

“Imitation of Similar Beings”: Social Mimesis as an Argument in Evolutionary Theory around 1900

Stefan Willer

*Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung
Schützenstraße 18
10117 Berlin, Germany*

ABSTRACT – The article analyzes imitation as both a fascinating and irritating phenomenon in “classical” evolutionary theory. Evolutionists situate imitation on the threshold between the natural and the socio-cultural, hence between the animal and the human. This intermediate position can be regarded as a symptom for the unresolved and maybe unresolvable problem of intentionality and teleology in nature. To elaborate this problem, I examine the ways in which imitation was conceived of by the German Africologist Wilhelm Bleek in his treatise *On the Origin of Language* and by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man*. Bleek and Darwin share a high esteem of imitation, which they see as the mainspring of human mental capacities, including language. But at the same time, imitation for them is the epitome of a low level of consciousness, embodied in the figures of the idiot, the savage, and the ape. Thus, the problem of similarity comes to the fore: similarity produced by imitation, but also being at the basis of every act of imitation. This problem is further evidenced with a side glance on Darwin’s remarks about mimicry in *The Origin of Species*. The article closes with a literary reading of Franz Kafka’s *Report to an Academy*, in which imitation and similarity represent survival strategies and motivate a strange shift from ape to man.

KEYWORDS – Ape, imitation, intention, language, mimesis, mimicry, resemblance, similarity, survival

Introduction

To begin, the current relevance of the problem of imitation needs to be stressed. Over the last ten years, imitation has become one of the most promising topics in attempts to interconnect cognitive and social science, evolutionary biology, and theories of mind (Byrne, Russon 1998; Prinz, Meltzoff 2002; Hurley, Chater 2005). Evidence can be found, for instance, in efforts of evolutionary anthropologists to study imitative behaviour – including the fascinating, yet vague phenomenon of empathy – in anthropoid apes (Tomasello et al. 1997; Visalberghi, Fragaszy 2002; Nielsen et al. 2005; Horner, Whiten 2005). In a recent

paper, Daniel Haun and Josep Call investigated “Imitation recognition in great apes” (Haun, Call 2008). Starting from the thesis that imitation is a fundamental part of social interaction in *human* infants, the authors studied the way in which apes react if they are imitated by humans. The whole experiment was about *aping the ape*.

In the experiment, the researcher sits face-to-face with a chimpanzee or orang-outang, separated from the animal only by a pane of glass. The researcher then starts to imitate every move of the ape. After some time, most of the apes show so-called “testing behaviours,” that is, they behave in an atypical manner. For instance, they might start spinning around on the spot or raising their arms high above their heads – and then watch closely how this is imitated by the researcher. The conclusion drawn from this behaviour is that apes, just like humans, recognize imitation not only in an implicit manner, but also in an explicit way. According to Haun and Call, *explicit imitation recognition* means “the ability to understand the directional impact of one’s own actions on others’ actions.” This kind of recognition “is thought to foster understanding of social causality, intentionality in others, and the formation of a concept of self as different from other” (Haun, Call 2008, 288).

There is another kind of recognition involved in experiments like this, the recognition of the individual difference between “self” and “other” in the species difference between man and ape. The specific intelligence of the great apes is seen in their ability to imitate creatures other than apes – such as humans, for instance. This does not mean that the species difference is self-evident for evolutionary anthropologists. The experiment noted above is about suspending rather than presupposing the difference between the two species. After all, the aim of the experiment is to show that imitation is at the basis of social interactions in apes *just like* it is in human beings. In this vein it is more than an accident that Daniel Haun, in a newspaper interview, spoke of the “fascinating proximity” between him and the apes in regard to the experience of imitation.¹

Imitation as a mode of social interaction is a very rich and complicated phenomenon. Long before the advent of evolutionary thinking, imitation had been rooted in anthropology. According to Aristotle, imitation (*mimesis* in Greek) “is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures.” Aristotle adds that “the pleasure felt in things imitated” is universal (Aristotle 1997, 5-6). Thus, it is an anthropological finding which substantiates Aristotle’s idea of building his complete doctrine of

¹ Cf. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 13, 2008 (Katharina Kramer, “Mach mir den Affen, Mensch!”).

poetry on the imitation, i.e., the re-production and re-enactment of real actions, things, and situations.

