

## **The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy**

Abstract:

This paper analyzes what Alexis de Tocqueville calls his “application of linguistics to history.” Beginning with Tocqueville’s position that language is the ground of meaningful links between people, it argues that the internal logic of a language—the grammar—is correlated with the internal logic governing the social order in which that language dwells. Social orders therefore have both linguistic and political grammars and, as the internal logic of language changes, so too will the political grammar. This paper thus traces what Tocqueville envisions as the historical path of language: from the language of aristocracy and the grammar of difference, to revolutionary language and the grammar of concurrence, to democratic language and the grammar of indifference.

## The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy

*I saw once more that poetry is encountered only by chance in this life; but that the essence of existence is only vile prose* (Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Mary Mottley, August 26, 1833).

### §1. Liens and Encumbrances

Early in *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville claims that “language is perhaps the strongest and most enduring link (*lien*) which unites men.”<sup>1</sup> Readers have long established the importance Tocqueville ascribes to associations and religion for creating links between people, but relatively little attention is afforded to the role language plays in his socio-historical drama.<sup>2</sup> This is unfortunate because in Tocqueville’s view, as will be argued in the following, to understand both the historical direction of a society and its ordering principles, one must consider language. This claim runs deeper than the politics of speaking English, Spanish, or French in North America, both in Jacksonian America and our own time. Languages have an internal set of rules—a grammar—that puts words in relation to one another, thereby yielding coherent and meaningful wholes. For Tocqueville, social and political life are governed by an analogous internal logic that puts not words, but people into coherent and meaningful wholes. In

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969), 33. “Le lien du langage est peut-être le plus fort et le plus durable qui puisse unir les hommes.”

<sup>2</sup> On associations, see for example D. Wudel, “Tocqueville on Associations and Association,” *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty* (1993), Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival Of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), Andrew Sabl, “Community Organizing as Tocquevillean Politics: The Art, Practices, and Ethos of Association,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (2002). On the place of religion, see D. S. Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville’s Thought* (New York: Elsevier, 1975), Catherine H. Zuckert, “Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy,” *The Review of Politics* 43 (1981), W. Galston, “Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion,” *Social Research* 54 (1987), Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993), Sanford Kessler, *Tocqueville’s Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

other words, and to borrow from linguistics, social and political life have their own “syntactic structure,” their own grammar linking people to one another.<sup>3</sup>

The central purpose of this paper is to shed light on this internal logic by examining what Tocqueville calls his “application of linguistics to history.”<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that many of the misgivings Tocqueville has regarding the development of democratic social conditions reverberate in his view of language and grammar. While it is true that Tocqueville laments the state of democratic literature and poetry<sup>5</sup> and democratic language,<sup>6</sup> what is being suggested here is prior to these concerns. For Tocqueville, as the internal logic of language breaks down, so too do the unspoken rules that precede and, one might almost say, beget the ineffable and meaningful bonds between people. Thus, while the French Revolution marked the deconstruction of the political and social apparatus of the *ancien régime*, for Tocqueville it was also a crucial moment in the history of language because it coincided with a breakdown of the internal, gathering-together character of language. In his view, the language and grammar of the old regime provided the logic for binding different sorts of people into meaningful relationships, relationships both liberating and encumbering. The Revolution, however, ran roughshod over the language and good grammar and replaced them with its own. And since language, like society, cannot bear perpetual revolution, when the dust settled the language of democracy, with its own

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<sup>3</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008 (1856)), 90.

<sup>5</sup> See Gisela Schlüter, "Democratic Literature: Tocqueville's Poetological Reflections and Dreams" in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (New York: New York University Press, 1992), Cushing Strout, "Tocqueville and American Literary Critics" in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (New York: New York University Press, 1992), Reino Virtanen, "Tocqueville on a Democratic Literature," *The French Review* 23 (1950).

<sup>6</sup> See René Georjgin, "Tocqueville et le langage de la démocratie," *Vie et Langage* 201 (1968), Laurence Guellec, "Du style démocratique en littérature," *Esprit* (2000), Laurence Guellec, *Tocqueville et les langages de la démocratie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), Laurence Guellec, "The Writer Engagé: Tocqueville and Political Rhetoric" in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

grammar, emerged.

The following, then, will outline this linguistic history. By following the historical movement from what Tocqueville considered the good grammar and language of aristocracy through the language of revolution to the language of democracy, it will become evident that for Tocqueville this movement is one of degeneration. With good grammar, fine distinctions can be made; particulars, be they words or people, find their proper homes. Without good grammar, nuanced articulation, be it social or linguistic, is much more difficult. Without good grammar, the unwritten rules that bind individuals in reciprocal relations of duty and obligation are obscured. For Tocqueville, such an outcome yields the most common criticisms of democratic social life—*anomie*, isolation, and indifference between fellow citizens. The outline of this history will thus begin with a description of aristocratic language and an internal logic I will call the *grammar of difference*. The next section will examine the social and literary origins of revolutionary language and an internal logic I will call the *grammar of concurrence*. It will demonstrate that unlike the fine distinctions maintained by the grammar of difference, with revolutionary language difference becomes blurred; particulars, be they words or people, are uprooted from their formerly fixed places and everything seems to run together, i.e., to concur. In the third act of this socio-historical drama, I will describe Tocqueville's vision of democratic language and what will be called the *grammar of indifference*. This grammar not only yields bad literature and shoddy poetry, but renders language mute, such that loneliness and indifference become the hallmark of the human condition. Simply put, with the grammar of indifference, language loses its power for linking men. The links are broken and it is every word for itself.

