

Articoli/1

«*Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache*»

Foundations of Linguistic Thinking in the European Enlightenment

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This contribution is dedicated to the foundations of linguistic thinking in the European Enlightenment. Starting from Herder's treatise on the origin of language, the nature of language, the essence of the linguistic sign, the relationship between language and thought or language and society and problems connected to the abuse of words are discussed. In the context of the origin of language debate, the question is raised whether man had been endowed with language by nature or whether he had merely been given the faculty of speech in the sense of a virtual potency either by God or due to his inherent genetic predisposition as a human being. As a typical methodological approach of the Enlightenment, hypothetical experiments are shown which, in narrative form, present 'test subjects' such as wild children in the wake of the Psammetichus experiment. This procedure promises information about the natural faculties of man and seems particularly suitable for explaining the zero point of language genesis.

1. The 18th Century as a Century of Language Discussion

In the historiography of linguistics, the 18th century was characterised by demanding a large variety of approaches. Ulrich Ricken, for example, described this period in France as «a century of language discussion»¹. Since the preoccupation with the role of language for the individual and society in the 18th century also took place in Italy, England, Germany, Spain and Russia within the framework of the respective national characteristics of the Enlightenment, it seems

¹ «Linguistische Fragen waren für die französische Aufklärung so aktuell, daß man das 18. Jahrhundert in Frankreich ein Jahrhundert der Sprachdiskussion nennen könnte» (U. Ricken et al. (hrsg.), *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung. Zur Geschichte der Sprachtheorien des 18. Jahrhunderts und ihrer europäischen Rezeption nach der Französischen Revolution*, Berlin 1990, p. 66).

legitimate to classify the entire epoch as the «century of language discussion»². Indeed, even before the establishment of linguistics as an independent academic discipline in the 19th century, the period of the Enlightenment proved to be a worthwhile subject of research due to the following factors: the multifaceted preoccupation with language, the manifold communication processes between scholars, philosophers and grammarians and the clearly emerging need for language descriptions and theoretical reflections on language. Last but not least, the linguistic thinking of the Enlightenment also provided important impulses for language reflection in Europe in the subsequent period, which shall be discussed in more detail in the following³.

In the 18th century, there were lively discussions in the European *république des lettres* about the nature of language, the relationship between language and society and the relationship between language and thought, for example. Scholars wondered what language actually consisted of, whether man had been endowed with language by nature or whether he had merely been given the faculty of speech in the sense of a virtual potency either by God or due to his inherent genetic predisposition as a human being. In this context, it was also discussed whether Men are human beings in the sense of René Descartes' (1596-1650) *cogito*, primarily due to their ability to think. In terms of the Cartesian conception, language was to be considered as the externally tangible manifestation of thought processes taking place in the human mind. This also made it possible to distinguish humans from animals, which, like parrots, were capable of imitating to a considerable extent, but did not have a creative use of language⁴ linked to a conscious use of meaning:

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³ M. Duchet, *Anthropologie et Histoire au Siècle des Lumières. Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot*, Paris 1971; L. Formigari, *Linguistica e antropologia nel secondo Settecento*, Messina 1970; L. Formigari, *L'esperienza e il segno. La filosofia del linguaggio tra Illuminismo e Restaurazione*, Roma 1990; A. D. Megill, *The Enlightenment Debate on the Origin of Language*, New York 1974; D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire (1600–1800). Rationalisme et révolutions positivistes*, Genève 1978; R. Salvucci, *Sviluppi della problematica del linguaggio nel XVIII secolo – Condillac Rousseau Smith*, Rimini 1982; U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie in der französischen Aufklärung*, Berlin 1984; G. Haßler, *Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung zur Rolle der Sprache im Erkenntnisprozeß*, Berlin 1984; L. Rosiello, *Linguistica illuminista*, Bologna 1967; A. Robinet, *Le langage à l'âge classique*, Paris 1978; J. Gessinger, W. von Rahden, (hrsg.), *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, 2 Bde, Berlin 1989; J. Gessinger, *Auge & Ohr. Studien zur Erforschung der Sprache am Menschen. 1700-1850*, Berlin 1994; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts. Die Berliner Preisfrage nach dem Ursprung der Sprache (1771)*, Berlin-New York 2003; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2 Bde, Berlin-New York 2009; J. Trabant, *Neue Wissenschaft von alten Zeichen: Vicos Sematologie*, Frankfurt/Main 1994; J. Trabant, *Artikulationen. Historische Anthropologie der Sprache*, Frankfurt/Main 1998, among others, make important contributions to linguistic-philosophical and anthropological problem areas of the 18th century.

⁴ On the role of the 'creative use of language', compare the controversially discussed book by N. Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics. A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, New York-London 1966 (Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 42-43).

Or, par ces deux mesmes moyens, on peut aussy connoistre la difference qui est entre les hommes & les bestes. Car c'est vne chose bien remarquable, qu'il n'y a point d'hommes si hebetés & si stupides, sans en excepter mesme les insensez, qu'ils ne soient capables d'arrenger ensemble diuerses paroles, & d'en composer vn discours par lequel ils facent entendre leurs pensées; et qu'au contraire, il n'y a point d'autre animal, tant parfait & tant heureusement né qu'il puisse estre, qui face le semblable. Ce qui n'arriue pas de ce qu'ils ont faute d'organes, car on voit que les pies & les perroquets peuuent proferer des paroles ainsi que nous, & toutefois ne peuuent parler ainsi que nous, c'est a dire, en tesmoignant qu'ils pensent ce qu'ils disent; au lieu que les hommes qui, estans nés sourds & muets, sont priuez des organes qui seruent aux autres pour parler, autant ou plus que les bestes, ont coustume d'inuenter d'eux mesmes quelques signes, par lesquels ils se font entendre a ceux qui, estans ordinairement avec eux, ont loysir d'apprendre leur langue. Et cecy ne tesmoigne pas seulement que les bestes ont moins de raison que les hommes mais qu'elles n'en ont point du tout⁵.

Descartes' views of the beasts as mere *automata*, devoid of reason and even consciousness, were questioned by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780), for example, who in his *Traité des animaux* (1755) attributed the first rudiments of conscious communication to animals⁶. For Condillac, the language of animals is expressed in the form of inarticulate cries that are underpinned by gestures. He refers to this form of communication as "langage d'action", a language of action:

Les cris inarticulés et les actions du corps sont les signes de leurs pensées [des pensées des bêtes]; mais pour cela il faut que les mêmes sentimens occasionnent dans chacun les mêmes cris et les mêmes mouuemens; et, par conséquent, il faut qu'ils se ressemblent jusques dans l'organisation extérieure. Ceux qui habitent l'air, et ceux qui rampent sur la terre, ne sauroient même se communiquer les idées qu'ils ont en commun⁷.

Apart from the differentiation between human spoken language and animal forms of communication, language theory debates also raised the question of how articulated spoken language differed from sign language and whether sign language was a communication system comparable to articulated spoken language in terms of its efficiency. In particular, Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* gave this discussion an important impetus⁸.

⁵ R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode & Essais* [1637], Édition mise à jour par B. Rochot, in *Œuvres de Descartes*, publiées par Ch. Adam, P. Tannery, Nouvelle présentation, en co-édition avec le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1982, pp. 57 f.

⁶ While Condillac's criticism of Descartes' conception of animals as *automata* is characterised by great objectivity, Bougeant's *Amusement philosophique sur le langage des bestes* (1739) exposes it to ridicule. Descartes' view of the beasts as *automata* is perverted in La Mettrie's treatises *L'homme machine* (1748) and *Traité de l'âme* (1751), as in these materialistic depictions of Man, the latter is reduced to physical processes such as breathing, blood circulation, excretory processes etc. and is thus equated with the animal.

⁷ E. Condillac, *Traité des animaux*, in *Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, texte établi et présenté par G. Le Roy, Corpus général des Philosophes Français, XXXIII, Paris 1947 [1755], II, IV, 361a-361b (my italics).

⁸ Cfr. J. Gessinger, *Auge & Ohr*, cit., pp. 210-228; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 361 f.