Still, if imitation serves to differentiate man from “*other* animals” in a gradual way and if man accordingly is not the only living being capable of imitations but “the *most* imitative of living creatures,” as Aristotle says, this means, in turn, that there must be imitation in other animals as well and that there is something animal, or zoological, in every act of imitation. Apes and monkeys have long been understood as outstanding representatives of this animal imitation. Scholars like Ernst Robert Curtius and, more recently, Carlo Ginzburg, have suggested that since the Middle Ages the etymological closeness of the Latin word *simia*, monkey, to *similis*, similar, has been used to articulate a certain suspicion towards imitation, as if every act of imitation were a mockery of the belief that there is a specific and inimitable resemblance of man to God, since man was created in God’s image (Curtius 1948, 522-523; Ginzburg 2006).

By the late 19th century, the distinction between monkey and man had turned from the typological to the genealogical. Hence, the concept of imitation in its function to link apes to humans had gained a different status. As will be argued here, it worked as a kind of distinguisher between the realms of the animal and the human. Still, as the value of this very distinction was being challenged by evolutionary thinking, imitation remained ambivalent or even uncanny. Imitation as an intermediate concept in evolutionary theory can be regarded as a symptom of the unsettled distinction between nature and culture.

“Imitation of Similar Beings” (Bleek, Haeckel)

My historical point of departure is the short formula quoted in the title of my paper, “imitation of similar beings.” This is how, in a small book published in 1868 by Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek, the faculty of imitation in apes is characterized. The essay is entitled *On the Origin of Language* or, in the original German version, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*. In the mid-19th century Bleek inquired into the grammar of African languages and into African folklore. Today, he is considered as one of the founders of modern African studies. He was born in Berlin and had been living in Southern Africa, mainly Capetown, from 1853 until his death in 1875.

In his essay, Bleek reflects on the possibility of finding the “germs for the development of human existence” by inquiring into the “steps

preceding mankind” (Bleek 1868, 47).² For this purpose he turns to the apes, being “the species closest to the human” (Bleek 1868, 48). Having established the basic difference between the word in human language and the sounds produced by any animal, Bleek nevertheless focusses on the transition from ape to man. The decisive step, he says, is the function of the sound as an interface between the own self and the surrounding objects. This goes along with what Bleek calls, in an interesting expression, “the urge of becoming the copy of the outside world” (Bleek 1868, 48). Thus, it is not the act of signification which is at the heart of language, but the desire of the speaker to actually *be like* the world around him. This desire is the original impulse of imitation.

But there is an important restriction about the boundaries of that outside world. Bleek explains this by comparing the ape to the parrot. The parrot is capable of imitating the sound of a creaking door just as easily as it can imitate any other bird’s voice. Such behaviour, however, is still far from language. The faculty of imitation shown by apes is different because it is restricted to the “imitation of similar beings” (Bleek 1868, 48). This kind of imitation not only concerns sounds but also gestures; it requires spatial proximity and living together. Thus, it is essentially social. “There is,” Bleek says, “an aspiration in the imitating being for as much correspondence as possible with its equals” (Bleek 1868, 49). As this faculty of imitation refers back to the “urge” (Trieb) of imitation – that is, to something unconscious – there is no strict separation between imitative sounds and sounds produced instinctively due to sensations like pain and fear. Moreover, these sounds are imitated as well. Consciousness is understood to be a secondary effect of this very imitation, a transfer from quantity into quality rather than a genuine quality in its own right.

