

Articoli/3

## *Leibniz and 18th-century Philosophy of Language*

Michael Losonsky  0000-0003-4659-7001

Articolo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*. Inviato il 29/05/2024. Accettato il 23/07/2024.

Leibniz's work on language left a lasting impression on 18th-century philosophical thinking about language. His two major works that discussed natural language were both published in the 18th century and in these works Leibniz focused on the sound symbolism, phonology, and etymology of language, topics that played a major role for 18th-century philosophers of language. These topics belonged to what Leibniz considered the material aspects of language and were tied to the expressive powers of language. Herder acknowledged Leibniz's influence and developed these ideas in his account of language as a forceful expression of human feeling. However, Herder ignored the formal components of language. The philosopher who developed the synthesis of the material and the formal features of language was Wilhelm von Humboldt, who drew from 18th-century thinkers that saw natural language as a unity of force and form, for example Sulzer and Harris. Humboldt was especially influenced by his tutor, Johann Jakob Engel, whose lectures drew on Leibniz as well as works in the Leibniz-Wolff tradition.

\*\*\*

### **Introduction**

Leibniz's work on language left a lasting impression on 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical thinking about language. His two major works that discussed natural language, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* and *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der Teutschen Sprache* were both published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The *Nouveaux essais*, Leibniz's response to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was written between 1703 and 1705, but on account of Locke's death Leibniz refused to publish it and it was finally published in 1765, 49 years after Leibniz's death on November 14, 1716. *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken* was written and revised in 1697-1712 and first published in 1717. In these works, Leibniz focused on the sound symbolism, phonology, and etymology of language, topics that from the point of view of post-Fregean philosophy of language might appear to be a «digression» or «*idée*

*fixes*»<sup>1</sup>. But Leibniz did not see these discussions as tangential, and neither did 18th-century philosophers of language.

These topics belonged to what Leibniz considered the material aspects of language, which he distinguished from its formal aspects. The formal perspective on natural language focused on language as a human competence, a synchronic, ahistorical, and a formal system with a determinate and rule-governed structure of truth and validity, namely its logical structure that mirrors the structure of the mind<sup>2</sup>. The material aspects take into consideration the aesthetic, conative, affective and literary features of natural language, including figures of speech<sup>3</sup>. Unlike the formal features that emphasize the unity of all languages, the material features of language highlight the diversity of languages as well as their historical nature and mutual influence. Material features are «the oldest monuments of peoples», and can be used to study their «kinships and migrations»<sup>4</sup>. A reason for this is that languages are material expressions of different aspects of human psychology, for example attitudes, emotions, feelings, and sensations.

Leibniz highlighted the expressive component of natural language in *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken*. He argued that speech is an «expressing of emotional movements» (*Ausdrückung der Gemüths Bewegungen*), that is, a pressing out of inner emotions<sup>5</sup>. Leibniz's discussion of sound symbolism needs to be understood in this light. The sounds human beings make, including human speech, are sometimes produced by «something natural», for example «natural instincts» in response to human experience. Human beings experience the sound and motion of a flowing river in a certain way and express this with sounds in much the same way that a sigh or 'ah' express emotion. Similarly, the sound of the rolled 'r', according to Leibniz, naturally signifies violent motion, which is a feature of the signification of 'rauben', 'rauschen' or the Latin word 'rapere', the etymological root of the English word 'rape'. On the other hand, the sound of the letter 'l' naturally signifies a gentle motion, as in the case of 'life' and 'love'<sup>6</sup>. These phonological features of languages can be used to compare languages and show affinities between languages and their common roots.

In sum, in addition to being (1) a formal representation of what the speaker has in mind and (2) an expression of attitudes, emotions, feelings and sensations, Leibniz assigned a third function to language. For Leibniz, language is not only a mirror of thought and an expression of conative and affective states of mind, but language also has a constitutive role to play in human thinking because human beings «cannot reason without symbols»<sup>7</sup>. It was this fact that made language a «monument of peoples». Leibniz turned to this topic in an essay of 1710 in

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Bennett, *Introduction*, in Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. by P. Remnant, J. Bennett, Cambridge 1996, pp. XI-XII.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 57-67.

<sup>3</sup> *A VI*, 6, pp. 285-286.

<sup>4</sup> *A VI*, 6, p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> *A IV*, 6, p. 535.

<sup>6</sup> *A VI*, 6, p. 283.

<sup>7</sup> *A VI*, 6, pp. 77, 212. See also *A IV*, 6, p. 533.