## **§2. The Grammar of Difference and Aristocratic Language**

For Tocqueville, aristocratic language and the grammar of difference is the product of a long historical process. By way of example, Tocqueville invokes the language of the indigenous peoples of America: “The languages spoken by the Indians of America, from the North Pole to Cape Horn, are all said to be formed on the same model and subject to the same grammatical rules, and this makes it highly probable that all the Indian nations spring from one stock.”<sup>7</sup> That the various languages are, strictly speaking, a network of dialects following regular rules of grammar, demonstrates that the indigenous peoples enjoyed a history different from the Europeans. Usually, if a people are of ancient origin, ruptures of language are likely because of a larger probability of “great revolutions” or upheavals in the prevailing order. When, for example, a nation is conquered, or conquers another, there is a mingling of difference. The indigenous peoples of North America, with their grammatical uniformity, “have not *yet* experienced great revolutions and have not mingled, willingly or otherwise, with foreign nations, for it is usually the combination of several languages into one that produces grammatical irregularities.”<sup>8</sup> The American Indians, like the Europeans that were then beginning to populate the continent, enjoyed the privilege of continental insularism. Their linguistic history was not punctuated by foreign invasions that beget grammatical irregularities.

The Europeans, however, did not enjoy this insularity which is why one finds these grammatical irregularities that mark the beginning of real difference between languages—the kind of difference that make meaning difficult to translate and to export. This is precisely why Tocqueville made efforts to learn English, which he did well, and German, which he did not so well. While one might translate a French book into English, the grammar that is both interior and anterior to understanding can be missed. Shortly after the publication of his *The Ancien Régime*

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<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 710.

<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 710, emphasis added.

*and the Revolution*, for example, Tocqueville expresses concern that his ideas are not being read in their appropriate language. In a letter to an American friend, Francis Lieber, he writes: “Thank you very much for the interest you have taken in advance in the book that I have just published. I am very eager to know what you will think of it once you have read it. I entreat you to read it in French. You know our language well enough for me to be interested in showing you my ideas in their national costume. The best translation is never more than a poor copy.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, there are two ways of regarding language. On the one hand, language is a collection of words that can be translated to other languages. But deeper than this “national costume” character of language, one finds “grammatical irregularities” that house an internal logic resistant to export.

Language can thus be exported by emulating the wagging of the native speaker’s vocal cords. As the movement of mouth, tongue, and larynx particular to a people, this national-costume character of language is superficial.<sup>10</sup> However, in Tocqueville’s understanding, language in this sense can be meaningful by illuminating caste difference. In a hieratic society such as Tocqueville’s 19<sup>th</sup> century France, though the words spoken are similar and familiar, and though facility with these words varies greatly, language reveals difference. Tocqueville puts it this way:

It is true that my birth and the society in which I had been brought up gave me great facilities for this which the others did not possess; for, although the French nobility have ceased to be a class, they have yet remained a sort of freemasonry, of which all the members continue to recognize one another through certain invisible signs, whatever may be the opinions which makes them strangers to one another, or even adversaries. [This bond (*lien*) which still exists between all its members is so close that I have found myself a hundred times more at ease in dealing with aristocrats who differed from me entirely in their interests and opinions than with bourgeois whose ideas and instincts were analogous to mine.

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<sup>9</sup> September 1, 1856. In Alexis de Tocqueville, *Tocqueville on America After 1840: Letters and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183-84. Among many other accomplishments, Lieber was the founder and first editor of the *Encyclopaedia Americana*, the author of the *Lieber Code*, and the English translator of Tocqueville and Beaumont’s *Penitentiary System in the United States*.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the superficiality of costumes, see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 203-05.

With the former I was in disagreement but I knew what language I had to speak, and I felt instinctively what I had to say and when to keep silent.]<sup>11</sup>

Language expresses difference not merely by what is spoken, but by creating unspoken bonds between speakers. This unvoiced aspect of language can, however, put one ill-at-ease in one's situation. Though one speaks French, it is possible to speak a language unintelligible to other French speakers. Language reveals that one can be not-at-home in one's own language; that one can be out of tune with others, despite speaking the same language. Simply put, though language can be shared, it is possible to have a different grammar. Language cannot always be translated.

This said, language can also put one at ease. Language brings to light attunements that express bonds within castes. For Tocqueville, it is important to note, a caste is more than an identifiable political or social group. While a caste might come to be associated with shared sympathies, party affiliation, or wealth, caste membership is given by birth. For example, regarding Europe, Tocqueville says,

when the feudal system became established in Europe, what we called from then on the nobility did not immediately constitute a caste but was composed at first of all the leading men of the nation and was thus, at the outset, simply an aristocracy. That is an issue I do not want to discuss here; all I need to note is that, from the Middle Ages, the nobility became a caste, whose distinguishing feature was birth.<sup>12</sup>

These differences, of course, are socially constructed and the construction begins in the cradle where one learns one's mother tongue. There is neither scientific nor mystical justification for

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<sup>11</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections* (New York City: Meridian Books, 1959), 242. Tocqueville was well aware of his merits: "I have related how many enemies I used formerly to make by holding aloof from people who did not attract my attention by any merit; and as people had often taken for haughtiness the boredom they caused me, I strongly dreaded this reef in the great journey I was about to undertake" (Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 258).

<sup>12</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 89. The distinction between the nobility and aristocracy is made clear in Alexis de Tocqueville, "Political and Social Condition of France," *London and Westminster Review* 3&25 (1836).

this difference. The Europeans, he says, were very similar but through various social machinations, people became “alien and indifferent to each other” and language, for better or worse, developed an internal logic that housed deep difference. Through “invisible signs” and unspoken language, the ruling caste established links that ensure “anyone not born noble was outside this peculiar and closed class and occupied a position more or less important in society but always subordinate in the state.”<sup>13</sup> The grammar of difference confirms and affirms one’s place in a social order. It creates ineffable bonds both within and across castes.

Is it, to be sure, possible to don various national costumes. One can become bilingual or even a polyglot, but it seems less likely that one can participate in multiple grammars. The grammar of difference is an ordering and gathering of diverse opinions, ideas, and instincts. It is more primordial than sounds passing one’s barrier of teeth, as Homer might put it.<sup>14</sup> For example, while in Michigan Tocqueville encountered several “half-castes.” Traveling from Flint to Saginaw, he and Beaumont found themselves in a clearing in the forest. In this clearing they entered “a rustic hut more comfortable than the savage's wigwam but ruder than the civilised man's house. That is the half-caste's (*métis*) dwelling.”<sup>15</sup> In the hut “seated cross-legged on a mat in the middle of the room, a young woman was making some mocassins; with one foot she rocked an infant whose copper colour and whose features made its double origin clear. This woman was dressed like one of our peasants except that her feet were bare and her hair fell freely on her shoulders.”<sup>16</sup> She was, in the patois of the time, *bois-brulés*. Tocqueville’s interpretation of the moment is telling:

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<sup>13</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 89.