So far, Bleek does not directly refer to apes in an empirical manner, but only to “beings” on the verge of humanity and human language. Still, to further substantiate his original idea of finding the “germs for the development of human existence,” he needs to elaborate on the possibility of singling out the different states of this very development. Here is where the proximity between men and apes comes into play again, albeit in a rather unpleasant manner. In a lengthy footnote to the essay, Bleek considers what he calls “points of contact” (Berührungspunkte; Bleek 1868, 53) between the phonetic systems of South African languages on the one hand and the sounds of anthropoid apes on the other. His basic idea – which is quite innovative for language theories at the time – is that the origin of phonetic systems is not a simple process. Bleek writes that,

² All quotations from Bleek are my translation, since I had no access to the printed English translation, published in 1869 (*On the Origin of Language*, transl. by T. Davidson, New York: Schmidt).

on the contrary, “the phonetic system requiring the greatest mechanical effort can be regarded as the most original one” (Bleek 1868, 53) and points to the variety of gutturals and of clicking sounds produced with the tongue and lips in several languages of Southern Africa.

Continuing his argument, Bleek quotes extensively from a letter sent to him by the famous German zoologist and propagator of Darwinism, Ernst Haeckel – who was not only Bleek’s cousin but who also arranged the publication of Bleek’s essay in Germany to which he wrote a programmatic preface (Haeckel 1868). Moreover, Haeckel referred Bleek to Darwin, as becomes evident in a reply written by Darwin in February 1868. Apparently, Darwin read Bleek’s essay at the very epoch in which he started working on *The Descent of Man*.³ The triangulation from Bleek to Haeckel to Darwin indicates that the “points of contact” between South African and ape languages are supposed to be points of contact between philology and zoology as well.⁴

In his essay, Bleek considers the co-operation between the sciences and the humanities as indispensable for investigating the development of mankind. In the concrete team work put into practice by Haeckel and Bleek, both philology and zoology endeavour to include each other into a holistic – or, as Haeckel liked to call it, “monistic” – worldview. In the letter cited by Bleek, Haeckel explicitly speaks of the “language of the apes,” (Bleek 1868, 54) noticing the same clicking of tongue and lips which Bleek found in the languages of several South-African peoples. For Haeckel again, the “language of the apes” is extremely relevant because it leaves no doubt, as he says, about the common pedigree of humans and apes. The South African “Bushmen,” he concludes, are those among the living human beings that are “the closest to the apes” (Bleek 1868, 54).

In spite of the hints of racism involved, neither Haeckel nor Bleek designate the peoples of Southern Africa as missing links between ape and man, nor do they try to insinuate that they are not human. But still, the distinction between animal and man is more than once blurred with the distinction between the African and the European. For instance, Bleek declares that an ongoing development from animal to man would be just as impossible as the development from the Hottentot to the European languages. And Ernst Haeckel, in his preface, claims this most starkly.

As everybody knows, the peoples of Southern Africa, the Hottentots, Bushmen,

³ Darwin, Letter to E. Haeckel, 6 February, 1868. According to the summary published by the online database “darwinproject,” Darwin in this letter “comments on works of Miklucho[-Maclay], Dohrn, and Bleek” and says that he has “begun work on *Descent*.” <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwinletters/calendar/entry-5841.html> (28 September, 2009).

⁴ These contacts are discussed in Alter 2007; Di Gregorio 2002.

Kaffirs, and other negroid tribes which are branches of the wool-haired, long-headed (dolichocephalous) family, have remained until now on the lowest step of human development and have distanced the least from the apes. (Haeckel 1868, iv)

Obviously, for Haeckel, Bleek, and many contemporary Darwinists, the ape remained an enigmatic animal and this was especially so when it concerned theories that traced language back to an archaic, apish kind of mimesis. This was why the similarity produced by and found in the ape could only be allowed to be a similarity to *other* human beings, the Africans. Such an internal division within the concept of similarity had consequences for the underlying evolutionary theory. For Haeckel's "monism," it was essential that the *one* rule of evolution reigned everywhere. But the idea of tracing language back to the realm of the animal produced an uneasiness within this very same doctrine. Haeckel and Bleek could only cope with this by almost brutally drawing a strict boundary within the realm of the human. The more philology and zoology worked at their mutual inclusion, the more they excluded their common "other," man, in so far as he had to be considered as ape.