Latin on «the origins of nations [...] drawn from the evidence of languages», the lead essay of the first volume published by the Prussian Academy of Science that he helped found<sup>8</sup>. Writing in German, this theme was developed in the *Unvorgreiffliche Gedanken*, which emphasizes how language, by transmitting the influence of both nature and society, binds human minds together<sup>9</sup>.

Leibniz's discussion there is, unfortunately, not free of nationalist and exceptionalist themes. For example, he argued that a thorough study of the etymology of European languages would show that «the origin and spring of the European essence in a large part is to be found with us», referring to German speakers<sup>10</sup>. This will become an important theme in Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803).

## 1. Leibniz and Herder

Leibniz's discussion of the role of power, expression, and nation in natural language had a lasting impact on Herder. Arguably, Leibniz was Herder's 'favorite philosopher', and certainly Herder wrote that Leibniz was the «pride of Germany» and «the greatest man Germany has had in modern times»<sup>11</sup>. In his *Metakritik*, a commentary and critique of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Herder referred to the «immortal Leibniz» and described him as «the great linguist» and «comparative linguist»<sup>12</sup>. Lamenting that Leibniz's philosophy was poorly understood, Herder launched a vigorous defense of it. He argued that Kant treated Leibniz with unwarranted condescension and failed to appreciate the «finest care of this mathematical man»<sup>13</sup> not to confuse concepts.

Herder's assessment of Leibniz was based on the publication by Rudolf Erich Raspe (1736-1794) of Leibniz's works, which included the previously unpublished *Nouveaux essais*. Immediately on publication in 1765, Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) sent Herder the table of contents, extensive excerpts, and his own assessment that this was mere «scholastic chatter». Herder did not accept this assessment. Instead, he acquired a copy of the volume and wrote down his own excerpts under the handwritten heading «Truths from Leibniz»<sup>14</sup>.

Herder wrote the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, published in 1772, with Leibniz's *Nouveaux essais* in mind. For example, he affirmed Leibniz's claim in the *Nouveaux essais* that a language of musical tones was in principle possible, but that it was not possible for human beings because human language

---

<sup>8</sup> See H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, Minneapolis 1982, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> *A IV*, 6, p. 533.

<sup>10</sup> *A IV*, 6, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> G. Arnold, «...der größte Mann den Deutschland in den neuern Zeiten gehabt» – Herders Verhältnis zu Leibniz, «Studia Leibnitiana», 37, 2005, pp. 162, 184.

<sup>12</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan, Berlin 1881-1892, Bd. 21, pp. 108, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 21, pp. 187-188.

<sup>14</sup> G. Arnold, «...der größte Mann den Deutschland in den neuern Zeiten gehabt», cit., p. 164.

required «naming» (*Namennennung*) or reference<sup>15</sup>. He borrowed, without citing, Leibniz's report that the «language of Barantola» had no term for «holy» and that the Hottentots had no term for «spirit»<sup>16</sup>. The themes in the *Nouveaux essais* of sound symbolism, active powers, the mind's need for signs, etymology, the diversity of languages, and languages as ancient monuments of peoples all reappear in the *Abhandlung*<sup>17</sup>.

Sound symbolism, in particular, played an essential role in Herder's philosophy of language. Confronted by an ocean of sensations and impressions, a human being naturally responds to some of these: for example, a lightning bolt that prompts a strong feeling that is expressed by an exclamation. This exclamation becomes a mark for a lightning bolt impression and forms the basis of a word for lightning<sup>18</sup>. The introduction of feeling and emotion as sources of expression had an important consequence for Herder, namely that he did not need to posit, as did Leibniz, a similarity between the sound of words and the sounds of the objects, because the sound itself can be expressive of felt and emotional responses to objects. For Herder, a human being was «feeling through and through» and «sound forth what he sees as well as what he felt»<sup>19</sup>.

In addition, for Herder the act of speaking, even at its inception, was an exercise of innate mental powers. For Herder, human beings, including their minds, are characterized by innate forces or active powers, following Leibniz's view that «primitive forces are what constitute substances themselves»<sup>20</sup>. The mental powers, including the power to reason, reflect and imagine, are not compartmentalized, but act in unison. Accordingly, the powers to speak, reason, reflect, and imagine operate in «the first thought of a child» just as the innate powers of an insect are in play the moment it is an insect<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, these powers are not mere abilities or dispositions. Herder denied that there is a «naked ability» without «a tendency» (*Tendenz*)<sup>22</sup>. On this issue Herder did not cite Leibniz, but his discussion closely followed Leibniz's denial in the *Nouveaux essais* of «naked faculties» or «pure powers»<sup>23</sup>, and that a power always involves an actual endeavor or «tendency» (*tendance*) towards action<sup>24</sup>.