These problems (and others) were discussed intensively in the context of the fundamental anthropological question of the origin of language and the emergence of the diversity of individual languages, which was central to the Enlightenment's reflection on language. For example, the title of this article «*Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache*» marks the beginning of Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744-1803) *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, a treatise on the origin of language, which was awarded a prize by the Berlin Academy, or more precisely the Prussian Society of Sciences (*Preußische Sozietät der Wissenschaften*)⁹, in 1771. The beginning of Herder's prize-winning essay reads as follows:

Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache. Alle heftigen, und die heftigsten unter den heftigen, die schmerzhaften Empfindungen seines Körpers, alle starken Leidenschaften seiner Seele äußern sich unmittelbar in Geschrei, in Töne, in wilde, unartikulierte Laute. Ein leidendes Thier so wohl, als der Held Philoktet, wenn es der Schmerz anfället, wird wimmern! Wird ächzen!¹⁰

The formulation «*Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache*» seems as remarkable as it is misleading: Herder is by no means implying that man was originally an animal. And that he developed from an animal to a human state. Nor does Herder mean to imply that man has always possessed language and that the question of the origin of language is therefore obsolete. In fact, Herder is not talking here about what is actually meant by 'language'. He understands 'language' as those natural, spontaneous emotional cries that both humans and numerous animal species emit¹¹. For Herder, such spontaneous expressions of emotion are already a kind of language, an emotional language that cannot be manipulated at will. However, remnants of this original natural language of primal screams continue to exist in the artificial language of civilised humans¹². In contrast to Condillac, Herder does not recognise the origin of human articulated speech in these spontaneous, inarticulate cries, as the animal-instinctive character of this form of expression does not seem compatible with the arbitrariness and intentionality of human speech:

Aber ich kann nicht meine Verwunderung bergen, daß Philosophen, das ist Leute, die deutliche Begriffe suchen, je haben auf den Gedanken kommen können, aus diesem Geschrei der Empfindungen den Ursprung Menschlicher Sprache zu erklären: denn ist diese nicht offenbar ganz etwas anderes? Alle Thiere bis auf den stummen Fisch tönen ihre Empfindung; deßwegen aber hat doch kein Thier, selbst nicht das Vollkommenste,

⁹ On the history of the Berlin Academy, its institutional foundations and prize issues as well as its relevance for the European republic of scholars of the 18th century, see A. von Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*. 3 Bde., Berlin 1900; A. D. Megill, *The Enlightenment Debate*, cit.; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

¹⁰ J. G. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Text, Materialien, Kommentar von W. Pross, Hanser Literatur-Kommentare, 12, München 1978 [1772], p. 9.

¹¹ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 564.

¹² Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 566.

den geringsten, eigentlichen Anfang zu einer Menschlichen Sprache. Man bilde und verfeinere und organisire dies Geschrei, wie man wolle; *wenn kein Verstand dazukommt, diesen Ton mit Absicht zu brauchen: so sehe ich nicht, wie nach dem vorigen Naturgesetze je Menschliche, willkührliche Sprache werde*¹³.

Herder does not attribute the origin of language to spontaneous, inarticulate cries, but to a genuinely human basic ability, which he calls *Besonnenheit* ('awareness', 'attentiveness', 'alertness'):

Der Mensch, in den Zustand von Besonnenheit gesetzt, der ihm eigen ist, und diese Besonnenheit (Reflexion) zum erstenmal frei wirkend, hat Sprache erfunden. Denn was ist Reflexion? Was ist Sprache? Diese Besonnenheit ist ihm charakteristisch eigen und seiner Gattung wesentlich, so auch Sprache und eigne Erfindung der Sprache¹⁴.

This ability to reflect, which precedes the usage of reflection in time, implies the specific human disposition to filter out and separate individual characteristics from the stream of simultaneously incoming sensory impressions:

Der Mensch beweiset Reflexion, wenn die Kraft seiner Seele so frei würket, daß sie in dem ganzen Ocean von Empfindungen, der sie durch alle Sinnen durchrauschet, Eine Welle, wenn ich so sagen darf, absondern, sie anhalten, die Aufmerksamkeit auf sie richten, und sich bewußt seyn kann, daß sie aufmerke¹⁵.

It is therefore a form of inner alertness, of attentiveness, which enables a structurally orientated approach to the world. In Herder's anthropological conception, awareness is the basis of language and thinking and thus makes a fundamental contribution to the humanisation of the individual. In line with sensualistic theories of language, Herder emphasises the importance of hearing as the middle of all senses for the perception of the world, since in his «oto-centric view of the world»¹⁶, language arises from an inner listening to the environment in a process of conscious assimilation of auditory impressions. Specifically, Herder cites the example of the sheep, whose most striking feature is not its soft white wool, but its unmistakable bleating. The bleating of the sheep becomes, as it were, a primal characteristic that is distinguished by the ear from various environmental sounds and noises: «Ha, Du bist das Blökende!»¹⁷. In Herder's conception, this bleating becomes the mark of the idea of the sheep and ultimately the designation for the sheep¹⁸.

As the example of Herder makes it clear, conceptions regarding the theory of language were not only an expression of philosophical positions during the Enlightenment, but often even a constitutive component of them.

¹³ J. G. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, cit., pp. 18 f. (my italics).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁶ Cfr. J. Trabant, *Artikulationen. Historische Anthropologie der Sprache*, cit., pp. 113 f.

¹⁷ J. G. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, cit., p. 33.

¹⁸ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 583 f.

Anthropological problems such as the Cartesian dualism of body and mind which was oftentimes conceived as an obstacle to overcome, the Enlightenment's historical conception of man, the vision of the development and perfectibility of human faculties, cognitive processes as well as processes of socialisation were also discussed within the context of language theory. Especially in their statements on problems of language, philosophers such as Voltaire (1694-1778), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), Christian Wolff (1679-1754) or Johann Gottfried Herder expressed their fundamental positions as thinkers of the Enlightenment. And in particular the question of the origin of language, with all its far-reaching anthropological and epistemological implications, proved to be one of the most important fundamental problems of the linguistic anthropology of the European Enlightenment, which is why it should be at the centre of our further considerations.

Beyond all the ideological and philosophical differentiation and national specificity of their statements on language in general and historical languages in particular, the secularised view of man and society which developed at the height of the Enlightenment was combined with a corresponding further development and re-evaluation of the linguistic positions of the 17th century. At the peak of the Enlightenment, a secularised view of man and society manifested itself which also strongly influenced the linguistic thinking of that time. In 1756, the theologian and demographer Johann Peter Süßmilch (1707-1767) gave a lecture to the Berlin Academy entitled *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (published in 1766) in which he defended the idea that language was a divine gift. His main argument in favour of the divine origin of language was the systematic character of language, which he conceived as a reflection of divine order¹⁹. Around the last third of the 18th century, the idea of a divine origin of language was abandoned – not only by the Berlin Academy – in favour of a determined search for explanations to describe the origin of language as a human creation. Condillac, for example, in his conception going beyond Locke, saw language and thought as the results of a long reciprocal development in the history of mankind:

Voraussetzung für diese neue Erklärung der menschlichen Denkfähigkeit ist die Eröffnung einer historisch-genetischen Perspektive, die außerhalb der Sichtweise von Locke lag und in der Condillac für das Denken und die Sprache einen gemeinsamen historischen Ursprung und eine wechselseitige Entwicklung ansetzt. Aus dieser Hypothese geht als weiterer neuer Aspekt gegenüber Locke die Annahme einer

¹⁹ Cfr. H. Aarsleff, *The Tradition of Condillac: the Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder*, in Hymes, D. H. (ed.), *Studies in the History of Linguistics. Traditions and Paradigms*, Bloomington 1974, pp. 93-156; A. D. Megill, *The Enlightenment Debate*, cit.

konstitutiven Rolle der Sprache für das Denken hervor, die beträchtlich über Lockes Bemerkungen zur Funktion der Sprache als Instrument des Denkens hinausgeht²⁰.

The problem of language had already gained great philosophical relevance in the 17th century in the context of the conflict between the sensory faculty of imagination and the physical or spiritual nature of human beings²¹. With the explanation of language and thought as the results of a long reciprocal development in the history of mankind, statements on the nature and origin of language were given a new significance in the Enlightenment. Continuing in a scientific direction, the debate about the origin of language is linked to the approaches of evolutionary thinking at the time, whose theoretical aspects of language can be found again in the scientific transformation theory of the 20th century²².

2. Narrative Explanations of the Origin of Language

In the following section, it shall be demonstrated how, in the course of the 18th century, the focus of the origin of language-debate shifted from the basic assumption of a divine origin well fitting into a theo-central worldview to the conviction that – within the framework of the Enlightenment's concept of *perfectibilité* – language could be conceived as a human invention which was based on Men's natural faculties.

Until around the middle of the 18th century, the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel provided an explanatory model for hypotheses on the origin of language which had been hardly questioned for centuries²³. This biblical myth was topically placed at the beginning of considerations on the origin of language and linguistic diversity. It is noteworthy that references to the legendary Tower of Babel are widespread not only in treatises on the philosophy of language, but also in grammars and sometimes even in more practically orientated language textbooks of the time²⁴.

