly constrained and parameter setting crucially required the subject slot to be filled. A sentence such as (7c) was therefore impossible, and the 'genius' of French built on the use of the indefinite subject pronoun *on* (from Latin *homo*) as in (7d). This strategy was actually also open to Spanish: as late as the 16th century we can find examples of a similar use of *hombre*:

(8)     *...si por huir de un hoyo cae hombre en otro mayor...* (Lope de Rueda, *Tymbria*)
        'If by avoiding one hole a person falls into a larger one...'

The reanalysed indefinite subject construction was then to generalise and create more distinctively indefinite reflexive constructions such as

(9)     *Se despreciaba al dictador*
        3-REFL despised-3sg OBJ-the dictator
        'People despised the dictator / The dictator was despised'

with the characteristic Spanish *a* 'personal' object marker. Notice here how ambiguity with a literal reflexive interpretation *Se despreciaba el dictador ~ El dictador se despreciaba* 'The dictator despised himself' is precluded: the personal *a* may therefore facilitate the further capitalization of the reflexive in this way in Spanish. In theory, constructions such as

(10)   *Se ve las montañas*
       3-REFL see-3sg the mountains

where a plural noun is the object of the invariably singular indefinite reflexive verb, ought also to be possible, and they are in certain register varieties of Spanish — but such constructions have been puristically castigated, which has prevented, or probably more accurately, reversed, completion of the capitalising trajectory. Through what may be seen as the force of analogy, the indefinite reflexive construction extends to intransitive verbs (*on* in French was already possible in this function):

(11)   *Aquí se vive bien*

I now turn to the indirect object function of the reflexive pronoun. The broadly benefactive values of the indirect object in

(12)   a.   *Juan se lava la cara*
            Juan 3-REFL washes the face
            'Juan washes his face'

       b.   *Juan se tomó las pastillas*
            Juan 3-REFL took the tablets
            'Juan took his tablets'

appear to have paved the way for what have been called the 'nuance' reflexives of Romance, in which the reflexive pronoun is not referential (and hence once again there is no room for ambiguity with a referential interpretation): thus the difference in modern Spanish between

(13)   a.   *Juan no sabe el número*
            'Juan doesn't know the number'
       b.   *Juan se sabe todos los números en inglés*
            'Juan knows all the numbers in English'

is the implication that in (13b) Juan knows all the numbers by heart, that he has really internalized them, that his personal effort and involvement has been in some way greater. (There are more ways of looking at this contrast, not least the telic aspectual implications of (13b), which are that an act of learning has been completed; but what I want to suggest here is the likelihood that such 'nuance' values of the reflexive are linked to an original referential benefactive value.) The creation of 'nuance' reflexives has led to exceptional idiosyncrasy and irregularity in the Romance languages (another idiosyncratic aspect of such verbs is the prepositions they select with objects and verbal complements); but it also provides for the forging of new expressive possibilities, which is a distinctive part of the 'genius' of these languages. A relatively clear example is the verb *salir* ' to go out'. With animate subjects, the reflexive expresses a nuance of effort or determination:

(14)   a.   *Salió de la reunión*
            'He/she left the meeting'
       b.   *Se salió de la reunión*
            'He/she (deliberately) walked out of the meeting'

(Again, there are other uses of *salirse* which I will not go into here.)  But there are much more difficult cases.  The difference between:

(15)  a.  *Olvidé el pasaporte*
           'I forgot the passport'
      b.  *Me olvidé de su cumple*
           'I forgot (about) his birthday'
      c.  *Me olvidé del pasaporte*
           'I forgot about the passport'

is notoriously difficult to discriminate in other languages, even by paraphrase.  In the Oxford Spanish Dictionary, for instance, both *olvidar* and *olvidarse de* are unhelpfully glossed in much the same way.  Moreira Rodríguez & Butt (1996) spend four pages (244–248) attempting to explain the difference without really successfully doing so either, apart from the crucial observation that *olvidarse de* 'is usually reserved for "to forget about"' (246), so that there is a significant difference between (15a) and (15c), which would not be appropriate for having left ther passport at home, though appropriate for having forgotten about its existence.

What I hope to have demonstrated here is that what has made capitalization of the reflexive possible in Spanish is largely the creativity of the human mind: the processes of change we have identified have been metaphor, reanalysis and analogy, made possible by pragmatic expectations which preclude ambiguity.  One consequence of the process is that Spanish uses the reflexive to express a function (indefinite agency) which is expressed differently in other languages: this is, I suggest, part of syntactic structural 'genius' which also has a statistical dimension (we have already noted the constrained nature of the *ser*-passive in Spanish; Spanish also has several other means of expressing indefinite agency, such as the use of *la gente* 'people' or *uno* 'one', which are more common in other languages).  Another consequence is that new expressive possibilities are made available (the 'nuance' reflexive): this is part of the lexical structural 'genius' of Spanish, which enables more 'successful' (i.e. economical) rendering of such distinctions than in other languages.

Although I do not have time to illustrate the relation between capitalization and 'genius' further in detail, I can suggest some other areas of Spanish grammar where I believe we can observe essentially the processes at work: the development of the opposition between the copular verbs *ser* and *estar*, which I outlined in Pountain (2000a), and the development of the so-called 'personal *a*', where the presence or absence of this preposition with objects not only indicates 'personality', but also such concepts as the 'individuation' of the object and a 'kinetic' relationship between agent and patient (see Kliffer 1984).

## 4 Conclusions

What I hope to have argued for today is the reality of some of the insights of writers on language from the 16th to the early 20th centuries who were fascinated by what they saw as the characteristic features of individual languages, by the perceived properties of some languages to express certain notions more 'successfully' than others, and by the realization that such properties can be produced by a set of historically related changes which conspire in a particular direction.  This 'genius' is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with structural, rhetorical and cultural properties.  Structural 'genius' needs to be understood as having a statistical, as well as a purely formal, dimension.  Such 'genius' is not something metaphysical, still less anything that is mysteriously related to the ill-defined or plainly mythical psychological or temperamental characters of the speakers of languages.  'Genius'

is something that can be defined rigorously in essentially intralinguistic terms if we take the trouble to stop and examine the detail of such properties and changes with due attention.

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