Herder understood his critique of Kant in the *Metakritik* to be an extension of Leibniz's views in the *Nouveaux essais* and the *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken* regarding the interdependence of mind and language. The human soul, Herder

---

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 5, p. 58; trans., J. G. Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by M. Forster, Cambridge, 2002, p. 104. For Leibniz, see *A VI*, 6, p. 274.

<sup>16</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 5, p. 78; trans., p. 118. For Leibniz, see *A VI*, 6, pp. 103-104.

<sup>17</sup> G. Arnold, „...der größte Mann den Deutschland in den neuern Zeiten gehabt“, cit., p. 173.

<sup>18</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 5, p. 63; trans., pp. 107-108.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 5, pp. 67-68; trans., p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> *A VI*, 6, p. 379. See P. Pénisson, *Trieb et énergie chez Herder*, «Revue germanique internationale», 18, 2002, pp. 45-52.

<sup>21</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 5, p. 31; trans., p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 5, p. 32; trans., p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> *A VI*, 6, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> *A VI*, 6, pp. 111-112.

wrote, «thinks with words». It not only «expresses» or «manifests itself» (*äussern sich*) in language, but it also «signifies itself [*bezeichnen sich selbst*] and uses language to order its own thoughts». Language was human reason's essential tool for synthesizing, individuating, and relating its concepts. Citing Locke and Leibniz, Herder declared that language is an «organon of our reason»<sup>25</sup>. However, for Herder language is essential only for conscious thinking, that is, what Leibniz called «apperception» and what Herder called «*Besonnenheit (Reflexion)*», and not essential to all psychological processes<sup>26</sup>.

The language that was essential to human reasoning was natural language. Humans had to think in their «*own* language», which Herder identified with national languages<sup>27</sup>. Accordingly, Herder highlighted the nationalist themes he found in Leibniz. In the *Metakritik* Herder translated long passages from Leibniz's *Preface to an Edition of Nizolius* where Leibniz argued that «no European [living] language is better suited than German for this testing and examination of philosophical doctrines» because it «is very rich and complete in real-terms, to the envy of all other languages»<sup>28</sup>. Herder also included long quotations from the *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken* about German being an «extraordinary touchstone for thinking unknown to others» because «pure German does not admit of empty words backed by nothing but the light foam of idle thoughts»<sup>29</sup>.

For Herder, language not only structures our conscious thoughts, but also has an effect on the psychological processes of which human beings are unaware. Herder agreed with Leibniz that the soul consists of minute and unconscious perceptions and that a physical body is only an «appearance of substances, as the milky way is of stars, and the cloud of droplets»<sup>30</sup>. But Herder maintained that consciousness or what Leibniz called «apperception» has the power to influence its own unconscious and obscure perceptions as well as its body. The body, for Herder, is «a single realm of invisible, inner [...] obscure force», but this body is «in the strictest bond with the lady monarch who thinks and wills» and «rules, to speak with Leibniz, in a realm of slumbering»<sup>31</sup>. But consciousness exercises its power and influence only with language. A human being only «gapes at images and colors until he *speaks*»<sup>32</sup>.

Biological, anthropological, environmental and moral differences yield a diversity of languages, but languages can merge as well as diverge. Herder, fond of water metaphors, described language as a natural force like a «majestic river» that arises from the needs a human already has «in a cradle of childhood, in

---

<sup>25</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 21, pp. 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 5, pp. 34-35; trans., pp. 87-88.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 21, p. 25, n.1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 21, pp. 70-71; L, p. 125.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 21, p. 71; A IV, 6, p. 535.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 8, p. 178; trans., p. 195.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 8, p. 192; trans., p. 207.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 8, p. 197; trans., p. 211.

swaddling clothes, of which you would have to be ashamed»<sup>33</sup>. Leibniz too – in an unusual metaphor for him – compared languages to rivers in the *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken*. In a discussion of the influence of foreign languages on German, Leibniz wrote that «our principal language and language of heroes[...] should go to ruin» due to the influence of foreign languages, particularly French, on German. But Leibniz recommended a middle ground between linguistic ‘Puritanism’ and succumbing to linguistic ‘mishmash’. Sometimes «powerful water surges and breaches of rivers» cannot be stopped by dams, but can be mitigated by flexibility and channeling the flow<sup>34</sup>.

In the *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken* Leibniz recommended that a German «*Glossarium Ethymologicum*» would serve the preservation and improvement of German<sup>35</sup>. In the *Nouveaux essais*, Leibniz’s concerns were more cosmopolitan: «etymologies rightly understood must interrelate the languages of various peoples»<sup>36</sup>. Herder in the *Abhandlung* also discussed a «true *Etymologikon*», but argued that such a project would be very difficult to complete because the origins of words involve «obscure feelings, fleeting side ideas, connected sensations [*Mitempfindungen*], which rise up from the bottom of the soul and can be but little grasped in rules»<sup>37</sup>.