Reflections on the episode of linguistic confusion are often linked to hypotheses about the original language of mankind, which was considered irretrievably lost after the curse of Babel. It was common practice to proclaim specific individual languages as the original language in order to secure their

²⁰ U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., p. 95.

²¹ Cfr. U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., p. 11

²² Cfr. U. Ricken et al. (hrsg.). *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit., pp. 272-273.

²³ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 25.

²⁴ This legend is of such great plasticity (cfr. U. Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, Roma-Bari 1993, p. 15) that it is known to have been a source of inspiration for a large number of artists in the visual arts over the centuries. The best-known depiction which, due to its diversity, also deeply influenced other artists in following periods is certainly the one by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (ca. 1525-1569), which can be admired in the museum of the Vienna Kunstverein.

supremacy over other individual languages on the basis of this privilege. As early as the 17th century, such nationalistically motivated endeavours to give certain languages the status of an original language led to bizarre but also amusing anecdotes about the origin of languages. The Swedish scholar Anders Kempe (1622-1689), for example, assumes in his work *Die Sprachen des Paradieses* (1688) that God spoke Swedish to Adam when he instructed him to name the animals in the biblical episode of the *nominatio rerum*, i.e. the naming of things by Adam in Genesis 2²⁵. Adam, for his part, answered God in Danish and the nasty serpent addressed him in the sinful, superficial language of seduction *par excellence*, – of course in French!

The biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel was also often used in the 17th century, and to some extent even in the 18th century, to describe the origin of the diversity of languages. It was quoted by authors such as Claude Duret (1565-1611), John Bulwer (1606-1656), Christoph Crinesius (1584-1629), Samuel Bochart (1599-1667), Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670), John Wilkins (1614-1672) and Jean Frain du Tremblay (1641-1724), with different emphases in each case. In this context, the assumption was very widespread in the 17th century (e.g. among scholars such as Kircher, Duret, Crinesius, Du Bartas) that although God had punished the people of Babel for their arrogance with the confusion of language, primitive Hebrew had remained exempt from God's vengeance and therefore continued to be spoken by some of Noah's descendants after the Flood²⁶.

In discussions concerning the origin of linguistic diversity, the episode of linguistic confusion is linked to considerations on etymologies that are intended to legitimise alleged original languages, such as when reference is made to the tribe of Heber, from which Hebrew is derived as the original language of the human race. However, numerous etymologies of this kind can be classified as outgrowths of apologetic endeavours aimed at proclaiming different national languages as the original language. These endeavours culminated as early as the Renaissance in the questionable etymologies of Goropius Becanus in his *Origines Antwerpianae* (1569) and were later classified by Leibniz in the *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain* (1765), which exposed them to ridicule²⁷.

What these ideas about the origin of language have in common is their narrative style, which is closely orientated towards biblical stories and reports. In addition to the Tower of Babel, these include the aforementioned *nominatio rerum* or the *Table of Nations* found in Genesis 10, which lists Noah's descendants and is used as the basis for determining alleged primitive peoples and original languages²⁸.

²⁵ Cfr. A. Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel. Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, München 1995, III, 1, p. 1338.

²⁶ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 496 f.

²⁷ Cfr. *ibid.*, I, p. 25.

²⁸ U. Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, cit., pp. 15 f.

Narrative accounts of the origin of language or the development of individual languages are not primarily intended to convey general and reliable knowledge about language that is neither marginal nor random²⁹, but they cannot do without basic concepts of language theory. These do not have to be developed in terms of definitions, but their relations underlie the narrative representations.

The hypotheses put forward in the 18th century about the origin of language can essentially be divided into three main groups³⁰:

- (a) supernatural endowment of language to the first humans (e.g. Frain du Tremblay, Süßmilch, Beauzée);
- (b) language as the creation of humans endowed with the ability to think, which explains the origin of language both for a rationalist starting position and for Lockean sensualism, and also ensures agreement with a religious world view by assuming a thinking ability of supernatural origin (Herder);
- (c) common emergence and development of language and thought in the course of human history (Condillac).

At the peak of the debate on the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the debate on the origin of language became increasingly active. The connection between signs and thought and the relationship to the emergence of society placed the problem of the origin of language in the context of the discussion about a new historical picture of man and society. Around the middle of the 18th century, there was a distancing from Christian explanations of human history. The myth of Babel became increasingly less relevant as an explanation for the diversity of languages. Biblical accounts of language in general were no longer understood as explanations for the origin and development of language. At the height of the Enlightenment, a process of liberation from the theocentric world view, secularisation and emancipation from Christian dogma took place. Now, man's striving for perfectibility (*perfectibilité*) is at the centre of anthropological observation, which also finds expression in an almost unshakeable belief in progress, as it is summarised by the end of the century in Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet's (1743-1794) posthumously published *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794).

An impressive document of the Enlightenment's interest in the nature of man and his natural faculties is not least the Berlin Prize Question about the origin of language³¹. Many scholars of the 18th century (such as Giambattista

²⁹ Cfr. W. Köller, *Narrative Formen der Sprachreflexion: Interpretationen zu Geschichten über Sprache von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin-New York 2006, p. 22.

³⁰ Cfr. U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., p. 164; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 27.

³¹ In my doctoral dissertation (C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.), I dealt with this prize question in detail, including all 24 manuscripts available in the archive of the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (and one manuscript by

Vico (1668-1744), Condillac, Rousseau or Antoine-Yves Goguet (1716-1758)) felt a strong fascination for questions about the origin of man, society, language and thought and for genealogical patterns of explanation. They assumed that the essence of human beings and achievements could be understood by recognising the origin of things.

3. The Discussion on the *Abuse of Words*, Linguistic Criticism and the Origin of Language-debate in the Enlightenment

Within the framework of genealogical explanations of the origin and development of the human species, one of the major concerns of the language debate of the Enlightenment was, amongst others, the search for the nature of things and how they could be rightly expressed by the use of appropriate words. Scholars endeavoured to investigate the truth of knowledge and ideas that are fixed and communicated with the help of words, thus taking up the basic question already raised by Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) in his *Cratylus* concerning the relationship between words and things and the correctness of names³². During the Enlightenment, the fundamental discussion of the reliability of knowledge conveyed through language was increasingly combined with an awareness of the use of language as an instrument of deception and intellectual, often also political, subjugation³³.

The fact that such linguistic criticism could lead directly to social criticism is shown particularly impressively by the description of language as an instrument of the formation and consolidation of the domination of one part of society over the other in Rousseau's treatise on the origin and foundations of inequality among men (*Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* [= *Discours de l'inégalité*] (1755)). Thus, at the beginning of the second part of his work, Rousseau provides perhaps the most striking example of an abuse of words with direct social consequences when he uses the affirmation «Ceci est à moi» («This is my own»)³⁴ to justify the social inequality that then continues to develop³⁵.

Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791) to be found at the *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*), and reclassified Herder's contribution.

³² Cfr. E. Coseriu, *Der physei-thesei-Streit / Are words and things connected by nature or by convention?* In M. Dascal, D. Gerhardus, K. Lorenz, G. Meggle (hrsg.), *Sprachphilosophie / Philosophy of Language / La philosophie du langage. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, 2 Bde, Berlin-New York 1996, II, pp. 880-898; P. Schmitter (hrsg.), *Sprachtheorien der Neuzeit I. Der epistemologische Kontext neuzeitlicher Sprach- und Grammatiktheorien*, Tübingen 1999; R. Schraetter, *Die Sprachursprungsfrage in Platons 'Kratylos'*, in J. Gessinger, W. von Rahden (hrsg.), *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, 2 Bde, Berlin 1989, pp. 42-64.

³³ J. Trabant, *Mithridates im Paradies. Kleine Geschichte des Sprachdenkens*, München 2003; J. Schiewe, *Die Macht der Sprache. Eine Geschichte der Sprachkritik von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, München 1998.

³⁴ J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, édition publiée sous la direction de B. Gagnebin et M. Raymond, Paris 1964 [1755], III, p. 164.

³⁵ Cfr. U. Ricken, et al. (hrsg.), *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit., p. 73; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 370-426; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 17; II, pp. 1014-1015; R. Bach, *Die Rolle der Sprache in Jean-Jacques Rousseaus Erklärung der sozialen Ungleichheit*, «Zeitschrift für Phonetik, Sprachwissenschaft und Kommunikationsforschung», 29, 1976, pp. 488-490.