<sup>14</sup> The ἔρκος ὀδόντων, of *Odyssey* 1.44, 3.29, and of *Iliad* 4.350.

<sup>15</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, "A Fortnight in the Wilds" in *Journey to America*, ed. J.P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959 (1831)), 367.

<sup>16</sup> Tocqueville, "A Fortnight in the Wilds", 368

We asked her if she was French. ‘No,’ she answered smiling.-‘English.’-‘Not that either.’ she said; she lowered her eyes and added, ‘I am only a savage.’ Child of two races, brought up to use two languages, nourished in diverse beliefs and rocked in contrary prejudices, the half-caste forms an amalgam as inexplicable to others as to himself.<sup>17</sup>

The young woman, it appears, was at least bilingual. Her national costume was of two peoples. But more importantly, Tocqueville is suggesting that while she might speak two languages, her linguistic dwelling is in-between two grammars. Rather than bilingualism in this sense, the amalgam of her existence is “inexplicable.” Language in this sense reaches down into the existential categories of beliefs (*croyances*) and prejudices (*préjugés*). Put otherwise, while we *use* different languages, we  *dwell* in but one grammar. The somber character of the encounter is owed to Tocqueville’s impression that the Métis women had no such dwelling. Lost between two worlds, at home in no grammar, she had no people with whom to share the unspoken language of recognition and belonging. It is precisely this sort of silence and loneliness that gives Tocqueville most pause—that inspires in him, as he puts it in this essay, “religious terror.”<sup>18</sup>

The encounter with the Métis woman, as Tocqueville puts it, was “on the border of the old and new world.”<sup>19</sup> That Tocqueville and Beaumont found this clearing in the forest was no coincidence. While venturing through this part of the United States, Tocqueville was adamant they experience the “wilderness.” They deliberately went off the beaten trail into the forest and mosquitoes to experience this frontier, this borderland. His desire to see the wilderness, however,

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<sup>17</sup> Tocqueville, "A Fortnight in the Wilds", 368: “Nous lui demandâmes si elle était Française. «Non, répondit-elle en souriant. — Anglaise? — Non plus, dit-elle; elle baissa les yeux et ajouta: Je ne suis qu'une sauvage.» Enfant de deux races, élevé dans l'usage de deux langues, nourri dans des croyances diverses et bercé dans des préjugés contraires, le métis forme un composé aussi inexplicable aux autres qu'à lui-même” (OC, Volume V, 380). For more on “half-castes,” see “Non-alphabetic Notebooks 2 and 3” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971), 105-06, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Tocqueville, "A Fortnight in the Wilds", 356. Cf. *Democracy in America*, 12, *Voyage au Lac Oneida*, 336. *Voyages en Angleterre, Irlande, Suisse, et Algérie*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville, "A Fortnight in the Wilds", 367.

stemmed not from some romantic European idea of virgin forests or fountains of youth. What he sought was to experience the time and place where European meets Indian. This encounter, however, ought not to be interpreted in racial terms, but sociological. At the edge of civilization, Tocqueville hoped to experience that which had passed him by in Europe, namely, aristocracy in its pure form—which is how he viewed the North American Indian.<sup>20</sup> After all, the French Revolution was a collision between the old world and the new, temporally speaking. It was a collision between aristocracy and democracy. The new world to which Tocqueville refers is not America, *per se*. It is neither a spatial nor temporal reference. Instead, it is the same “new world” to which he refers at the outset of *Democracy in America* when he describes his effort as “a political science for a world itself quite new.”<sup>21</sup> For Tocqueville, “new world” refers to a way of thinking, an internal logic. Hence, to be at the collision point of the new world and the old world in the American wilderness is to experience first-hand the mingling of two grammars.

In Michigan, in a clearing in the forest, Tocqueville found himself between two worlds—the new and democratic and the old and aristocratic. The irony here should be clear. The old world, which was only available to Tocqueville in the various archives in which he later did so much research for his *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, could still be experienced with the Indians living beyond the boundaries of American expansion. This is not to say, of course, that Tocqueville would be able to speak Algonquin with the indigenous peoples he encountered. For Tocqueville, however, the native had in common with the European aristocrat the internal logic that speaks without speaking; they have in common the basic epistemological principles of

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<sup>20</sup> See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 328: The North American Indian “thinks hunting and war the only cares worthy of a man. Therefore the Indian in the miserable depths of his forests cherishes the same ideas and opinions as the medieval noble in his castle, and he only needs to become a conqueror to complete the resemblance. How odd it is that the ancient prejudices of Europe should reappear, not among the European population along the coast, but in the forests of the New World.”

<sup>21</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 12

the old, pre-revolution French *noblesse*. The inexplicable amalgam of the Métis women, then, is neither a statement on race nor ability with English, French, or her native tongue. It is inexplicable because she dwells between the language of democracy and the language of aristocracy. In this in-between, she represents a world without canvas for the art of mutual duties and obligations. Alone in the forest, dwelling at the point of collision between historical moments, she represents a world where the grammar that begets those important “bonds of human affection”<sup>22</sup> has been forgotten—where the grammar of difference is being transliterated and transformed into the grammar of indifference.

