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The book under discussion demonstrates how certain European views on language and linguistic practices were detached from the background from which they emerged and how they were rendered apparently disinterested, quasi-natural models, valid for the entire world. In tracing back this history, Baumann and Briggs discuss two major processes, linguistic purification, i.e. the decontextualisation of language from its social background, and hybridization, i.e. the recontextualisation of language in a way to suit the construction of modernity. The book consists of nine chapters: introduction (1) and conclusion (9) aside, it analyzes texts of (2) Francis Bacon and John Locke, (3) antiquarians such as John Aubrey and Henry Bourne as well as philologists such as Thomas Blackwell and Robert Lowth, (4) the reconstruction of the Ossian epic and its role in the Scottish Enlightenment, (5) the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, (6) the Brother Grimm’s project of collecting and editing folk tales, (7) Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s collection of Ojibwe oral literature and (8) the work of Franz Boas. Baumann and Briggs thus trace the roots of modernist language ideologies by analyzing the works of Western scholars who influenced the formation of scholarly disciplines such as anthropology, folklore studies, literary studies and linguistics.

Baumann and Briggs’ book is primarily a meta-theoretical study. It starts with Francis Bacon’s efforts of purifying language in order to cleanse it from its self-reflexivity. Building upon Bacon’s language pessimism, Locke propagated a plain, precise and
unadorned style. While his attempt to create a purely referential language was bound to fail, Locke was influential in establishing the idea that such language existed. The cosmopolitan language he envisioned originated in and became associated with written male elite discourses, marginalizing, as an effect, the linguistic repertoire of everybody else. More influential yet was the implication that what was true for English should hold true for any language. The hegemonic imposition of elitist language varieties and discursive strategies required rationalization, a task undertaken by antiquarians and philologists. Baumann and Briggs describe in Chapter 3 how these scholars shaped a political sociology of culture, necessary for the imagination of modernity. What is more, these scholars gave the dominating language ideologies a history and provided a basis for comparison of the Western past with non-Western societies.

The role of language in the creation of modernity entailed deviations from the Lockean project. Johann Gottfried Herder, in contrast to Locke, highlighted the linkage between language and its speakers. Perceiving language as the central force shaping the national character led to the powerful view that a nation and its language were ideally homogenous. Herder, too, made use of exclusion as he removed the rabble, women, nobility and overrefined intellectuals from the core of the nation. His imagination of the nation was thus based on inequality, in that even the genuine spirit of a nation was seen to be unequally distributed. The work of the Brothers Grimm, discussed in Chapter Six, was pivotal in establishing the German people as a textual nation. Collecting texts and editing them in the way to render them palatable to the emerging bourgeoisie required manipulation of and intervention into the texts. The tales collected enjoyed wide circulation as (good) national subjects were expected to know their tradition, perceived to be epitomized in folk literature. Reading folk tales with such disposition was decisive. It made the nation appear historical and real.

The literature of the Other, too, was collected and manipulated by scholars in order to imagine Western modernity. Native American literature was also seen as ethnographic data which revealed the Indian mind. The analysis of other cultures became fully institutionalized in the late 19th century, due to the work of Franz Boas. By assigning his informants a lack of control and awareness over their language, Boas placed anthropologists in a unique position. He perceived only anthropologists to be able of freeing themselves from the influence of culture. However, Baumann and Briggs