Herder’s reference to rules indicated a significant and deep difference between his and Leibniz’s philosophies of language. Unlike Leibniz, Herder disdained grammatical and logical form. Rules, grammars and forms were not essential to natural language. They were only theoretical constructions – «every grammar is only a philosophy about language»<sup>38</sup>. His post-Kantian disdain for form blinded Herder to the role of formal expression in Leibniz’s philosophy. In effect, Herder cleaved Leibniz’s work on language from his logic. Herder’s signature views on language – that natural languages are essential to human thinking, that they are historical phenomena, essentially expressive, and the expressions of nations as well as individuals – drew only on Leibniz’s discussion of the material aspects of language, leaving the formal aspects aside.

---

<sup>33</sup> J. G. Herder, *Fragmente zur Deutschen Literatur*, ed. by Ch. G. Heyne, Stuttgart-Tübingen 1827, p. 144. See also Id., *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 5, pp. 152, 512; trans., pp. 54-55, 143, n. 167, 298-299.

<sup>34</sup> A VI, 6, p. 538.

<sup>35</sup> A IV, 6, p. 547.

<sup>36</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. by J. Bennett, P. Remnant, New York-Cambridge 1996, p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> J. G. Herder, *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, p. 5, p. 72; trans., p. 114. See also *ivi*, Bd. 5, p. 75; trans., p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Bd. 5, p. 82; trans., p. 121.

## 2. Leibniz and Humboldt's 18th-century Education

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) is often understood as working in the wake of Herder's philosophy of language<sup>39</sup>. Herder and Humboldt indeed shared many linguistic concerns, including their focus on individual natural languages, linguistic diversity, the origins of this diversity, phonology, the expressive properties of speech, the development and confluence of languages, and, finally, the influence of human language on thought and perception. However, of equal importance is the fact that Humboldt rejected Herder's disdain for form. While he emphasized the aesthetic and analogical properties of language, Humboldt also found an important place for formal and logical structure. For Humboldt, as for Leibniz, force had a formal component<sup>40</sup>. This synthesis of force and form in Humboldt's philosophy of language indicates a path to Leibniz, not through Herder but rather, through other 18th-century thinkers.

The conception of language as expressive was an instance of Leibniz's more general view that «whatever happens to the soul arises out of its own depths»<sup>41</sup> combined with his dynamic conception of a substance. Individual substances consist of an «energy» (*enérgeia*) or «a kind of nisus or primitive force of action [*vim agendi primitivam*]» that determines the series of states that constitute the substances<sup>42</sup>. This inner force is itself an «impression», «vestige», or «expression» of God<sup>43</sup>. Speech, then, is an action that expresses a person's inner energy or primitive force.

The concept of human language as an expression of energy plays a key role in Humboldt's philosophy of language. In his methodological and philosophical introduction to his massive book on the Austronesian language Kawi, published separately under the title *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung*, Humboldt declared that language is essentially a kind of force: «In itself it is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energieia*)». The action Humboldt had in mind «is the ever-repeated *mental labour* of making the *articulated* sound capable of expressing *thought* [*Ausdruck des Gedanken*]» and accordingly «language proper lies in the act of its real production»<sup>44</sup>. However, linguistic labor operates «in a *constant and uniform way*» and this constant and uniform element of the work of «elevating articulated

---

<sup>39</sup> See T. Borsche, *Sprachansichten: Der Begriff der menschlichen Rede in der Sprachphilosophie Wilhelm von Humboldts*, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 35-36, 82; J. Trabant, *Traditionen Humboldts*, Frankfurt 1990, pp. 51-52; C. Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Linguistic Capacity*, Cambridge 2016, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> See M. Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, cit., pp. 83-115; R. H. Robins, *Leibniz and Wilhelm von Humboldt and the History of Comparative Linguistics*, in T. De Mauro, L. Formigari (eds), *Leibniz, Humboldt, and the Origins of Comparativism*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1990, pp. 85-102.

<sup>41</sup> L p. 338 (*GP II*, pp. 58-59).

<sup>42</sup> L pp. 498, 501, 504 (*GP IV*, pp. 504, 507, 512).

<sup>43</sup> L p. 501 (*GP IV*, p. 507).