### **§3. The Grammar of Concurrence and Revolutionary Language**

The movement from the grammar of difference to the grammar of indifference maps nicely onto Tocqueville’s application of linguistics to history. The grammar of indifference, however, emerges only after the Revolutionary dust settles. In between the *ancien régime* and “the world itself quite new,” Tocqueville describes a politics and language with an interior logic that might best be characterized as the *grammar of concurrence*. To concur is, literally, “to run together.” Just as various colors of paint, when poorly applied, run together and blur what were once distinct forms and hues, the internal logic of language can also run together. And this is precisely how Tocqueville describes the use of language leading up to, and following, the Revolution. Running alongside the 700-year history that describes the advent of the dogma of equality, one can also follow the grammar of concurrence. Like egalitarian thinking, the grammar of concurrence began to congeal during the Enlightenment and came fully to light in

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<sup>22</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 507.

what Tocqueville calls “the literary spirit in politics.”<sup>23</sup>

Tocqueville discovered this literary spirit while conducting research for his *Ancien Régime*. While reviewing local documents from pre-Revolutionary times, he discovered that the language officials used was not too different from his present day. “On both sides,” he says, “the style is equally colourless, smooth, vague and lifeless. The personality of each writer is removed and disappears into a common mediocrity. Were you to read a present-day prefect, you would be reading an Intendant.”<sup>24</sup> This style of language, however, was interrupted a little before the Revolution in France. Official documents, he discovered, became replete with sentimental language. For example, Tocqueville tells us that “the official style, with its normally dry tone, became after that sometimes unctuous and almost caring. A sub-delegate complained to the Paris Intendant, ‘that, in the course of his duties, he often experiences a grief which is harrowing to a sensitive soul.’”<sup>25</sup> This sentimental language was not unique to the political class. Tocqueville also noticed the employment of similar language ranging from peasantry all the way to the monarchy:

Fostered by the political passions which used it, this style infiltrated all three classes and moved with unusual rapidity even down to the lowest class. Well before the Revolution, the edicts of Louis XVI spoke often of natural law and the rights of man. I come across peasants who, in their petitions, called their neighbours fellow citizens; the Intendant, a respectable magistrate; the parish priest, the minister of the altars; God, the Supreme Being.<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere Tocqueville notes the lasting effects of this literary spirit in politics. In the years

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<sup>23</sup> Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 69: “l’esprit littéraire en politique.” Tocqueville long held that the literary spirit and clear writing are distinct. In a letter to Edward Lee Childe (December 4, 1858) he writes: “you wrote me a short letter which proved to me that, despite the fact that you are a literary spirit, you know, when you want to, how to speak about business affairs in a clear –and concise way (the two great qualities of the genre).”

<sup>24</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 148.

following the Revolution,

the governing revolutionary party kept up in its official language all the rhetoric of the Revolution. Likewise the last thing that a party will abandon is its phraseology, because among political parties, as elsewhere, the vulgar make the rules of language, and the vulgar abandon more easily the ideas instilled into them than the words that they have learned. When one reads the harangues of the time, it seems as if nothing could be expressed simply. Soldiers are called ‘warriors,’ wives ‘faithful companions,’ children ‘pawns of love.’ Duty is never mentioned, ‘virtue’ always; no one ever promises less than to die for his country and for liberty.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, there is a tendency to eschew language that references specific people, specific places, and specific instances in revolutionary periods. For Tocqueville, the problem with this is almost self-evident. To think of one’s neighbor as “fellow citizen” reduces the neighbor to an abstract other. Such abstraction opens the way to treating another human being as merely an idea, rather than a unique individual with whom one experiences all the liens and encumbrances of decent political and social life. Abstractions cover over the canvas on which human beings paint relations of mutual duty and obligation. For Tocqueville, reality is full of contingency, difference, and complexity; abstraction and false sentimentality cannot adequately address these. The propensity to such language leads to what Ralph Hancock calls “a dislocation of theory and practice” and severely curtails the development of the practical wisdom needed for the art of government.<sup>28</sup>

Tocqueville is unambiguous on the source of this transition: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and

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<sup>27</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1968), 128. Regarding the speech of Louis-Philippe, Tocqueville says, “Generally speaking, his style... reminded me of the sentimental jargon of the end of the eighteenth century, a facile redundancy singularly incorrect: Jean-Jacques with a touch of a kitchenmaid of the nineteenth century” (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Hancock, "Tocqueville's Practical Reason," *Perspectives on Political Science* 27 (1998), 217. Cf. Ralph C. Hancock, "The Uses and Hazards of Christianity in Tocqueville's Attempt to Save Democratic Souls" in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), 359, 90-91.

his philosophical brethren. Writers like Rousseau worked under an unnatural impulse “to replace the complex and traditional customs which guided society of their time with simple and elementary rules borrowed from reason and natural law.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the universalist tendencies of the Enlightenment were replicated in its very language. On this point, Tocqueville is consistent. In one of the last things he wrote, he is deeply critical of the sentimentalism Rousseau introduced to the average language of French life:

The inflated sentimentalism, the exaggerated expressions, the incoherence, and the ungainly images, those constant citations from antiquity which were to be characteristic of the language of the Revolution were already habitual at this time. Tranquility or moderation was completely absent. The overwhelming inclinations of all minds were to commonplaces; nor was it permissible to express anything simply; it was necessary that the expression should overflow beyond the original idea or sentiment. . . .<sup>30</sup>

In other words, the language of the era abhorred boundaries. In the realm of literature this may be a fine thing because literature is the home of imagination. In literature, one has license to go places closed to the real world of politics. The world of literature need not contend with the empirical realities of human relationships and, for that matter, the empirical boundaries of the physical human being. Literature has no boundaries and, qua literature, does not need them. In short, abstractions have a comfortable home in literature.<sup>31</sup>

Yet Tocqueville is neither rejecting linguistic abstractions *tout court*, nor claiming they are exclusive to the language of democracy. As he puts it:

The languages of all peoples have a base of generic and abstract terms, and I do not make out that they are only found among democracies. I only assert that the tendency of men in times of equality is to increase the number of words of this type and in particular to use them detachedly and with the most abstract possible

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<sup>29</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 141.