In Rousseau's view, the emergence of civilised society is the result of a fundamental act of linguistic abuse, an affirmation that rhetorically cements future social injustice. In contrast, he confronts the guilt-ridden emergence of the civilised society with his vision of a state of nature at the beginning of the history of humanity, in which there is no inequality due to the lack of social interaction and competition, as will arise in the civilisation through the invention of the arts and sciences. In his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1749, published 1751), which was awarded a prize by the Académie de Dijon, Rousseau had already emphasised that he considered the invention of the arts and sciences to be extremely harmful to humanity in the process of the development of civilised society. He considered different faculties and talents as the seed of human inequality, which was further reinforced by the invention of property.

Even in such central works of the Enlightenment as Claude-Adrien Helvétius' (1715-1771) *Discourse on the Spirit of Man* (*De l'esprit*, 1758), the depiction of the misuse of language in a corrupt form of society is a combination of linguistic criticism and social criticism³⁶. As part of a radical linguistic criticism, Helvétius even identifies unclear word meanings as a reason for the emergence of armed conflicts:

On voit quel germe éternel de disputes & de calamités renferme souvent l'ignorance de la vraie signification des mots. Sans parler du sang versé par les haines & les disputes théologiques, disputes presque toutes fondées sur un abus de mots, quels autres malheurs encore cette ignorance n'a-t-elle point produits, & dans quelles erreurs n'a-t-elle point jeté les nations ?³⁷

Helvétius is sceptical about the possibility of combating the misuse of words through a universal language, as he considers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's project of an *ars characteristic* to be a utopia:

Parmi les peuples, comme parmi les souverains, il n'en est aucun que l'abus des mots n'ait précipité dans quelque erreur grossiere. Pour échapper à ce piège, il faudroit, suivant le conseil de Leibnitz, composer une langue philosophique, dans laquelle on détermineroit la signification précise de chaque mot. Les hommes alors pourroient s'entendre, se transmettre exactement leurs idées ; les disputes, qu'éternise l'abus des mots, se termineroient ; & les hommes, dans toutes les sciences, seroient bien-tôt forcés d'adopter les mêmes principes.

Mais l'exécution d'un projet si utile & si desirable est peut-être impossible. Ce n'est point aux philosophes, c'est au besoin qu'on doit l'invention des langues; & le besoin, en ce genre, n'est pas difficile à satisfaire. En conséquence, on a d'abord attaché quelques fausses idées à certains mots; ensuite on a combiné, comparé ces idées & ces mots entr'eux; chaque nouvelle combinaison a produit une nouvelle erreur; ces erreurs se sont multipliées, &, en se multipliant, se sont tellement compliquées qu'il

³⁶ Cfr. S. Schwarze, *Lexikalische Polaritäten und gesellschaftliche Darstellungsperspektive in der Gesellschaftsbeschreibung bei Helvétius*, Halle 1988.

³⁷ C.-A. Helvétius, *De l'esprit*, Paris 1758, p. 38.

seroit maintenant impossible, sans une peine & un travail infini, d'en suivre & d'en découvrir la source³⁸.

According to Helvétius, languages are not the work of philosophers, but emerge analogically to the Epicurean conception of the origin of language³⁹ from human primary needs (*besoins*). Due to this spontaneous, unreflected origin of language, errors would have crept in from the outset and false concepts would have been associated with certain ideas. In the course of the ongoing development of language, these errors would have been perpetuated and multiplied to such an extent that it would be impossible to eliminate them. For Helvétius, the history of language thus becomes a history of its progressive errors and misuse of words⁴⁰.

Also based on Locke, but with completely different conclusions than George Berkeley (1685-1753)⁴¹, Condillac developed a coherent sensualist theory for the development of all thought processes in his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746), in which the concept of the arbitrary character of signs occupies a central position⁴². Whereas Locke had recognised a source of knowledge independent of the senses in addition to sensations in reflection⁴³, Condillac traced the entire human cognitive activity back to sensory perception and explained the higher operations of thought as sensations transformed with the help of linguistic signs⁴⁴.

Inspired by William Warburton's (1698-1779) conception of mankind's original gestural language in *The divine legation of Moses* (1738-1742), Condillac assumes the existence of an action language (*langage d'action*) at the beginning of the development of language, which consisted of gestures and inarticulate sounds and was initially sufficient for the primitive living conditions of prehistoric man:

[...] le langage d'action: langage qui, dans ses commencemens, [...] ne consistoit vraisemblablement qu'en contorsions et en agitations violentes. Cependant ces hommes

³⁸ C.-A. Helvétius, *De l'esprit*, cit., pp. 39 f.

³⁹ A detailed discussion of the Epicurean conception of the origin of language can be found in S. Gensini, *Epicureanism and Naturalism in the Philosophy of Language from Humanism to the Enlightenment*, in P. Schmitter (hrsg.) *Sprachtheorien der Neuzeit I. Der epistemologische Kontext neuzeitlicher Sprach- und Grammatiktheorien*, Tübingen 1999, pp. 44-92.

⁴⁰ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, pp. 17 f.; II, p. 1015b.

⁴¹ The difference between Condillac's and Berkeley's continuation of Locke's sensualism is discussed in more detail in U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., pp. 104-105.

⁴² Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, *Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung*, cit.; U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit.; U. Ricken, et al. (hrsg.) *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

⁴³ Cfr. G. Haßler, *Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung*, cit.; L. Formigari, *Linguistica ed empirismo nel Seicento inglese*, Bari 1970.

⁴⁴ Cfr. U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit.; U. Ricken, et al. (hrsg.) *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit.; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

ayant acquis l'habitude de lier quelques idées à des signes arbitraires, les cris naturels leur servirent de modèle, pour se faire un nouveau langage⁴⁵.

In Condillac's view, the ability of prehistoric man to use gestures and the first rudimentary sounds as gestures of the voice are fundamental to the genesis of language. For him, the utilisation of gestures and inarticulate sounds as vocal gestures and carriers of emotions is one of the natural faculties of human beings that make language possible in the first place. The basis of this primary form of communication is the principle of imitation. It was only in the course of the development of language that the growing need for communication in primitive society led to the addition of arbitrary, instinctive signs to these natural signs. With the help of the arbitrary signs of spoken language, it becomes possible for men to freely dispose of their imagination and consciously evoke sensory impressions of absent objects. According to Condillac, signs whose use is independent of immediate external stimuli and is subject to the freedom of decision of the speaker have an arbitrary character. This is precisely the precondition for the higher mental operations of differentiation, generalisation, comparison, judgement and reasoning, through whose psychogenetic explanation Condillac was able to overcome the gap between experience and understanding⁴⁶.

In his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines*, Condillac following Locke, still characterises linguistic signs as institutional and arbitrary, but in his *Grammaire* (1775, I, chap. 1), he proposes to call them 'artificial' (*artificiels*) rather than 'arbitrary' (*arbitraires*) in order to avoid misunderstandings and the negative connotation of a lack of systematicity and functionality conveyed by the idea of *arbitraire*⁴⁷. These artificial or institutional signs emerged from natural signs in a continuous process, always based on already known signs. This principle of analogy⁴⁸ in the enrichment of sign systems, repeatedly emphasised by Condillac, is then also the necessary condition for the functioning of artificial signs once they have achieved an autonomous status in relation to natural signs. However, spoken language by no means allows for a choice of signs that is dependent on the speaker's whim⁴⁹. Rather, the rules for combining ideas and assigning signs to them that have emerged in a long process of interaction between language and thought are binding for the speaker and determine the special character of a language, the so-called *génie de la langue* or *genius of the tongue*⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ E. Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines*, in *Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, texte établi et présenté par G. Le Roy, Corpus général des Philosophes Français publié sous la direction de R. Bayer, Paris 1947 [1746], II, I, I, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁶ Cfr. U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., pp. 94-104.

⁴⁷ Cfr. U. Ricken et al. (hrsg.), *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit., p. 78.

⁴⁸ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, pp. 659-674.

⁴⁹ Cfr. *ibid.*, I, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Cfr. *ibid.*, I, pp. 777-790. The term *génie de la langue* was first used by the orientalist and Greek scholar Amable de Bourzeys (1606-1672) on 12th February 1635 in his Academy speech

Arbitrary signs are carriers of meanings due to their relationships with each other and function on the basis of the analogy present in the language system. The use of arbitrary signs is no longer a natural and spontaneous reaction to sensory perceptions, but a linguistic activity at a certain stage of the interwoven development of language and thought. Condillac explicitly opposes a predominantly negative assessment of the influence of language on thought. It is true that languages are imperfect methods and therefore sometimes lead thinking astray. But precisely because they are methods whose functioning is based on inner analogy, they must in many cases lead to correct results⁵¹.

