

## Musée des confluences, what place for mankind in the universe?

*Marlène de Palma  
MA student in English linguistics  
Université Grenoble Alpes  
March 2017*

The conference that will be taking place on the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of March seeks to investigate the linguistic manifestations of egocentrism and anthropocentrism. Its aim is to understand to what extent the Animacy Hierarchy structures language and discourse. What is the Animacy Hierarchy? In a word, across languages, the animacy feature is found to be responsible for a number of linguistic asymmetries. A simplified version of the Animacy Hierarchy can be described as follows: humans > non-human animates > inanimates ('>' translates as 'are higher in the hierarchy'). In addition to the talks, the participants are invited to visit the Musée des Confluences in Lyon. The museum offers a permanent exhibition on the "Origins and tales of our world"; the visit is an opportunity to explore the principles of the Hierarchy in the artistic and historical fields.

The permanent path of the museum takes the visitor through four exhibition rooms, all aiming to tell one aspect of the history of mankind. This path offers the chance to discover the diversity of cultures and civilizations as well as to wonder about the future of mankind. By exhibiting artwork, animals from a wide range of species, as well as human artefacts and written work, it re-places human beings within the Great Chain of Being. The museum relates the history of nature, humans, and what links them together.

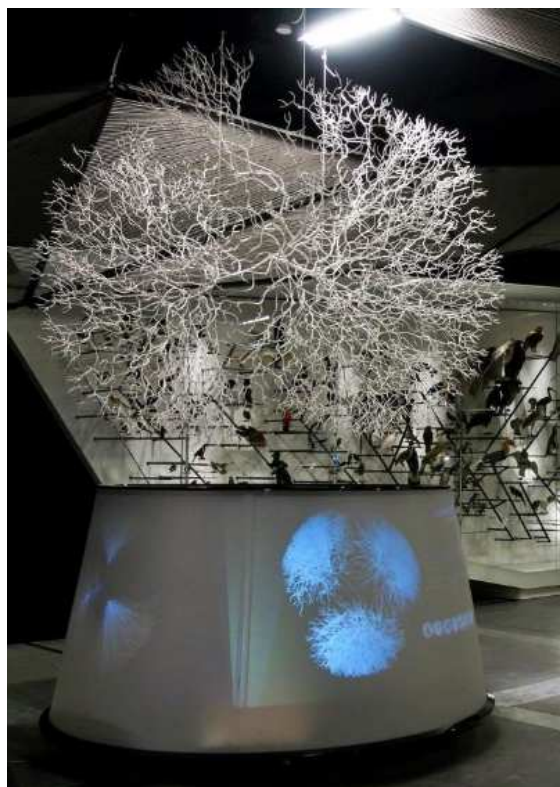
I believe that visiting a museum is very interesting to illustrate the notion of egocentrism and anthropocentrism. To begin with, a museum is a location built by humans in order to preserve the memories of mankind. Of course, it includes wildlife elements as they are the source of life, but mostly because they are the source of human history itself. Nature is at the origin of the creation of life, but it seems that it has been robbed of its status by human ego. For centuries, humans have been looking for keys to the origin of life. As science was not established until recently, their creativity and imagination gave birth to myths in order to explain the origin of the world. Some of these myths are on display at the museum, such as the Myth of Sedna.



This sculpture is exposed in the area dedicated to the symbolic representation of origins. For the Inuit people, Sedna is the goddess who created the Inuit, but also other populations and all living creatures on earth. Her story says that she was sacrificed by her father as she fell off board, because he wanted to save his own life. To force her to let go of the bark, he cut her fingers with a hatchet. From her cut phalanges, sea mammals were born.

This myth is a typical representation of the principles of the Hierarchy. Animals were born from human fingers, which clearly positions humans at the top of the hierarchy. It can also be read as a manifestation of andocentrism: we have the man-woman relationship in which man is clearly in top position.

The next piece of art I would like to introduce is called *The Tree of Life*.



The *Tree of Life* is a physical representation of phylogeny, a scientific ranking of all the species that ever walked the earth, and their common ancestors. The ramifications show that these living beings are all part of the same family. It is said that all the species distributed among the surface of this “bush” are still living today; they are the result of an evolution story as long as ours. The branches that stop before the surface are the extinct ones. This sculpture triggers an intense reflection about our origins, and gives us a particular glimpse of our evolution. It also puts in perspective the fact that, though the evolution of human beings is one of the longest, it is far from being the only one. Indeed, there are more species of animals which have succeeded in surviving through genetic mutations. However, human beings always feel they are the most important because of technical capacities (writing, speaking, and so on). Once again we find the Hierarchy at work. But this sculpture can also lead us to ask, “what if evolution had been different?”, would humans still be “at the top” of the hierarchy?

This notion of status in the hierarchy is questioned as well in the documentary called “Le Big Bang mes ancêtres et moi”. This documentary echoes the numerous themes developed in the exhibition “Origins and tales of our world”. It shows that if 4.5 billion years of evolution were condensed in 24 hours, humanity would only appear in the last 5 minutes. However, humans keep thinking they are more important. This is probably due to their own evolution, because so far, humans are the only beings capable of creating civilization as we know it today. Humans are the only species who have been capable of “taming” natural elements. Their creativity and mental capacities enabled them to turn natural elements to their advantage. Among these natural elements we can mention animals, as they were used for the profit of humanity, but natural phenomena as well. That is to say, humans use wind to produce electricity, or to sail and travel, they have distorted the “true” function of water (hydration, survival) to produce energy and tamed it for agricultural uses, and so on. In order to illustrate that thought more precisely, I will introduce one last piece of art called “*The Lantern Clock*”.



This clock was created in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and has a particular mechanism that enables it to chant the time from uneven hours. Its functioning was based on the division of 6 hours of “daytime” and 6 hours of “nighttime”, although these hours could vary according to the season. As we know, humans have been depending on the Sun, a natural element, to determine the duration of the day. They first used sundials, then created clocks. As I said previously, human beings think they are not meant to be dependent on nature but rather to use it for their own profit. This clock is the perfect example of Humanity taking control of the Earth by controlling time. Detaching themselves from the Sun, humans have invented a clever mechanism that even enables them to control the speed of time. It is the demonstration of absolute control over the environment. Since the invention of the clock, humans have set the pace for the world, which places them above any other living creature.

To conclude, we can see that the notion of Animacy Hierarchy exists among other domains than linguistics and discourse. Since time immemorial, humans have survived not only by adapting to their environment but mostly by finding ways to make use of it. Though nature is the absolute element, humans thought, and keep thinking, that it was meant to serve them. Therefore, they forced their way to the top of the hierarchy. The relation human > animate > inanimate which will be addressed by keynote speaker Greville Corbett, can be found absolutely everywhere, and the exhibition “Origines, les récits du monde” is a very good way to put that characteristic of human language in perspective.