<sup>30</sup> Tocqueville, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that all literature is created equally, as Tocqueville makes abundantly clear in *Democracy in America*. If there is a democratic literary style, it is, as Laurence Guellec puts it, “le non-style par excellence” (Guellec, “Du style démocratique en littérature,” 30).

meaning and to use them on every conceivable occasion, whether needed or not.<sup>32</sup>

Abstract terms are needed for the same reason dogmas are needed in thought. In our average everyday lives, certain dogmas (opinions) are taken without question. Augustine calls this “the usefulness of belief,” suggesting that, existentially speaking, human beings need to take certain facts as given, lest they fall into a quagmire of doubt.<sup>33</sup> For example, most people are told by their parents who their father is, and they take this information on trust, without discussion. To doubt all things that cannot be empirically verified by every person every time the issue arises would beget an inescapable existential impasse. For Tocqueville, abstractions function in a similar way, providing shortcuts for thinking so that the epistemological wheel need not be reinvented daily.<sup>34</sup>

The problem is when these epistemological abstractions become habitual and work their way into the day-to-day practical lives of people. To abstract is, literally, to draw away. It means to withdraw from the material world, away from specifics. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville invokes the term to contrast the sovereignty of the Union with the sovereignty of the states. “The sovereignty of the Union,” he writes, “is an abstract entity (*un être abstrait*)

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<sup>32</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, "On the Usefulness of Belief" in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. John H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 313: “Now I ask, if nothing which is not known is to be believed, how will children serve their parents and love them with mutual dutifulness if they do not believe that they are their parents. That cannot be known by reason. Who the father is, is believed on the authority of the mother, and as to the mother, midwives, nurses, slaves have to be believed, for the mother can deceive herself deceived by having her son stolen and another put in his place. Be we believe, and that without any hesitation, what we confess we do not know. Otherwise, who does not see that dutifulness, the most sacred bond of the human race, might be violated by the most overbearing wickedness. ...nothing would remain stable in human society if we determined to believe nothing that we could not scientifically establish.”

<sup>34</sup> According to Laurence Guellec, Tocqueville struggled with this very question concerning his writing and politics: “What degree of abstraction to adopt? Where exactly to situate oneself in the ‘realm of the abstract’? This question, which Tocqueville is forced to face as he tries to reshape traditional concepts, is intimately intertwined with any intellectual venture. ...Under a variety of names, the problem of abstraction obsessed the mind of thinkers during and after the Revolution” (Guellec, "The Writer Engagé: Tocqueville and Political Rhetoric", 171).

connected with a small number of external concerns.”<sup>35</sup> This sovereignty, because it is abstract, is only loosely felt by the people and only dimly understood. It is a power that is removed, or drawn away, from the daily experience of the average person. It is not palpably present. The sovereignty of the states, on the other hand, “strikes every sense; it is easily understood and is seen in action constantly. The former is an innovation, but the latter was born with the people themselves.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, in contrast to being abstract, state sovereignty shares a kind of natality with people. In a sense, it is rooted in the very soil from which the people spring. It is organic. The sovereignty of the union is abstract and inorganic. Like the imaginative creations of writers like Rousseau, “the sovereignty of the Union is a work of art. That of the states is natural; it exists on its own, without striving, like the authority of the father in a family.”<sup>37</sup> The abstract being is “huge and distant... a vague, ill-defined sentiment.” The non-abstract being “affects every detail of life.” It is organically linked to things, to places, to people. State sovereignty carries the “duty of guaranteeing property, liberty, and life.” The non-abstract “is supported by memories, customs, local prejudices, and provincial and family selfishness.”<sup>38</sup> In short, when abstraction as a habit of mind remakes itself in the practical lives of people, it draws them away from one another. It discourages habits that beget the enduring links that unite people in a world of shared duties and obligations.

Had this impulse remained in the domain of the writers, it would have been fine. In fact, one might find merit in this way of thinking and the expression thereof. The problem, however, is that the language of these writers spread beyond its proper place. Writers like Rousseau were read in all walks of life in French society and,

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<sup>35</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 166.

<sup>36</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 166.

<sup>37</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 166.

<sup>38</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 166.

towards the end of the century, when the language peculiar to Diderot and Rousseau had had the time to spread in diluted form into popular language, the false sentimentality which filled the books of these two writers [won] over the administrators and infect[ed] even the accountants.<sup>39</sup>

More alarming for Tocqueville, however, is that not only did local functionaries adopt it in their reports, it became *de rigueur* for politicians. As Tocqueville puts it, “Political language itself then adopted something of the language spoken by authors, packed with generalizations, abstract terms, pretentious vocabulary and literary turns of phrase.”<sup>40</sup> Thus whereas abstractions are a necessary part of human existence, they are only salubrious if confined to their proper domain. When the false sentimentality of Rousseau and his ilk infect the language of politicians, their language becomes immoderate and imprecise—precisely the sort of language that admits of no difference.

This is what Tocqueville saw happening in France. The dogma of equality brought with it a proclivity for abstractions, generalizations, and homogenization—both grammatically and politically speaking. Tocqueville puts it thusly:

When we study the history of our Revolution, we realize that it was prompted by precisely the same outlook which inspired so many books on the theory of government. They reflected the same attractions for universal theories, comprehensive systems of legislation and an exact symmetry in the laws; the same contempt for existing facts; the same faith in theory; the same taste for the original; the ingenious and the novel in reshaping institutions; the same desire to reconstruct the entire constitution at one and the same time following the rule of logic and according to a single plan instead of seeking to reform it in its separate parts.<sup>41</sup>

The impulse to eliminate the complex and differentiated aspects of human existence is part and parcel of the new political dogma. Difference is eschewed because it runs contrary to the

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<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 148.

universalist tendencies of the Enlightenment and, practically speaking, to recognize difference—to linger in the grammar of difference—requires time, effort, patience, and moderation. The impulse to the universal and the homogeneous, however, preoccupied the writers of the pre-Revolutionary period so much that Tocqueville could only conclude that “what we call political philosophy in the eighteenth century consisted, properly speaking, of this single notion.”<sup>42</sup>