The "Principle of Imitation" (Darwin)

Charles Darwin addressed this same issue, conceptualizing the problem of imitation in apes and humans. The relevant remarks can be found in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, three years after Bleek's *Origin of Language*. Even though there is no explicit reference to Bleek, it is likely, as I said, that Darwin took notice of his essay. At any rate, in *The Descent of Man*, we find the same two characteristics we just saw in Bleek and Haeckel; that is, the high esteem of imitation on the one hand and the uneasiness about it on the other. As to the esteem, imitation figures within a unified or at least comprehensive "principle of imitation, and reason, and experience" (Darwin 1989, 134) which Darwin conceptualizes as the mainspring of the development of human mental capacities. As to the uneasiness, there seems to be the need or desire to distinguish between imitation and reason, for instance when Darwin states that there is "a strong tendency in . . . monkeys, in microcephalous idiots, and in the barbarous races of mankind, to imitate whatever they hear" (Darwin 1989, 91). Certainly the important difference lies in this "whatever," for it is the faculty of refined distinction and diversification that for Darwin is essentially human and which makes up the specificity of human language. Accordingly, man

is the animal that once stopped to imitate whatever he perceived, and started to select consciously what to imitate.

Still, the argument of imitation falls short of explaining how this specificity could come into existence in the first place – how man stopped to be an imitative animal and started to imitate like a man. Whenever Darwin speaks of imitation in *The Descent of Man* in order to explain the derivation of man's "intellectual and moral faculties," it is also imitation that calls in question the exclusiveness of these faculties, with repeated reference to the savage, the idiot, and the monkey. The passage explicitly headed "Imitation" starts as follows.

The principle of *Imitation* is strong in man, and especially, as I have myself observed, with savages. In certain morbid states of the brain this tendency is exaggerated to an extraordinary degree; some hemiplegic patients and others, at the commencement of inflammatory softening of the brain, unconsciously imitate every word which is uttered, whether in their own or in a foreign language, and every gesture or action which is performed near them. (Darwin 1989, 76-77)

As Darwin continues, we see that adding consciousness and intention does not in itself mean to make imitation readily digestible: "No animal voluntarily imitates an action performed by man, until in the ascending scale we come to monkeys, which are well known to be ridiculous mockers" (Darwin 1989, 77). Thus, imitation is at the same time both the evidence of a high position in the "ascending scale" of evolution and the paradigm of the laughable or even the contemptible. So in Darwin, too, the ape represents what could be called the mimetic scandal. For the Darwinian ape is already very close to man with respect to his anatomy and physiology, but in his faculty of imitation he comes even closer within the realm of the social and the cultural.

This again recalls the initial formula "imitation of similar beings." Of course, every imitation is about producing similarity, but if we talk about an imitation *of* the similar, this means necessarily that there has already been similarity *before* the act of imitation. When trying to draw an analytical distinction between the pre-existing similarity and the similarity produced by imitation, one is approaching the general predicament of similarity or resemblance in evolutionary theory.

In Darwin's work, this predicament is already manifest in *The Origin of Species*. From the 1866 edition on, he added a passage on "Analogical Resemblances" to the chapter dealing with the "Mutual Affinities of Organic Beings." Here, resemblance is a methodological problem that mediates between species classification, on the one hand, and the concept of genealogical affinities between species, on the other. As Darwin states, resemblances are in fact indispensable clues in the

scientific task of constructing correct and reliable pedigrees, which means the construction of a classification in which species are no longer misunderstood to be stable entities. But these clues may just as well be deceiving for there are often similarities between species that are not genealogically related.

Darwin mentions two reasons for these deceiving resemblances. They may result either from adaptation to similar living conditions or from strategies of protection. An example of the first version are the “fin-like anterior limbs” in whales, compared to the fins of fishes (Darwin 1988, 389). An example of the second version is “the wonderful manner in which certain butterflies imitate . . . other and quite distinct species” (Darwin 1989, 391). The one phenomenon is called analogy, the other, mimicry. Resemblance is at work in both of them, but in different ways. As for the complex of analogy, resemblance is preceding. It exists in the outside world, in the living conditions of two or more species which indeed are not genealogically related, but still objectively linked by the same needs.