<sup>44</sup> W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von A. Leitzmann, Berlin 1907, Bd. 7, p. 46; trans., W. Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language*

sound to an expression of thought [...] constitutes the *form* of language»<sup>45</sup>. This is a major difference between Herder and Humboldt, namely, that language as an expression of structured power is not primarily an expression of emotion or feeling, but primarily an expression of thought, which is an «*intellectual activity*, entirely mental, entirely internal»<sup>46</sup>.

The most significant influence on Humboldt came from his philosophical education in 1785 by his tutor Johann Jakob Engel (1741-1802). Engel drew on Leibniz as well as works in the Leibniz-Wolff tradition, in particular the *Vernunftlehre* by Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768). Humboldt took detailed lecture notes that Engel then checked and corrected. The lectures included an extended overview of the *Monadology*<sup>47</sup>, a work that ignited in Humboldt what he described as a kind of religious enthusiasm<sup>48</sup>. Engel's lectures emphasized that for Leibniz a substance is identical to a force, in particular a force of representation (*Vorstellungskraft*), which is essential even to the apparently most lifeless object<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, forces are not mere possibilities, but something actual and effective<sup>50</sup>. A force is an «uninterrupted striving to enact something» and hence a soul always has perceptions<sup>51</sup>.

According to Engel, every force is rule-governed, and human reason is defined as a force to reflect according to rules, fundamentally the formal principles of identity and non-contradiction<sup>52</sup>. Concepts themselves are forces and the soul draws upon all its active powers in the formation of concepts<sup>53</sup>. Human beings are acquainted with force in their own case when they experience mental endeavor and effort. Engel argued that while David Hume was correct in his analysis of the power of external objects in terms of temporal correlation and constant conjunction, he failed to notice that human beings are directly acquainted with the power of their own mental activity, the most fundamental being the force of imagination<sup>54</sup>.

The discussion of force in Engel's lectures drew on Reimarus's *Vernunftlehre*, in particular the Leibnizian position that force is not just a disposition or ability, but «a striving [*Bemühen*] to enact something»<sup>55</sup>. Reimarus tied his concept of force to Leibniz and Wolff, writing that they were «the great men who have

---

*Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, intr. by M. Losonsky and trans. by P. Heath, Cambridge 1999, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47; trans., p. 50.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53; trans., p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 426-432.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 466.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 427-428.

<sup>50</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 365, 413-414, 431.

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 365, 370.

<sup>52</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 365-366, 406.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

<sup>55</sup> H. S. Reimarus, *Die Vernunftlehre als eine Anweisung zum richtigen Gebrauche der Vernunft in dem Erkenntniss der Wahrheit*, Hamburg 1766<sup>3</sup>, p. 7.



[...] written so beautifully about forces»<sup>56</sup>. Accordingly, force is introduced at the very beginning of Engel's lectures in the introduction to logic. Logic is objectively a set of rules for examining and discovering truths, and subjectively, a skill to do this. Therefore, logic is an art because it involves «the innate skill to make something following these rules»<sup>57</sup> even if it is made badly. Then in his notes, Humboldt entered the following aside: «In the fine arts what is produced is called an energy [*Energie*], that is, if I understand it correctly, a force [*Kraft*] that causes a change in the soul of the perceiver», and he cited the essay *Von der Kraft (Energie) in den Werken der schönen Künste* by Johann Georg Sulzer (1720-1779)<sup>58</sup>.

Sulzer had developed his philosophy under the aegis of Leibnizian and Wolffian principles. He described Leibniz as a «great man» whose theory of concepts in the *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* laid the foundations for a «truly useful logic» and «opened up a whole new field that in the meantime has delivered many important truths to psychology»<sup>59</sup>. Citing Wolff, Sulzer affirmed the Leibnizian thesis that the soul's essential active power is to produce representations. Moreover, this power is to be understood as an appetite or continuous striving to bring about representations, and consciousness is «apperception», not mere perception<sup>60</sup>. Sulzer held with Leibniz that representation is the act of representing unity in multiplicity, which is pleasurable, and that something is beautiful when it brings about a heightened activity of representation and the associated pleasure<sup>61</sup>. Accordingly, Sulzer claimed that beauty is a kind of force that changes the soul of the perceiver.

Sulzer apologized for using the term «energy», but wrote that he needed a word to indicate that in language as in matters of taste there is a «superior force», something Horace called «*acer spiritus et vis in verbis et rebus*»<sup>62</sup>. Sulzer used the term again in an essay on the *Properties of the Soul insofar as they are Similar to the Properties of Matter*, arguing that the mind's «energy» is independent of apperception<sup>63</sup>. His use of «energy» could have a variety of sources. An important proximate antecedent was James Harris (1709-1780), who in *Hermes* (1751) defined speech or discourse as «the joint Energy of our best and noblest Faculties, (that is to say, of our reason, and our social affections)»<sup>64</sup>. In other words, «speech or discourse is a publishing of some Energy or Motion of [the] soul»<sup>65</sup>. The

---

<sup>56</sup> H. S. Reimarus, *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere, hauptsächlich über ihre Kunsttriebe*, Göttingen 1982, pp. 216, 411.