Tocqueville’s misgivings of the literary spirit in politics are clear. To dwell in this linguistic world is to overlook the serious character of political life. It is to play fast and loose with the realities of the lived world. It is to obscure the fact that we live in a world with other real, non-abstract human beings with whom we naturally share relationships of duty and obligation. In language that parallels Plato’s critique of the Sophists, Tocqueville’s view of the literary spirit in politics is clear:

What I call literary *esprit* in politics consists in seeking for what is novel and ingenious rather than for what is true; in preferring the showy to the useful; in showing one’s self very sensible to the playing and elocution of the actors, without regard to the results of the play; and, lastly, in judging by impressions rather than reasons.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, the grammar of difference becomes the grammar of concurrence and, in a community determined by this internal logic, everything runs together. This running together evokes colorful language from Tocqueville: the grammar of concurrence, with its concomitant revolutionary language, is a “frightening spectacle!”<sup>44</sup>

## **§5. The Grammar of Indifference and Democratic Language**

While the grammar of concurrence and revolutionary language might be a frightening

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<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 148: “*Effrayant spectacle!*”

spectacle, it is the grammar of indifference and the language of democracy that inspires Tocqueville's most serious misgivings. As we have seen, Tocqueville's analysis of the move from the language of aristocracy to the language of revolution focuses largely on France. For the language of democracy, his attention necessarily turns to America because for Tocqueville, right up to the time of his death, the social condition of France was one of revolution. In America, however, his application of linguistics to history could be continued because there one finds the dogma of equality taken to its limit. In America, scant remnant of aristocracy could be seen clinging to the grammar of difference and the internal logic governing both language and the relations between men was democratic through and through.

What, then, is the character of this logic and language? We have seen that with the language of aristocracy, terms had clear, specific, and stable meanings. "The language of aristocracy," Tocqueville writes, "ought to be as at rest as are all its other institutions. But few new words are needed, as few new things are made; and even when something new is made, people are at pains to describe it in familiar words whose meaning is fixed by tradition."<sup>45</sup> And the tradition that informs neologisms in an aristocratic milieu is the classical. If a moment of novelty emerges and existing language is insufficient, "the new expressions invented always have a learned, intellectual, and philosophic character, sure signs that they are not children of democracy."<sup>46</sup> In democratic times, however, there is much more agitation and innovation and thus an "endless change of language."<sup>47</sup> Words lose their fixedness and specificity without which they lose their power of differentiation.

While this fluidity of language gives Tocqueville serious pause, he also sees a kernel of good amidst these shifting linguistic horizons. In fact, he goes so far as to say there is genius in

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<sup>45</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

<sup>46</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

<sup>47</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

this capacity: “the genius of democracies is seen not only in the great number of new words introduced but even more in the new ideas they express.”<sup>48</sup> This genius, as with most of the positives that Tocqueville sees in the democratic age, is derived of the fact that any movement in language, like any political movement, reflects the free will of the majority. Tocqueville predicates the good of this on what he calls the “theory of equality applied to brains.”<sup>49</sup> It is, essentially, an application of Condorcet’s Jury Theorem to the world of ideas—the probability that the new ideas are correct rises with increased participation. The problem, however, is not in the factual veracity of the new ideas, but rather in their form. Because most people in democratic times are engaged in trade and politics rather than reading philosophy and studying the classics, “most of the words coined or adopted for its use will bear the marks of these habits; they will chiefly serve to express the needs of industry, the passions of politics, or the details of public administration. Language will spread out endlessly in that direction, but metaphysics and theology will slowly lose ground.”<sup>50</sup> While democracies are ever producing new ideas, the words coined to express them are outside their own tradition. They are stripped of their links with the past, they are incomplete participants in the linguistic history that is bound up with a people’s identity. Democratic neologisms, while expressing the genius of innovation are, at best, gauche participants in the grammar of difference.

For Tocqueville, there is a certain irony to this. Because the typical citizen of a democratic country has no classical education, she knows no Latin or Greek. Hence, she has neither the inclination nor the ability to derive her coinages from the traditional canon. Yet many

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<sup>48</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

<sup>49</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478: “The moral authority of the majority is partly based on the notion that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in a numerous assembly than in a single man, and the number of the legislators is more important than how they are chosen. It is the theory of equality applied to brains.”

<sup>50</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

novel words have classical roots. The reason, Tocqueville suggests, is not a natural inclination. There is no poetic inspiration. Instead, the penchant is much baser:

If they do sometimes make use of learned etymologies, it is generally vanity that sends them rooting among dead languages, and not learning that naturally suggests them to the mind. It can even happen that the most ignorant people among them use such derivations most. The very democratic wish to rise above their station often leads them to want to dignify a very mean occupation by a Greek or Latin word. The lower the calling and the more remote from learning, the more pompous and erudite the name found for it. Thus rope-dancers are turned into acrobats and funambulists.<sup>51</sup>

This inclination to euphemize low occupations reveals a recurring characteristic of democratic language—the impulse to make manifest the love of equality. Just as there can be no hierarchy of birth, there can be no hierarchy of endeavor. The garbage collector is no lower, socially speaking, than, say, the doctor. All positions are morally equal, and if they seem distasteful, they are ascribed “pompous” names to level them.<sup>52</sup> Hence, garbage collectors become sanitation engineers, lumberjacks are silviculturalists, and prostitutes are sex workers.

For Tocqueville, this shifting meaning of words is a problem. Recalling that language is perhaps the strongest and most enduring link that unites people, when the meanings of words shift constantly and seemingly arbitrarily, the gathering-together character of language can be lost. This is especially possible when the neologisms are themselves abstractions—a problem democratic language inherits from revolutionary language. Democratic peoples, he says,

have this passion for generic terms and abstract words because such phrases broaden the scope of thought and allow the mind to include much in few words. A democratic writer will freely put ‘the capabilities,’ meaning capable men, without going into details as to what these capabilities are to be applied to. He will speak

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<sup>51</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478.