Darwin does not speak of imitation in this context, whereas in the account he gives of mimicry (following Henry Walter Bates’s definition of the term), he frequently uses the words “imitators,” “mimickers,” “mockers,” and “counterfeiters.” He uses them even more frequently in the 6th edition of *The Origin of Species*, published in 1872, in which he finds formulations like the following, speaking of the butterfly species *Ithomia* and *Leptalis*: “The form which is imitated keeps the usual dress of the group to which it belongs, whilst the counterfeiters have changed their dress and do not resemble their nearest allies” (Darwin 1989, 391). One almost gets the impression that mimicry is about intentional strategies of becoming like someone else which, of course, is not what Darwin had in mind, given the evolutionist’s premises of accidental variations and gradual modifications. But it is precisely under these premises that the similarity *preceding* imitation gains specific importance. So again, in mimicry we are talking about an “imitation of similar beings.”

Starting with species already somewhat like each other, the closest resemblance, if beneficial, could readily be gained by the above means; and if the imitated form was subsequently and gradually modified through any agency, the imitating form would be led along the same track, and thus be altered to almost any extent. (Darwin 1989, 393)

Imitation and the Human Community (Kafka)

With mimicry we seem to have reached a point quite far from Bleek’s idea of social imitation underlying speech and understanding on the

verge of humanity. Still, there is a continuity of problems, as far as the making of evolutionary thinking is concerned. Both versions of imitation are based on similarities and, at the same time, result in similarities. In both versions, the similarities are likely to induce “mutual affinities of organic beings” and, accordingly, to cross the boundaries between species – maybe even to unsettle the very concept of species. And, not least, both mimicry and social imitation have to be regarded as survival strategies. Obviously, there is a great deal of sociality involved in the concept of mimicry, and vice versa.

This statement shall now be substantiated by shifting to literature, thus, to a different kind of text and textual analysis. Franz Kafka’s “Report to an Academy,” first published in 1919,⁵ is a narrative in which the ape and his disconcerting ability of imitation again come to the fore, giving some uncanny information about the necessity of imitation as a survival strategy. Kafka’s text is characterized by a strange kind of precision apt to unsettle both the required (or pretended) distinctiveness of scientific texts and the intellectual power of the scientific community. For this narrative turns the hierarchies of observation, experiment, and expertise upside down. The reader, instead of seeing researchers aping the ape, is confronted with a situation in reverse, with an apish creature addressing and at the same time mimicking and mocking the judicious discourse about imitation.

In Kafka’s text, a first-person narrator is speaking to some “Honored members of the Academy” to give them “an account of the life I formerly led as an ape” (Kafka 1995, 173). It is important to notice that it is not an ape anymore that is speaking and that it is not the language of the apes that we are listening to. The speaker is expressing himself “in human terms” (Kafka 1995, 176), as he says, even though he never claims to have become a human being. Nevertheless, within the “nearly five years” (Kafka 1995, 173) since he was an ape, he has passed through some “development” (Kafka 1995, 184) and made considerable “progress,” until finally “the rays of knowledge penetrated from all sides into [his] awakening brain” and he “managed to reach the cultural level of an average European” (Kafka 1995, 183).

Joining a solemn ideal of knowledge with the “average” of culture, Kafka’s “Report to an Academy” already manifests itself as a parody of an optimistic and teleological understanding of evolution, especially of the step from ape to man. Indeed, the developmental progress of Kafka’s narrator is mainly a progressive subjugation of the animal’s body to the standardizing powers of human society, starting with him being hunted,

⁵ I will quote from the excellent translation by Willa and Edwin Muir.

shot, trapped in a cage, and shipped to Europe, and culminating in the philistine posture in which he describes himself at the end of his report. “With my hands in my trouser pockets, my bottle of wine on the table, I half lie and half sit in my rocking chair and gaze out of the window” (Kafka 1995, 184). Moreover, all of the education has led him to nothing more than a career on the variety stage where he gives a performance every night, having “a success that could hardly be increased” (Kafka 1995, 184).