<sup>57</sup> W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., Bd. 7, p. 364.

<sup>58</sup> J. G. Sulzer, *Johann Georg Sulzers vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Leipzig 1782<sup>2</sup>, Bd. 1, pp. 124-147.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-9, 202, 351-352.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>64</sup> J. Harris, *The Works of James Harris*, Oxford 1841, p. 117.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) also used 'energy' to refer to a higher mental power.

However, Sulzer certainly also drew on Leibniz, as he did so often in his philosophy. Sulzer's discussion of the «energy» in works of art had a striking antecedent in Leibniz's *De ipsa natura* (1698), where he referred to the «energy [ἐνέργεια] in created things» and explicitly compared nature, as «God's artifact», to works of art<sup>66</sup>. In a published response of 1702 to a critic, Leibniz wrote that his view was that «created things [have] a certain active nature, power, force, energy, distinct from the power of God»<sup>67</sup>. Leibniz used the term «energeia» as early as 1685 in his reading notes *Logica de notionibus*<sup>68</sup>. His first use of the Greek 'ἐνέργεια' was in notes written in 1685 on Martin Fogel's (1634-1675) *Lexicon philosophicum*. According to these notes, Fogel maintained that the Latin «*Actus* signifies not only ἐντελέχεια [entelechy] but also ἐνέργειαν [energy]»<sup>69</sup>.

A few years later in 1689 Leibniz took extensive notes on Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the World* (1678), where Cudworth adapted the term 'energy' from Plotinus's use of 'ἐνέργεια' for an incorporeal, unextended, and active power that is more basic than matter and responsible for all life, including mental life<sup>70</sup>. In order to make his case that in ancient Greek philosophy atoms were not material, Cudworth quoted long passages in Greek, mostly by Plotinus, about ἐνέργεια<sup>71</sup>. Leibniz's reading notes do not include the Greek word, but he used the Latin word to highlight that for Cudworth incorporeal substances have a «power of action» and an «internal energy» (*energia interna*)<sup>72</sup>. In a letter of 1704 to Lady Masham, Leibniz praised Cudworth's «intellectual system» and agreed «that an incorporeal substance is an energy or internal active force»<sup>73</sup>.

Leibniz's close reading of Cudworth in 1689 certainly encouraged or even confirmed Leibniz's use of 'energy', including the Greek word, and thus played a role in its appearance in 1698 in *De ipsa natura* for a force more basic than a mechanical or material force. Humboldt's use of 'energeia' in *Über die Verschiedenheit*, then, has at least some roots in Leibniz's use of that term via Sulzer's essay on art and energy. The reference to Sulzer's essay is important because Sulzer specifically tied energy to language and artistic creation, which were core features of Humboldt's conception of natural language as a creative expression of imagination and feeling<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>66</sup> L, pp. 498-499 (*GP IV*, pp. 504-505).

<sup>67</sup> *GP IV*, p. 594.

<sup>68</sup> *A VI*, 4, pp. 1275, 1277.

<sup>69</sup> *A VI*, 4, p. 1317.

<sup>70</sup> See S. Hutton, *Salving the Phenomena of Mind: Energy, Hegemonikon, and Sympathy in Cudworth*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 25(3), 2017, pp. 465-486.

<sup>71</sup> See R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Andover 1837, pp. 116, 225, 227, 522, 537, 541, 552, 754, 763, 767, 785.

<sup>72</sup> *A IV*, 6, p. 1945. See R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> *GP III*, p. 368.

<sup>74</sup> See W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., Bd. 7, pp. 86-87. See also K. Müller-Vollmer, *Von der Poetik zur Linguistik – Wilhelm von Humboldt und der roman-*

However, the reference to Sulzer is not the only source of the concept of energy in Humboldt. Engel in his lectures to Humboldt explicitly drew on Leibniz's *Meditationes* in which Leibniz emphasized that human ideas are not just «some kind of little pictures, but affections or modifications of our mind» that involve motions of the mind, including «minute motions» too small to notice, already implying that there are mental powers<sup>75</sup>. Moreover, in explaining clear knowledge Leibniz made a striking comparison to artists «who correctly judge what has been done well or done badly» in a work of art, but are not able to justify their judgments<sup>76</sup>. Sulzer, as noted above, also admired Leibniz's *Meditationes* and arguably they left a deep impression on the thinking of both Sulzer and Engel, and hence on that of Humboldt<sup>77</sup>.