<sup>52</sup> Tocqueville suggests that this propensity pertains not just to occupations, but to democracy itself. The Americans, he says, “have erected a magnificent palace for Congress in the center of [Washington] and given it the pompous name of the Capitol” (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 469). Capitol, of course, refers to a citadel on the top of a hill, but the reference here is to the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Saturnine (later, the Capitoline) Hill at Rome.

of ‘actualities,’ thereby including everything taking place before his eyes in one word, and he will use ‘eventualities’ to cover all that can happen in the universe after the moment at which he is speaking.<sup>53</sup>

This problem of abstraction, however, is compounded by a problem more specific to democratic language—personification. Whereas abstraction allows for simplification, personification opens the way to removing agency from the human actor. To say, for example, that “society does this,” or in Tocqueville’s example, “the force of things wills that capacities govern,” allows for specific, responsibility-bearing individuals to be sheltered from and indifferent to the lived reality of their particular community.<sup>54</sup> It allows for abstract “society” to bear the blame for a criminal’s action rather than, say, the poor parenting skills of a particular mother and father. Thus, while democratic language provides a mechanism for distinguishing new ideas from old, it is not the same as the grammar of difference. There are bonds, but no “bonds of affection.” They connect, but these connections inspire no diligence, no reliance, and no sacred sense of duty between individuals. The words are lifeless and the internal logic begetting the language opens the way to general social and political indifference.

As a participant in this linguistic history, Tocqueville admits that his own language has been infected. While he might resist the tendency for abstractions—which the grammar of indifference shares with the grammar of concurrence—the pernicious problem of personification is more difficult to avoid. In Tocqueville’s words,

I have often used the word ‘equality’ in an absolute sense, and several times have even personified it, so that I have found myself saying that equality did certain things or abstained from others. Frenchmen in the reign of Louis XIV would never have spoken that way; it would never have entered the head of any of them to use the word ‘equality’ without applying it to some particular thing, and they would have preferred not to use the word at all than turn it into a living being.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 481.

<sup>54</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 481.

<sup>55</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 481. Equality is not the only term Tocqueville tends to personify.

The problem with the personification of words is two-fold. First, as with abstractions, it allows for the removal of agency. If, for example, one is able to say that “history” demands this or that, then any failure of our duties and obligations to other people can be blamed on the movement of history. In other words, language ceases to be the canvas on which to paint the salubrious bonds between individuals.

The second problem is not unrelated. For Tocqueville, words in the language of aristocracy can have an ontological status that comports with a general aristocratic cosmology. The aristocratic view of the world is, in Max Weber’s language, “enchanted.” Just as ancestors have an “enchanted” presence in the present world, so too can words. This view is similar to that of St. Augustine, who also suggests two kinds of words. There are words that, when spoken, cease to exist as the next is uttered. Once this following word is spoken, it too becomes past before the next, and so on.<sup>56</sup> The other kind of word does not pass from existence once uttered. It is a word that, upon being uttered, is inserted into the world and dwells therein. Such a word, Augustine says, “is spoken eternally and by it all things are uttered eternally.”<sup>57</sup> In short, while some words come into being and pass away, other words are thrown into existence and continue to participate in this existence.

In his *Recollections*, Tocqueville hints at this vision of words. Recalling a conversation he had with Louis-Napoleon, he says that words can “be like stones thrown down a well; their

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He habitually ascribes human-like behavior to democracy: “This abundance of abstract terms in language of democracy, used the whole time without reference to any particular facts, both widens the scope of thought and clouds it. They make expressions quicker but conceptions less clear. However, in matters of language democracies prefer obscurity to hard work” (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482).

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.6.8.

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.7.9.

sound was heard but one never knew what became of them.”<sup>58</sup> Like Augustine, Tocqueville is suggesting that a word does not always come into being and pass immediately out of existence. Once uttered, a word can also dwell in the great well of being, ready to be drawn forth. As Tocqueville puts it, though words might be uttered and dropped into a well, “I believe, however, that they [are] not entirely lost.”<sup>59</sup> Words perdure by hanging around, so to speak. They create moods, sometimes in rooms, sometimes in eras. They can hang around as reminders of injustice and tyranny. By way of example, Tocqueville mentions the *taille*, the hated seigniorial tax of feudal France:

When in the year 1831 in Canada, I was talking with farmers of French origin, I found that in their language the word *taille* was synonymous with misery and evil. They called any great misfortune ‘a real *taille*.’ The *taille*, I believe, never existed in Canada; at any rate, it had been abolished for more than half a century. No one remembered its real meaning; the name alone remained in the language as a lasting proof of the hatred that it had inspired.<sup>60</sup>

In this understanding, although words come into being on our breath, they return the favor by inspiring enduring bonds that unite men across time and space. In the grammar of difference, words are animated, but not personified. They have spirit, but no agency of their own. With democratic language, words lose this spirit. The spirit of the word has been severed with the past. The bonds created by the spirit of the word are forgotten.<sup>61</sup>

For Tocqueville, this dereliction of meaning does not arise *ex nihilo*. Instead, it creeps up on language. He describes it thusly:

A writer begins by the slight deflection of a known expression from its original meaning, and he adapts it, thus modified, as best he can for his purpose. A second

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<sup>58</sup> Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 253.

<sup>59</sup> Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 253.

<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> In Quebec today, for example, *taille* has lost this meaning that Tocqueville points out. Today, the word merely means “size” or “cutting,” as in “the cutting of the rock.” The word no longer gathers people together as a reminder of injustice and the violation of human liberty.

writer twists its meaning in a different direction. Then comes a third, taking it off down a new track. Then, since there is no accepted judge, no permanent court to decide the meaning of a word, the phrase is left to wander free. As a result, writers hardly ever appear to stick to a single thought, but always seem to envisage a group of ideas, leaving the reader to guess which is intended.<sup>62</sup>

As a result, everybody is speaking the same language, but no one knows what anyone is saying. There is communication, but no community. And when there is no community, there is neither time nor space for the bonds of affection; the grammar of difference is squelched and, in its place, a grammar of indifference. For Tocqueville, this is a most

annoying feature of democracy. I would rather have the language decked out with Chinese, Tartar, or Huron words than let the meaning of French words become doubtful. To be harmonious and homogeneous is but a secondary beauty of language. Convention plays a great part in that sort of thing, and if need be, one can do without it. But you cannot have a good language without clear terms.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, community requires good language; good language requires good grammar. Whereas the grammar of concurrence betrays bad grammar, the grammar of indifference may be no grammar at all.