It is this freak-show aspect that made of Kafka’s narrative a showpiece for reciters in public readings already in the 1920s and, later on, for actors in theatrical monologues. But the obvious stage potential also indicates that the function of theatrical performance in the “Report to an Academy” is not restricted to parody. To regard the first person narrator as an actor has consequences for the whole setting of the text. Not only does the very speech act of addressing the academy turn into a theatrical situation, the acting and performing are revealed as essential motives for the ape’s development. And this is where imitation/mimesis comes into play again, for the actual developmental process starts with aping. The speaker recalls how he as an ape, trapped on the ship in his cage “between decks” (Kafka 1995, 175, 180), tried to find a “way out” (“Ausweg” in the German original) – which, incidentally, is the main expression in Kafka’s text (appearing more than a dozen times, Kafka 1995, 176-183). After his first distress, he starts to watch closely the behaviour of the ship’s crew. In his later account, this almost sounds like a study in behaviour.

They had a habit of doing everything as slowly as possible. If one of them wanted to rub his eyes, he lifted a hand as if it were a drooping weight. [...] Their laughter had always a gruff bark in it that sounded dangerous but meant nothing. They always had something in their mouths to spit out and did not care where they spat it. (Kafka 1995, 178)

When approaching the ape, they seem to become more animal.

When they were off duty, some of them often used to sit down in a semicircle around me; they hardly spoke but only grunted to each other; smoked their pipes, stretched out on lockers; smacked their knees as soon as I made one slightest movement; and now and then one of them would take a stick and tickle me where I liked being tickled. (Kafka 1995, 178)

It is this kind of behaviour that particularly calms and consoles the trapped ape, for he realizes that he will find his “way out” thanks to the very proximity between him and the humans in front of his cage.

He can use this proximity to “become like them” (Kafka 1995, 179). Again, we find the pattern of an imitation of similar beings. This is why Kafka’s speaker exclaims retrospectively, “It was so easy to imitate these people” (Kafka 1995, 180). Still, he does not conceal the difficulties that were involved, especially when trying to imitate the seamanlike habit of drinking. “My worst trouble,” he recalls, “came from the schnapps bottle” (Kafka 1995, 180). It is only in accomplishing this task that he can achieve his initiation into “human community.” Emptying the bottle for the first time – in an act explicitly designated as an “artistic performance” – the trapped being becomes enabled to speak and experiences the mimetic force of language in a subsequent “echo” effect.

I took hold of a schnapps bottle that had been carelessly left standing before my cage, uncorked it in the best style, while the company began to watch me with mounting attention, set it to my lips without hesitation, with no grimace, like a professional drinker, with rolling eyes and full throat, actually and truly drank it empty; then threw the bottle away, not this time in despair but as an artistic performer; forgot, indeed, to rub my belly; but instead of that, because I could not help it, because my senses were reeling, called a brief and unmistakable “Hallo!” breaking into human speech, and with this outburst broke into the human community, and felt its echo: “Listen, he’s talking!” like a caress over the whole of my sweat-drenched body. (Kafka 1995, 182)

Immediately after reporting this key scene, the narrator repeats that he only imitated human beings because he “needed a way out, and for no other reason” (Kafka 1995, 182). This “way of humanity” (“Menschenausweg”), as it is called in the end, is the only way to survive. I can only supplement that the “Report to an Academy” has early been applied to the discourse concerning Jewish assimilation. Indeed, Kafka’s friend and editor Max Brod designated it as a most brilliant satire on assimilation. This is to say that survival as a concept of evolutionary theory does not automatically become merely metaphorical when applied to the realm of the social. Quite the contrary, as we can infer from one last remark of Kafka’s ex-ape who recognizes, in retrospect, that since he “managed to survive the first critical period,” he was all the more “amenable to training” (Kafka 1995, 176).

I already mentioned that from an evolutionary perspective, social imitation, just like mimicry, can be regarded as a survival strategy. The very concept of survival implies the threat of extinction. Even if imitation is rooted in the “urge of becoming the copy of the outside world” – as Wilhelm Bleek in his monistic enthusiasm called it – there is still something discomfoting about this “urge.” Kafka addresses this uneasiness by experimenting with species development in the travestied

narrative of individual education. As this education is all about imitation, it proceeds as a kind of social mimicry – stressing the performative aspect of playing a role, of using what Darwin called the “tricks of the stage” (Darwin 1988, 392) and, thus, of never really belonging to the imitated.

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