But it is also relevant that in the same year that Engel tutored Humboldt, Humboldt wrote an abstract of James Harris's *Treatise Concerning Art*, according to which the causal «effect of art is [...] either a work [*Werk*] or an energy [*Energie*]»<sup>78</sup>. Humboldt was referring to a passage where Harris declares the end of art is either «in some energy, or some work»<sup>79</sup>. As noted above, Harris also characterized speech in *Hermes* as «a publishing of some energy», and given Humboldt's abstract, Harris cannot be ignored as another source of Humboldt's slogan that language is an *Energeia*<sup>80</sup>. In sum, Humboldt drew on mutually reinforcing sources that included Leibniz, Sulzer, and Harris; but Leibniz is not a negligible stream in this confluence of sources because he explicitly combined energy with formal properties, which became an essential component of Humboldt's concept of *Energeia*.

While Engel assigned a central role to formal principles in his lectures to Humboldt, linguistic form itself does not appear in these lectures. Language was only a minor topic of these lectures. However, Humboldt in his notes maintained that words are arbitrary signs of things and that they can play a role in the formation of concepts, and Engel corrected this in parentheses with the comment that they are «not so completely arbitrary», echoing the *Nouveaux essais*<sup>81</sup>. There is also a brief reference to Herder's *Abhandlung*, but only to mention that this is a difficult topic because thought and language are interdependent, and that Engel will discuss this more later. This discussion does not occur in Humboldt's lecture notes<sup>82</sup>.

---

*tische Sprachbegriff*, in K. Hammacher (hrsg.), *Universalismus und Wissenschaft im Werk und Wirken der Brüder Humboldt*, Frankfurt am Main 1976, pp. 224-240.

<sup>75</sup> L, p. 294 (A VI, 4, pp. 591-592).

<sup>76</sup> L, p. 291 (A VI, 4, p. 586).

<sup>77</sup> T. Borsche, *Sprachansichten*, cit., pp. 156-168.

<sup>78</sup> W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., Bd. 7, p. 359.

<sup>79</sup> J. Harris, *The Works of James Harris*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> See H. Aarsleff, *The Context and Sense of Humboldt's Statement that Language 'ist kein Werk (Ergon) sondern eine Tätigkeit (Energeia)'*, cit.

<sup>81</sup> A VI, 6, p. 371.

<sup>82</sup> See W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., Bd. 7, p. 372.

In 1795 Humboldt turned to linguistic form in his first focused discussion of language ten years after the lectures in an unpublished short essay *Über Denken und Sprechen*. In it, Humboldt argued that thinking creates unities or concepts that can be separated and combined in new ways, and that the articulated sounds of speech also consist of elements that can be put together in multiple ways that conform to the structure of concepts<sup>83</sup>. Humboldt maintained that the human voice is needed because its sounds make the «most cutting» distinctions in the temporal passage of experience. The human made sounds are terse and as their sound dies away, they leave a lively and rousing impression. These sounds, then, are combined and separated in accordance with the structure of concepts, and this is the basis for linguistic form. Linguistic form also plays a role in human communication. Speech motivates human beings to think along with each other, which distinguishes speech from emotive expression that only motivates people to act, and not to think along with each other<sup>84</sup>. However, emotive expressions that are not parts of speech still have role to play, namely when a person is not able to think about the subject anymore and can only express his emotions. The only role emotions have in the case of speech is to influence the strength of the articulated tone.

Humboldt felt that linguistic studies so far had ignored this inner structure of language where linguistic and mental forms intersect, and this became his life-long project. Humboldt began developing this conception of the intersection of mental and linguistic structure in 1810 in a short fragment that was to be an introduction to the study of language<sup>85</sup>. He argued that this structure has an «inner harmony» and, more importantly, that linguistic structure is infinite: «every language is by nature infinite». For Humboldt, the infinity of language was a difficult problem for the scientific study of language<sup>86</sup>. In short, while Humboldt's discussion of the intersection of linguistic and mental form belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his turn to this topic already occurred at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Conclusion

Leibniz's work on language in the *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken* and the *Nouveaux essais* were both published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and influenced that century's philosophical thinking about language. Herder's conception of language as fundamentally both an individual and a national expression of feeling borrowed from Leibniz's views on human language as expressive and hence as diverse with both individual and national features. Unfortunately, Herder did not preserve Leibniz's focus on the formal features of language. This was preserved by other 18th-cen-

---

<sup>83</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 582. See also H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, cit., pp. 341-342; K. Müller-Vollmer, *Thinking and Speaking*, «Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal», 11, 1989 pp. 199-200.