The most telling example Tocqueville offers for this linguistic theory applied to history is with the word “gentleman.” The example begins with a comment on the progress of equality in England: “What must be said is that, for a long time now, England has not, strictly speaking, had a noble class (*la noblesse*), if we use the word in the ancient and restricted sense (*le sens ancien et circonscrit*) it has retained everywhere else.”<sup>64</sup> Of course, words were always circumscribed in their ancient, aristocratic usage. In England, however, the meaning of “gentleman” deviated from this differentiated usage, which points to a parallel transformation of the English social state.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint a particular rupture, one can follow the transformation:

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<sup>62</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 479-80.

<sup>63</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 479-80.

<sup>64</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 90.

This singular revolution is lost in the mists of time but one living testament still remains, namely the language. For several centuries the word ‘gentleman’ entirely changed its meaning in England and the word ‘vassal’ no longer exists. It would, already, have been impossible to translate literally into English this line of *Tartuffe* when Moliere wrote it in 1664:

‘And such as one sees him, he is indeed a gentleman.’

If you wish to make yet another application of linguistics to history, follow through time and space the fate of the word ‘gentleman’, which is born from the French word ‘*gentil-homme*’. You will observe its meaning broaden in England as social classes draw together and close ranks. In each century it is used for men placed a little lower down the social scale.<sup>65</sup>

His point is clear. Whereas “gentlemen” once circumscribed, restricted, and defined a particular caste, its meaning became more expansive, less exclusive. The distinctions of the word were muddied and, simultaneously, the social distinctions described by the word ran together. Castes in England had long ceased to be based strictly on birth. In its place, money—which is fluid, portable, flexible, and ephemeral—defined castes.

Following this logic, Tocqueville turns to the use of “gentleman” in America.

Gentleman, he writes,

moves across to America where it is employed to describe vaguely all citizens. Its history is the very history of democracy. In France the word ‘*gentil-homme*’ has always remained closely tied to its original meaning; since the Revolution it has practically disappeared from use but that use has never changed. The word has been preserved intact to indicate the members of a caste because the caste itself has been preserved as separate from all other classes as it had ever been.<sup>66</sup>

In America, class distinctions never existed as in the old world. As such there was no need to invoke “gentlemen” for the sake of differentiation. For this reason, the two most common places we see the word gentlemen are on the door of toilets and at Gentlemen’s Clubs—spaces all men in democracies can visit.

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<sup>65</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime*, 91.

In sum, with democratic language “the origin of words is as much forgotten as that of men, and language is in as much confusion as society.”<sup>67</sup> This is precisely why Tocqueville frets about the shifting meanings of words in the democratic language. The origin of a word is important because it carries with it the origin of a people. To know who we are as a community requires that we carry these linguistic identifiers with us. When words constantly shift meanings, language itself ceases to be the force inspiring the links between citizens; it ceases to be the canvas on which to inscribe relations of duty and obligation. Without such canvas, man finds himself alone in the world, without community and human connections.

## **§7. Conclusion**

The central purpose of this paper has been to shed light on what Tocqueville calls a theory of linguistics applied to history. It has been to demonstrate that, for Tocqueville, the erosion of language and grammar parallels the erosion of meaningful and reciprocal relationships of duty and obligation in the modern, democratic world; that though people still talk, the bonds that gather people together have lost their valence. And this is precisely how Tocqueville espied the human condition in fully democratic circumstances. A letter to his mother after visiting Ohio provides no better description of this dislocation and indifference. In Cincinnati, he tells his mother, he found

a people absolutely without precedents, without traditions, without habits, even without foundational ideas [that] has cleared a new path for itself in its civil, criminal, and political legislation, and plunged ahead, indifferent to the wisdom of other peoples and all memory of the past. It is shaping its institutions the way it has built roads straight across the forests, secure in the knowledge that it will encounter no limits or impediments; a society that does not yet have any bonds, be they political, hierarchical, religious or social; where each individual is what it pleases him to be, regardless of his neighbor; a democracy devoid of limits or

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<sup>67</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 481.

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In the democratic world, despite speaking the same language, and despite pursuing the same goal, there is “no common tie that binds them together. There is not one among them who could talk about his life to people who would understand him.”<sup>69</sup> Though democratic life might be fair, equal, and prosperous, it can also be marked by anomie, isolation, and indifference between fellow citizens. For those accustomed to dwelling in the grammar of difference, the thought of life in Cincinnati is, so to speak, disconcerting. Such an objection to democratic life cannot be taken lightly.

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<sup>68</sup> Tocqueville to his mother, written from Louisville, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1831. Fred Brown translation, forthcoming with Yale University Press. Cf. Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, Notebook E, 261-65: “No one has been born there; no one wants to stay there; there is not a *single* man of leisure, not a single speculative mind. ...Democracy there is without limits.” This view of Cincinnati was reiterated a decade later. In his notes for his voyage to Algeria, Tocqueville said of Algiers: “Premier aspect de la ville: je n'ai jamais rien vu de semblable. Prodigieux mélange de races et de costumes, arabes, cabyles, maures, nègres, mahonais, français. Chacune de ces races qui s'agitent ensemble dans un espace beaucoup trop étroit pour les contenir, parle un langage, porte un habit, accuse des moeurs différentes. Tout ce monde s'agite avec une activité qui paraît fébrile. Toute la basse ville paraît en état de destruction et de reconstruction. On ne voit de toutes parts que ruines récentes, édifices qui s'élèvent; on n'entend que le bruit du marteau. *C'est Cincinnati transporté sur le sol de l'Afrique*” (Tocqueville, OC V, 191. Emphasis added).

<sup>69</sup> Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 262.

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