Introduction to *Mother Tongue* V

By Roger W. Wescott

The disagreements among the twelve authors of the first nineteen selections in MT-V seem to me to spring primarily from the philosophical divergence between absolutists and relativists. The absolutists appear to regard some genetic connections between languages as indisputable and others as inconceivable. The relativists, by contrast, tend to regard all such connections as possible, but only some as probable. The relativists, moreover, seem to treat probable affiliations as differing in degree, some being more probable than others.

Believing that all relations are, by definition, relative, I belong, predictably, in the ranks of the relativists. And, as a monogenist, I further consider all languages to be genetically related. For me, the question to be addressed regarding most controversial linguistic genealogies is one of subgrouping: which languages are closely related, which distantly, and how closely or distantly? Consequently, I treat no linguistic evidence as either conclusive or beyond consideration.

The question of scientific evidence for postulated cognation depends, clearly, on the definition of science. For mathematicians, science consists primarily of logic. For chemists, science consists primarily of experiment. For linguists, science is rarely either of these. But what is scientific linguistics? I hope that a future issue of *Mother Tongue* may be devoted, at least in part, to a discussion of this question.

The only section of MT-V in which polemics are not conspicuous is the last one, concerning environmental influences on language. Yet Verhaegen and Munro may take exception to my having characterized their view of early human evolution as "aquaticism." The term that Verhaegen has more often employed in recent writings is "aquarborealism." Aquarborealism is the hypothesis that, when Pliocene hominoids began venturing beyond tropical forests, they did most of their foraging in shallow waters but sought rest and refuge in the trees, avoiding grasslands until they had developed substantial tool-using and weapon-wielding capacities – presumably in the Pleistocene Epoch.