4. Psychogenetic Explanation of the Origin of Language and the Historical View of Man

The extent to which hypotheses about the origin of language in 18th-century philosophy shaped ideas about the origin and development of the human race becomes particularly evident in Condillac's attempts at explanation, who attributed a constitutive role to signs in the process of cognition. While for Locke, the problem of the origin of language was still outside the scope of his view, Condillac's hypothesis of the origin of language exposed in his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* had a decisive influence on his conception of man and society because he assigned signs the decisive role in the transition from sensory cognition to abstract thinking. Condillac's hypothesis of the origin of language now also includes society in the genetic analysis and thus places it in a new developmental-historical perspective⁵². While the communicative use of cries and gestures in the stage of *langage d'action* was already a first step from the instinctive to the conscious, these signs of sign language were predetermined by nature according to the structure of the human body, innate in their basic features. The assumption of an innate means of communication is particularly

Sur le dessein de l'Académie, et sur le différent génie des langues. From then on, the term *génie de la langue* haunted the minds of language scholars and was an integral part of the apologetic discourse on the price of language and the defence of the various European vernaculars (cfr. C. Neis, 'Génie de la langue', *Apologie der Nationalsprachen und die Berliner Preisfrage von 1771*, in G. Haßler (hrsg.), *Texte und Institutionen in der Geschichte der französischen Sprache*, Bonn 2001, pp. 69-88). In the case of the French language, the apology of the *génie de la langue* culminated in Antoine de Rivarol's essay *De l'universalité de la langue française* (1784) which was awarded a prize by the Berlin Academy who wanted the European *république des lettres* to investigate the reasons for the still prevailing status of French as "universal language" but also to answer the question whether it was supposed to preserve this status quo – a clear indication that the role of French as a universal language had already begun to falter (cfr. J. Storost, *Langue française – langue universelle? Die Diskussion über die Universalität des Französischen an der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften. Zum Geltungsanspruch des Deutschen und Französischen im 18. Jahrhundert*, Bonn 1994).

⁵¹ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 24.

⁵² Cfr. U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., p. 95; U. Ricken, et al. (hrsg.), *Sprachtheorie und Weltanschauung in der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit., p. 76.

significant in connection with the rejection of innate ideas, as they had been propounded by Descartes.

The question of the origin of the first mental operations, which went beyond pure perceptual processes but could not yet be based on the conscious use of signs, was answered by Condillac by referring to sign language and its role in the cognitive process. The arbitrary signs of spoken language that emerged with the further development of communication needs were initially mixed with sign language. In his view of the origin of language, Condillac assumes the existence of two abandoned children of both sexes after the great Flood, thus echoing biblical narratives like the myth of Adam and Eve in Paradise or the myth of Noah's Arch. In so doing, he recurs to a hypothetical experiment – a practice which was quite common among scholars in the 18th century. Since the origin of language is historically irrevocable, attempts were made to reconstruct the genesis of articulated speech by referring to individuals who, for various reasons, were subject to specific restrictions (like e.g. newborns and toddlers, «feral» children, deaf-mutes or «exotic» peoples), in order to simulate the beginning of the development of language⁵³. These hypothetical experiments were oftentimes linked to the legendary experiment of the Egyptian king Psammetichos I. (656-610 BC), as recorded by Herodotus (c. 484 – c. 425 BC) in his *Five Books of History*, who allowed two children to grow up isolated from society in order to find out what the original language was. Since the first word these children uttered was supposedly *bek*, which means «bread» in Phrygian, Psammetichos concluded that the original language of the entire human race was Phrygian⁵⁴.

In the 18th century, thought experiments, which are used as hypothetical models of the reconstruction of language genesis⁵⁵, are sometimes explicitly based on the legendary Psammetichos experiment or are based on lists of cases of 'wild children', which are the subject of Condillac's, Rousseau's, Herder's, Monboddo's or Soave's language origin hypotheses. The basis of their arguments is the assumption that the socially deficient language acquisition of children who grew up outside society and were found in the various forests of Europe allows conclusions to be drawn about the pre-civilisational natural state of the human species and thus about the rudiments of language development. The inadmissible transfer of the findings on the ontogenesis of deficient individuals to the phylogensis of humanity as a whole, on which this hypothesis is based, is also applied in the context of thought experiments with deaf-mutes and primitive, «exotic» peoples⁵⁶.

⁵³ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, pp. 343-375.

⁵⁴ Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 261.

⁵⁵ Cfr. C. Neis, *Zur Sprachursprungsdebatte der Berliner Akademie (1771). Topoi und charakteristische Argumentationsstrukturen in ausgewählten Manuskripten*, in G. Haßler, P. Schmitter (hrsg.), *Sprachdiskussion und Beschreibung von Sprachen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*. Münster, pp. 127-150; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

⁵⁶ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, pp. 343-375.

By using the thought experiment with two abandoned children in his explanation of the origin of language, Condillac was completely in tune with the philosophical discussions of his time. In his conception of the origin of language, the historical dimension of humanity is only made possible by human spoken language and the cognitive and communicative functions it implies at this early level. For Condillac, the history of human society, like language and thought, is to be understood as the work of man himself⁵⁷.

As previously emphasized, in Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), the sensualist hypothesis of the origin of language was given an emphatically socio-critical thrust. Rousseau adopts Condillac's hypotheses on the role of language in the development of thought and in the transition of humanity from the state of nature to the state of civilisation, but he is eager to show to a greater extent than Condillac the connection between language and society. While Condillac's original hypothesis primarily considers the cognitive function of language, Rousseau focuses more on the connection between language and society. While Condillac assumes a relatively harmonious course of human development, Rousseau emphasises precisely the social contradictions that deform society and the individual. With the help of language, those who appropriated the land were able to gradually develop the idea of property and make it a defining norm of social life. By establishing the linguistic and thus historical relativity of the concepts and terms of morality, property and power, Rousseau opposes their legitimisation in terms of natural law⁵⁸.

In his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), however, Rousseau primarily puts forward a hypothesis on the further development of language and not on its genesis, after admitting his inability to provide a plausible explanation of the origin of language at all. Thus, the Genevan philosopher capitulates to the problem of the anteriority between language and society, which appears to him as an indissoluble vicious circle:

Quant à moi, effrayé des difficultés qui se multiplient, et convaincu de l'impossibilité presque démontrée que les Langues aient pû naître, et s'établir par des moyens purement humains, je laisse à qui voudra l'entreprendre, la discussion de ce difficile Problème, lequel a été le plus nécessaire, de la Société déjà liée, à l'institution des Langues, ou des Langues déjà inventées, à l'établissement de la Société⁵⁹.

Partly dissatisfied with Condillac's hypothesis about the origin of language, Rousseau emphasises that, unlike him, he could not presuppose the existence of a society before the invention of language, as he was unable to imagine how language could have been necessary at all in the state of nature. In line with the

⁵⁷ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 29.

⁵⁸ J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, édition critique, avertissement et notes par Ch. Porset, Bordeaux 1970 [1755], pp. 197-200, 209, 215.

⁵⁹ J.-J. Rousseau, 1964 [1755], *Discours sur l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, cit., p. 151.

Epicurean theory of origins, Rousseau considers man in the state of nature to be an animal-like, vagabond creature, reduced to his primary needs and with no real reason to invent language:

Qu'il me soit permis de considerer un instant les embarras de l'origine des Langues. Je pourrais me contenter de citer ou de repeter ici les recherches que Mr. l'Abbé de Condillac a faites sur cette matière, qui toutes confirment pleinement mon sentiment, et qui, peut-être, m'en ont donné la première idée. Mais la manière dont ce Philosophe résout les difficultés qu'il se fait à lui-même sur l'origine des signes institués, montrant qu'il a supposé ce que je mets en question, savoir une sorte de société déjà établie entre les inventeurs du langage, je crois en renvoyant à ses réflexions devoir y joindre les miennes pour exposer les mêmes difficultés dans le jour qui convient à mon sujet. La première qui se présente est d'imaginer comment elles purent devenir nécessaires [...] Je dirois bien, comme beaucoup d'autres, que les Langues sont nées dans le commerce domestique des Peres, des Meres, et des Enfants : mais outre que cela ne résoudroit point les objections, ce seroit commettre la faute de ceux qui raisonnant sur l'Etat de Nature, y transportent les idées prises dans la Société, voyent toujours la famille rassemblée dans une même habitation.

[...] au lieu que dans cet état primitif, n'ayant ni Maison, ni Cabanes, ni propriété d'aucune espèce, chacun se logeait au hazard, et souvent pour une seule nuit ; les mâles, et les femelles s'unissoient fortuitement selon la rencontre, l'occasion, et le desir, sans que la parole fût un interprète fort nécessaire des choses qu'ils avoient à se dire : Ils se quittoient avec la même facilité⁶⁰.