<sup>84</sup> W. Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., Bd. 7, p. 583.

<sup>85</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 625.

<sup>86</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 620-621.

tury writers, in particular Engel, Reimarus, Sulzer, and Harris, who influenced Humboldt's synthesis of both the expressive, aesthetic and analogical properties of language, on the one hand, and its formal and logical structures, on the other.

Michael Losonsky  
Colorado State University  
✉ michael.losonsky@colostate.edu

## Bibliography

Abbreviations of Leibniz Works:

- A = *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, hrsg. von die Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Darmstadt and Berlin, Akademie Verlag 1923-  
L = *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. by L. Loemker, Dordrecht, Kluwer 1970<sup>2</sup>.  
GP = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, hrsg. von C. I. Gerhardt, 7 Bde, Berlin, Weidmann 1875-1890.

- Aarsleff, H. 1982. *From Locke to Saussure*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.  
Aarsleff, H. 2007. *The Context and Sense of Humboldt's Statement that Language 'ist kein Werk (Ergon) sondern eine Tätigkeit (Energeia)'*, in E. Guimarães, D. L. P. de Barros, *History of Linguistics 2002*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 197-205.  
Arnold, G. 2005. „...der größte Mann den Deutschland in den neuern Zeiten gehabt“ – Herders Verhältnis zu Leibniz, «*Studia Leibnitiana*», 37, pp. 161-185.  
Borsche, T. 1981. *Sprachansichten: Der Begriff der menschlichen Rede in der Sprachphilosophie Wilhelm von Humboldts*, Stuttgart, Klett.  
Bennett, J. 1996. *Introduction*, in G. W. Leibniz, *New Essay on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. by P. Remnant, J. Bennett, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.  
Cudworth, R. 1837. *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 2 voll., Andover, Gould and Newman.  
Cudworth, R. 1996. *Treatise on Eternal and Immutable Morality with a Treatise of Freewill*, ed. by S. Hutton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.  
Harris, J. 1841. *The Works of James Harris*, Oxford, Thomas Tegg.  
Herder, J. G. 1827. *Fragmente zur Deutschen Literatur*, ed. by C. G. Heyne, Stuttgart-Tübingen, Cotta'sche Buchhandlung.  
Herder, J. G. 1881-1892. *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan, Berlin, Weidmann'sche Buchhandlung.

- Herder, J. G. 2002. *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by M. Forster, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Humboldt, W. 1907. *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by A. Leitzmann, 15 Bde, Berlin, Behr Verlag.
- Humboldt, W. 1999. *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, intr. by M. Losonsky, trans. by P. Heath, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, S. 2017. *Salving the Phenomena of Mind: Energy, Hegemonikon, and Sympathy in Cudworth*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 25(3), pp. 465-486.
- Leibniz, G. W. 1996. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. by J. Bennett, P. Remnant, New York-Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Losonsky, M. 2006. *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Müller-Vollmer, K. 1976. *Von der Poetik zur Linguistik – Wilhelm von Humboldt und der romantische Sprachbegriff*, in Hammacher, K. (hrsg.), *Universalismus und Wissenschaft im Werk und Wirken der Brüder Humboldt*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, pp. 224-240.
- Müller-Vollmer, K. 1989. *Thinking and Speaking: Herder, Humboldt and Saussurean Semiotics*, «Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal», 11, pp. 193-214.
- Pénisson, P. 2002. *Trieb et énergie chez Herder*, «Revue germanique internationale», 18, pp. 45-52.
- Reimarus, H. S. 1766<sup>3</sup>. *Die Vernunftlehre als eine Anweisung zum richtigen Gebrauche der Vernunft in dem Erkenntniss der Wahrheit*, Hamburg, Johann Carl Bohn.
- Reimarus, H. S. 1772<sup>4</sup>. *Die vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion*, Hamburg, Johann Carl Bohn.
- Reimarus, H. S. 1982 [1760<sup>1</sup>]. *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere, hauptsächlich über ihre Kunsttriebe*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Robins, R. H. 1990. *Leibniz and Wilhelm von Humboldt and the History of Comparative Linguistics*, in T. De Mauro, L. Formigari (eds.), *Leibniz, Humboldt, and the Origins of Comparativism*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 85-102.
- Sulzer, J. G. 1782<sup>2</sup>. *Johann Georg Sulzers vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 1, Leipzig, Weidmanns Erben.
- Taylor, C. 2016. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Linguistic Capacity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Trabant, J. 1990. *Traditionen Humboldts*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Wolff, C. 1963. *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill.