

**Sarah Winter, “Darwin's Saussure: Biosemiotics and Race in  
*Expression.*” *Representations* 107.1 (2009): 128-161**

In “Darwin’s Saussure”, Sarah Winter admirably confronts a range of seemingly disparate debates currently raging among Darwinian historians, medical sociologists and scholars of modern linguistics, ultimately producing a series of controversial arguments which demand the attention of academics currently working in each of these fields.

With varying degrees of success, Charles Darwin has been upheld as a central figure in the histories of a vast spread of intellectual disciplines. Here, Winter’s central aim is to establish Darwin as a pivotal player in the foundation of modern linguistics, posturing that the naturalist bore a key influence on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. An impressive range of evidence is marshalled in support of this cause. Winter firmly establishes that Darwin was not only well-versed in language theories developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but that this ‘linguistic’ background actively informed much of the naturalist’s research, manifesting itself in both his notebooks, his correspondence and the seminal *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Impressively, Winter draws out a host of connections between Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) and Saussure’s landmark *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, (1913), positioning Darwin within the narrative of the history of modern linguistics. Winter ambitiously proposes that Darwin, in elaborating his theory of expression as a universal yet evolutionarily arbitrary sign, undermined nineteenth century comparative philology, paving the way for Saussurian linguistics. A number of acute observations are deployed in support of this view, exposing marked similarities between what Winter terms “the conceptual and methodological priorities” (146) of the two thinkers. Importantly, the basis of argument is far from limited to *Expression* alone. Winter incorporates into her narrative both *Origin* as well as *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), lucidly proposing that the layout of Darwin’s well-known tree diagram corresponds with Saussure’s distinction between synchronic and diachronic linguistics.

Winter bolsters her argument with consideration of developments in the period between Darwin’s late Victorian publications and Saussure’s early twentieth-century activities. Here we are offered a balanced perspective. While Darwin’s central ideas are shown to have been carried through Victorian philology in the 1880s and 1890s, Winter acknowledges that language scholars made alterations to the opportunistic element implied by Darwin’s natural selection; a change which indeed would later inform Saussure’s theories. Thus, instead of simply championing Darwin as an out-and-out forerunner of Saussure, Winter wisely sheds some light on the process of transition between the two. More consideration of the inter-period would only serve to strengthen this argument. Additionally, more discussion of Darwin’s linguistically-interested contemporaries would establish whether Darwin was unique in articulating ideas which created the 1870s watershed in pre-linguistics. Winter does dedicate space, it must be noted, to relevant figures such as Max Müller and Sir Charles Bell. Nevertheless, further discussion would ensure that Darwin’s role in the case of modern linguistics is not being over-emphasised.

In tandem with this central argument, Winter skillfully inter-weaves a further thread suggesting that Darwin's stance on the issue of race should be reconsidered based on a new reading of *Expression*. Here Winter offers an original take on a backlog of debate and discussion as to whether Darwin held race to be a biologically hierarchical category. *Expression* is convincingly pitched as representing a major revision to *The Descent of Man*, the text frequently argued to contain Darwin's core views on race. Supporting her narrative with persuasive material from *Expression*, Winter argues that Darwin ultimately rejected the polygenetic view of race through establishing expression as a universal 'biosemiotic' sign.

Such a reading has far-reaching implications. Methodologically, through highlighting these significant developments in Darwin's thought, Winter reminds us of the need to take a holistic approach to Darwin's publications when assessing any aspect of his views. This line also has a significant bearing on the controversial claims recently made by Adrian Desmond and James Moore; namely, that Darwin was prompted to publish *Origin of Species* in order to oppose notions of African racial inferiority. Leaving these considerations in the sub-text, Winter chooses to broach an altogether more politicised and, from the standpoint of modern genetics, topical issue: the abandonment of race as a category used to distinguish human kind.

Though there is less time to convincingly re-position Darwin as a figure who represented a missed opportunity to dismantle the notion of race, Winter's concluding assertions encapsulate what today's researching academic should strive towards: bold, provocative scholarship which simultaneously addresses debates raging in both 'cultures' of the humanities and the sciences.

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