Rousseau sees a decisive difficulty in the establishment of a convention without the existence of a language, which would be necessary to justify such a linguistic convention:

Franchissons pour un moment l'espace immense qui dut se trouver entre le pur état de Nature et le besoin des langues ; et cherchons, en les supposant nécessaires, comment elles purent commencer à s'établir. Nouvelle difficulté pire encore que la précédente ; car si les Hommes ont eu besoin de la parole pour apprendre à penser, ils ont eu bien plus besoin encore de savoir penser pour trouver l'art de la parole⁶¹.

Thus, the Genevan philosopher paradoxically endeavours to pile up obstacles that thwart the origin of language instead of developing a plausible hypothesis of its genesis. Rousseau shifts the beginning of speech from the natural state to a historical time and, together with the emergence of social injustice, presents it as the result of a human learning process resulting from certain changes in the physical world. Catastrophes, floods and acts of violence in nature, which urged the unification of people in society, left their traces in the emerging language:

[...] et l'on peut conjecturer encore comment diverses causes particulières purent étendre le langage, et en accélérer le progrès en le rendant plus nécessaire. De grandes inondations ou des tremblemens de terre environnérent d'eaux ou de précipices

⁶⁰ J.-J. Rousseau, 1964 [1755], *Discours sur l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, cit., pp. 146 f.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

des Cantons habités; Des revolutions du globe détachèrent et coupèrent en îles des portions du Continent. On conçoit qu'entre des hommes ainsi rapprochés, et forcés de vivre ensemble, il dut se former un Idiome commun plutôt qu'entre ceux qui erroient librement dans les forêts de la Terre ferme.⁶²

The idea of a rupture is particularly accentuated by the connection between language, society and inequality. According to this thesis, the first person who claimed ownership of something with the words «Ceci est à moi» and who found people simple-minded enough to believe him was the true founder of bourgeois society. If someone had been found at the time who had exposed this linguistic declaration of ownership as a lie, people would have been spared crime, war, murder and other misery:

Le premier qui ayant enclos un terrain, s'avisa de dire, ceci est à moi, et trouva des gens assés simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. Que de crimes, de guerres, de meurtres, que de misères et d'horreurs, n'eût point épargnés au Genre-humain celui qui arrachant les pieux ou comblant le fossé, eût crié à ses semblables. Gardez-vous d'écouter cet imposteur; Vous êtes perdus, si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous, et que la Terre n'est à personne⁶³.

For Rousseau, the misuse of language in the course of the institutionalisation of property is the means *par excellence* of the demonstration of social inequality. Against this backdrop, he sees the origin of language as a critical phenomenon that has caused the disruption of the uncorrupted state of nature, in contrast to civilisation. Rousseau's critical vision of the emergence of language and society in his *Discours de l'inégalité* made him the target of numerous authors such as Süßmilch, Herder, Francesco Soave and the anonym participants in the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language⁶⁴.

5. Resacralisation and Secularised View of the Question of the Origin of Language in the Debate at the Berlin Academy

The fact that Rousseau had declared in his *Discours de l'inégalité* that he was unable to explain how language could have arisen in a purely human way was used by some representatives of a theocentric world view to defend their own orthodox view of the divine origin of language. The complex relationship of anteriority between language, thought and society proved to be an insoluble dilemma, a vicious circle, which enabled scholars, such as Nicolas Beauzée (1717-1789), Noël-Antoine Pluche (1688-1761) or Johann Peter Süßmilch to justify the divine origin of language, although Rousseau had been above all eager to show how human faculties had developed from a state of nature to a civilised

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 168 f.

⁶³ J.-J. Rousseau, 1964 [1755], *Discours sur l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, cit., p. 164.

⁶⁴ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

condition and did not properly intend to demonstrate that language had been a divine gift.

Starting from different philosophical perspectives, the discussion at the Berlin Academy reflected the broad panorama of philosophical, epistemological and anthropological reflections of the time in a variety of ways⁶⁵. In this discussion, the Academy's president, the French philosopher, mathematician and biologist Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698-1759) had himself contributed a work to the discussion in 1748 entitled *Réflexions philosophiques sur l'origine des langues et la signification des mots* and assumed the role of a mediator. It was also him who encouraged the announcement of the prize question of the Academy for 1759 which aimed at the investigation of the reciprocal relationship between language and the opinions of the people. This prize question was convincingly answered by the Göttingen theologian and orientalist Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791)⁶⁶. Together with Süßmilch's *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (1766), the prize question on the reciprocal relationship between language and the opinions of the people has to be considered as a decisive step towards an intensification of the linguistic-theoretical discussion heading to the question of the origin of language at the Berlin Academy.

Süßmilch advocates the thesis of an inseparable connection between language and thought. For him, language is a necessary prerequisite for the activity of understanding, but on the other hand it is itself such a complicated and perfect product that its inventors must necessarily have already possessed understanding, which in turn is impossible without language. In Süßmilch's view, the only way out of this dilemma is to recognise the creation of language as a divine act, thus attacking the ideological successors of the Epicurean theory of language, among whom he counts Maupertuis, Condillac and Rousseau. These, he argues, degraded man, who is properly the crown of creation, to the level of an animal⁶⁷.

Rousseau's depiction of the origin of language and society also met with fierce opposition from Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey (1711-1797), who, a few years later, in his capacity as Permanent secretary of the Academy, had even to read out the text of the announcement of the relevant prize question. As

⁶⁵ Cfr. H. Aarsleff, *The Tradition of Condillac*, cit., pp. 146 f.; D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire (1600–1800)*, cit., pp. 178 f.; A. D. Megill, *The Enlightenment Debate*, cit.; U. Ricken, *Sprache, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, cit., pp. 177 f.; J. Gessinger, W. von Rahden, (hrsg.), *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, cit.; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.

⁶⁶ J. D. Michaelis, *Beantwortung der Frage von dem Einfluß der Meinungen eines Volcks in seine Sprache, und der Sprache in die Meinungen*, in *Dissertation qui a remporté le prix proposé par l'Académie Royale des Sciences et belles lettres de Prusse, sur l'influence réciproque du langage sur les opinions, et des opinions sur le langage, avec les pièces qui ont concouru*, Berlin 1760, pp. 1-84; J. D. Michaelis, *De l'influence des opinions sur le langage, et du langage sur les opinions. Dissertation qui a remporté le prix de l'Académie des Sciences & belles lettres de Prusse, en 1759, traduit de l'Allemand*, Bremen 1762.

⁶⁷ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 65.

early as 1759, under the impression of the contradiction between Maupertuis' sensualist view and the resacralisation efforts of Süßmilch, he wrote his *Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation*. This text was not only published in 1763 as an independent work⁶⁸, but was also placed by the author at the end of his *Anti-Emile*⁶⁹, which appeared in the same year, because of the polemic against Rousseau it contained.

The *Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation* is divided into two parts of almost equal length, the first of which is entitled *Réunion des principaux moyens pour découvrir l'origine du langage, des idées et des connaissances de l'homme*. This is an examination of the secularised view of the state of nature in the sense of Rousseau and important basic premises of a sensualist epistemology as represented by Condillac and Charles Bonnet (1720-1793). The second part, entitled *Ebauche du système de la compensation*, can be considered argumentatively detached from the question of interest to us and can therefore be neglected in this context⁷⁰.

The very title of Formey's treatise is a clear reminiscence of the Genevan philosopher's *Discours de l'inégalité*, whose vision of the original state of man and the beginning of human language, however, Formey clearly rejects. At the beginning of his reflections, Formey asserts that man's main interest in knowledge lies in understanding his own nature⁷¹. However, it proves to be quite difficult to research the natural characteristics of human beings, as they are embedded in a civilising context from which it is almost impossible to distinguish purely natural elements:

A proprement parler, il n'y a qu'une chose qui nous intéresse, c'est de bien savoir ce que nous sommes. Naitre, vivre & mourir au sein des Sociétés, sur le pied où elles sont à présent, est un état peu propre à favoriser nos recherches & nos découvertes à cet égard. Nous prenons continuellement pour naturel ce qui n'est que factice; & quoique la nature fournisse incontestablement un fonds, une aptitude, une capacité, nous ne saurions déterminer avec précision en quoi cela consiste⁷².

It is worth noting that from the outset, Formey addresses the argumentation from a secular point of view and links the question of the origin of language with the question of the nature of man. Immediately following the explicit formulation of this important basic position in the Enlightenment discussion of language, however, Formey reproaches philosophers such as Condillac or

⁶⁸ J.-H.-S. Formey, *Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation*, Berlin 1763a.

⁶⁹ J.-H.-S. Formey, *Réunion des principaux moyens employés pour découvrir l'origine du langage, des idées et des connaissances des hommes*, in *Anti-Emile*, Berlin 1763b, pp. 211-230.

⁷⁰ Cfr. C. Neis, *Formeys Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation (1763) im Kontext der Berliner Debatte um den Sprachursprung*, in J. von Götze, M. Meiske, (hrsg.), *Jean Henri Samuel Formey. Wissensmultiplikator der Berliner Aufklärung*, Hannover 2016, pp. 169-184, here pp. 170 f.

⁷¹ Cfr. *ibid.*, pp. 172 f.

⁷² J.-H.-S. Formey, *Réunion des principaux moyens employés pour découvrir l'origine du langage*, cit., pp. 211 f. (my italics).

Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) for having contributed nothing to the distinction between body and soul and thus nothing to the understanding of the original character of the human soul; indeed, their doctrines may even have paved the way for materialism⁷³. The rejection of theses that can only be interpreted in a materialistic way underlies Formey's entire writing and ultimately also leads to the rejection of the question of whether people could invent language on their own⁷⁴. When he nevertheless proposes an experiment in which children should grow up isolated from any linguistic influences, he expresses the conviction from the outset that these "test subjects" would not develop language and would remain in a state of *animalité* until the end of their lives⁷⁵.

In contrast to Rousseau, who in the *Discours de l'inégalité* endows man from the beginning with the capacity for perfection, *perfectibilité*, which enables him to eventually glide from the state of nature into the civilised state with its attributes of sedentariness, property, the arts and sciences, Formey does not consider children left to their own devices to be capable of survival in a hypothetical state of nature. For this reason, he considers Rousseau's original state to be a chimera:

Des enfans exposés en naissant sont aussitôt la proie de la mort: des enfans de 3 ou 4 ans, de 6 ou 7 même, à qui on ne fourniroit plus aucun secours, ne pourvoiroient pas à leur propre subsistance. Ce sont pourtant ces créatures ainsi abandonnés, au milieu desquelles il faudroit que le langage s'introduisit & se perfectionnât, pour que la these que je combats acquît quelque probabilité. *Plus j'y pense donc, plus je crois l'état de pure nature, une vraie chimère, une grossiere absurdité, une contradiction manifeste.*⁷⁶

Finally, Formey rejects the idea of a natural state of man in favour of the notion that man received his first ideas and the ability to communicate them from the Creator along with his existence. However, he assumes that social instruction and communication are necessary for the formation and further development of this ability⁷⁷.

If one considers Formey's argumentation in his *Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation*, his efforts to resacralise the question of the origin of language appear downright reactionary in comparison to the postulates of Maupertuis, Condillac or Rousseau. It is not without a certain irony that Formey of all people, in his capacity as Permanent Secretary of

⁷³ Cfr. *ibid.*, pp. 213 f.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, vi, p. 229.

⁷⁵ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 36.

⁷⁶ J.-H.-S. Formey, *Réunion des principaux moyens employés pour découvrir l'origine du langage*, cit., p. 227 (my italics).

⁷⁷ Cfr. G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 36.

the Berlin Academy, was given the task of reading out the announcement of the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language⁷⁸.

6. The Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language. Anthropological Foundations in the Linguistic Thinking of Soave, Herder and Tetens

The object of the Berlin Prize Question was to show whether humans, left to their natural faculties, were capable of inventing language and, if so, by what means:

En supposant les hommes abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, sont-ils en état d'inventer le langage? Et par quels moyens parviendront-ils d'eux mêmes à cette invention? On demanderoit une hypothèse qui expliquât la chose clairement et qui satisfît à toutes les difficultés⁷⁹.

«Have human beings, left to their natural faculties, been able to invent language? And by what means would they most easily have achieved this invention?» (A hypothesis is requested that explains the matter clearly and satisfies all the difficulties.) – The very nature of the question shows that at this time (i.e. in 1769), Formey's assumption of a divine origin of language was regarded as outdated. On the contrary, the secularised views of Condillac and Rousseau, which were addressed in greater or lesser detail by almost all the candidates, proved to be important inspirations for this question⁸⁰.

When Herder 1771 was finally selected as the prize winner from 31 entries, it is worth noting that almost all of the entries that were praised by the judges emphasised aspects of the psychological view of language and the relationship between language and thought or language and society. A number of entries, not least Herder's prize-winning essay itself, illustrate that the question of the origin of language is always simultaneously a question of its nature and its relationship to thought and society⁸¹.

Among the entries to the prize question for 1771, which were praised by the Berlin jurors, there is also a Latin manuscript that can be attributed to Francesco Soave (1743-1806)⁸². As we showed in other works,⁸³ the attribution to this author can be made on the basis of the fact that Soave later had his

⁷⁸ Cfr. C. Neis, *Formeys Discours sur l'origine des sociétés et du langage et sur le système de la compensation (1763) im Kontext der Berliner Debatte um den Sprachursprung*, cit., p. 181.

⁷⁹ A. von Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, cit., II, p. 307.

⁸⁰ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 398-426.

⁸¹ Cfr. *ibid.*

⁸² [F. Soave], *Preisfrage 1771*, Manuskript I-M-666, BBAW, Akademiearchiv Berlin 1771.

⁸³ Cfr. C. Neis, *Francesco Soave e la sua posizione sull'origine del linguaggio: dal dibattito all'Accademia di Berlino (1771)*, in *D'uomini liberamente parlanti*, a cura di S. Gensini, Roma 2002, pp. 191-218; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; C. Neis, *Francesco Soave et la question de l'Académie de Berlin (1771)*, cit.

reflections on the origin of language presented in this manuscript published in Italian under the title *Ricerche intorno all'istituzione naturale di una società e di una lingua*. These *Ricerche* are part of his *Istituzioni di logica, metafisica ed etica*, which were only published posthumously in 1813⁸⁴.

Soave's way of arguing is characterised by his orientation towards sensualist theories of the origin of language⁸⁵. For example, he explicitly refers to Locke and Condillac, whose epistemological-sensualist conception of the process of cognition he adopts. He also refers to Charles de Brosses (1709-1777), whose reflections in the *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues* (1765) on the central role of imitation and onomatopoeia as the basis of the original language are seminal for him⁸⁶. Consequently, Soave pursues a hypothetical empiricism in his treatise when, like Condillac, he has an isolated pair of children invent language in a thought experiment. In doing so, Soave refers to the widespread reports of 'wild children' in the 18th century, which were to be found in the various forests of Europe and even had a firm place in the taxonomic systems of Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) in his *Systema naturae*⁸⁷:

I. HOMO. Nosce te ipsum.
Sapiens. H[omo] diurnus; *varians cultura, loco*.
Ferus. Tetrapus, mutus, hirsutus.
Juvenis Ursinus lithuanus. 1661.
Juvenis Lupinus hessensis. 1544.
Juvenis Ovinus hibernius. *Tulp. Obs. IV: 9*.
Juvenis Bovinus bambergensis. *Camerar.*
Juvenis Hannoveranus. 1724.
Pueri 2 Pyrenaici. 1719.
Puella Transisalana. 1717.
Puella Campanica. 1731.
Johannes Leodicensis. *Boerhaav.*⁸⁸

In line with Linné's enumeration, Francesco Soave provides the following list of cases of "feral children":

⁸⁴ Cfr. C. Neis, *Francesco Soave e la sua posizione sull'origine del linguaggio*, cit., pp. 191-218; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 431-506; C. Neis, *Francesco Soave et la question de l'Académie de Berlin (1771)*, «International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science», 4(1), 2021, pp. 48-59.

⁸⁵ Cfr. L. Formigari, *Linguistica e antropologia nel secondo Settecento*, cit.; G. Capone Braga, *La filosofia francese e italiana del Settecento. Parte prima: Gli ideologi francesi*, Padova 1942.

⁸⁶ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 479-486.

⁸⁷ On the special features of Linné's classification, see C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., pp. 277 f.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, I, cit., pp. 355-360; C. Neis, *Feral children and the origin-of-language debate in the eighteenth century*, «International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science», 3(12), 2020, pp. 37-47.

⁸⁸ C. von Linné, *Caroli a Linné [...] Systema naturæ per regna tria naturæ, secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis*. Editio duodecima, reformata, Holmiæ 1766 [1753], p. 28.

Quod si quis etiam quaerat, quânam fieri possit, ut tenella adhuc aetate absque ullo subsidio destituti diu vivant, atque adolescent; eadem inquam ratione, qua vixit *puer in Hassia inter lupos repertus anno 1344*; alius item annorum 12. eodem anno inventus in Weteravia; *alius annorum 16. in Hibernia inter oves silvestres deprehensus circa dimidium seculi XVII*; alius novennis inter ursos correptus in Lituano-Grodnensibus silvis anno 1662; *alius prope Hameliam inventus hoc ipso saeculo*; *puella insuper in silva Cranenburgensi prope Zwollam provinciae Ultrajectinae oppidum a rusticis capta anno 1717*; aliique de quibus fusé disserit Henricus Conradus Koenig Schediasmate suo de Hominum inter feras educatorum statu naturali solitario; quibus addenda est *puella etiam, quam omnes novunt non multis ab hinc (2.) annis prope Cabilonum fuisse inventam*⁸⁹.

A central element of Soave's argumentation is also the rejection of Rousseau's pessimistic view of man and the emphasis on the socially constitutive function of language. Soave's polemic against Rousseau is much sharper in the slightly modified Italian version of his contribution to the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language, as the author can now uninhibitedly shoot his poisoned arrows at the hated adversary⁹⁰:

Ma un filosofo, quanto ingegnoso, altrettanto stravagante nei suoi paradossi, un filosofo, che non sa trovar l'uomo felice, se non avvicinandolo quanto è possibile alle bestie, ha poi anche voluto sotto alle bestie medesime *degradarlo*, pretendendo, che abbandonato a sè stesso, non solo egli non sia capace d'istituire niuna lingua, ma nemmeno d'istituire niun principio di società. E qual mania è questa mai di voler abbassare sè medesimo pel tristo piacere d'abbassare i suoi simili?⁹¹

Soave demonstrates the necessity of the union of human beings in a state of nature in order to overcome crises and threats by means of a large number of historical case studies that attempt to reconstruct the origin of language in a model-like and exemplary manner. His argumentation reveals a pronounced awareness of the historicity of language, which is expressed in his endeavour to shed light not only on the origin of language, but also on its further development and perfection. In his argumentation, he also integrates examples from individual languages such as French or Latin⁹².

Not only Soave's essay, but also other submissions to the Berlin Prize Question, which cannot be attributed to specific authors, testify to a profound knowledge of the epistemological and anthropological implications of the problem of language. In a large number of prize-winning essays, Rousseau's psycho-critical vision of the human being is rejected as a false starting point for a convincing theory of the origin of language. However, it is not so much Rousseau's

⁸⁹ [F. Soave], *Preisfrage 1771*, cit., pp. 4 f. (my italics).

⁹⁰ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 500.

⁹¹ F. Soave, *Ricerche intorno all'istituzione naturale di una società e di una lingua*, in *Istituzioni di logica, metafisica ed etica*, Venezia 1813, V, pp. 7-115, here pp. 113 f.

⁹² Cfr. C. Neis, *Francesco Soave e la sua posizione sull'origine del linguaggio*, cit.; C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; C. Neis, *Francesco Soave et la question de l'Académie de Berlin (1771)*, cit.

linguistic assumptions that are criticised, but rather his pessimistic view of the human being. The linguistic implications of Rousseau's argumentation are in any case less suitable for criticism, since in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, he limits himself to illustrating the difficulty of the problem of origins and in the second part of this work suddenly assumes a linguistic leap without explaining it plausibly⁹³.

For a large number of authors who took part in the Berlin Prize Competition on the Origins of Language, Condillacian sensualism provided a starting point for the formulation of hypotheses on the origins of language. For example, Johann Nicolaus Tetens (1736-1807), who published his manuscript in 1772 independently of the Berlin Prize Competition under the title *Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache und der Schrift* ("On the Origin of Language and Writing"), argued that at the beginning of the development of language there was a sign language consisting of gestures and inarticulate animal-like cries, which was increasingly used consciously as a means of communication:

Wenn die Menschen in eine Gesellschaft vereinigt waren, die unter sich zusammenhält, das Geschlecht fortpflanzt, und ihre Kinder aufziehet, so war auch der Gebrauch der Stimme, seine Empfindungen und sein Verlangen andern anzuzeigen, ganz natürlich. Fähigkeit und Anlage in dem Körper war vorhanden. Schreyen, Winseln und andere Töne, sind mechanische Ausdrücke des Schmerzens, der Begierden und der Thätigkeiten. Bedürfnisse und Anlässe, seines Gleichen durch Töne zu sich zu rufen, finden sich in Menge bey dem Menschen, wie bey einer jeden andern Thierart. [...] Auf diese Art könnte ein Anfang einer Sprache entstehen, nämlich ein Gebrauch der Stimme, um Empfindungen und Begierden durch natürliche Töne zu erkennen zu geben. Dies ist noch ein bloße Thier-Sprache, und ihre Wörter, wenn man anders diese Töne so nennen will, waren unarticulirt, nur Anzeigen der Empfindungen und Begierden, nur bloß natürliche Töne.⁹⁴

The endeavour to demonstrate the natural faculties of man in accordance with the formulation of the prize question, whereby Descartes' conception is implicitly or explicitly rejected by the ideas introduced, is characteristic of numerous prize-winning essays. Both the epistemological and socio-theoretical implications of the question, which are included by the concept of natural faculties so typical of Enlightenment thought, are made the subject of the investigation. In addition to the origins of language, its further development, phenomena of linguistic change and the perfection and corruption of languages are often addressed. The focus of the argumentation is on the historicity of language as a historical product that is passed on through the "generational contract" between parents and children and is subject to constant change. This historicising vision of language is usually characterised by a teleological orientation towards the

⁹³ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 38.

⁹⁴ J. N. Tetens, *Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache und der Schrift*, Bützow-Wismar 1772, pp. 24 f.

perfectibility of human beings, which finds points of reference in Rousseau's concept of *perfectibilité*⁹⁵.

The developmental dimension of language and its historicity also characterised the argumentation of Herder's prize-winning essay. By using the provocative sentence «Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache»⁹⁶, Herder does not reduce language to inarticulate cries, which he rejects in disagreement with Condillac and Rousseau, but rather conceives man as a linguistic being from the very beginning. Contrary to Süßmilch's static theocentric vision of the origin of men and language, in Herder's evolutionary conception, man is characterised by a faculty that he refers to as *Besonnenheit* ('awareness', 'attentiveness', 'alertness'), which opens the door to man's historicity. Since man is endowed with this special faculty, Herder sets him apart from the animal kingdom which remains trapped within instinctive boundaries and also enables him to develop language, thus entering in the course of human history. Indeed, in Herder's conception, the very essence of human beings, beginning with the tender stirrings of *Besonnenheit* as basis for the development of the individual, is a prerequisite for the subsequent evolution of language and thought. In the spirit of Enlightenment thinking, Herder also transfers this faculty from ontogenesis to phylogenesis. Just as the individual goes through different stages of language acquisition and the thinking process, the development of language allows the entire human species to enter its own historicity.

Herder's conception of language, based on the sensualism of the Enlightenment, was an integral part of his historical view of man which he further developed in his voluminous work *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-1791). For Herder, history and the fate of humanity were based on a generational contract through which knowledge was continuously passed on from individual to individual. His conception of language and thought is deeply rooted in his trust in the perfectibility of the human being and has to be regarded as characteristic for the linguistic and anthropological way of thinking of the Enlightenment.

Conclusion

This contribution describes the 18th century as a period in which linguistic thinking played a decisive role within the framework of hypotheses about the origin and nature of Man. Starting with the polemical introduction of Herder's winning essay to the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language, it became evident that Enlightenment anthropological thought crucially defined Man and his natural faculties in contrast to the beasts. This distinction was essential to identify the core of humanity. In the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the

⁹⁵ Cfr. C. Neis, *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit.; G. Haßler, C. Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, cit., I, p. 38.

⁹⁶ J. G. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, cit., p. 9.

confrontation with Descartes' assertion that animals are soulless *automatons* whose sounds are in no way comparable to the articulated spoken language of humans is central to the discussion of human faculties, as the beasts do not associate any mental concepts with their sounds. The meaningfulness of language remains lost to them.

Language, indeed, proves to have a significant impact on hypotheses about the emergence of civilisation allowing Mankind to enter a historical dimension thanks to the evolution of his achievements due to his perfectibility. With the explanation of language and thought as the results of a long reciprocal development in the history of mankind, statements on the nature and origin of language were given a new significance in the Enlightenment. After the assumption of a divine language origin was increasingly rejected in the course of the secularisation process, which progressed steadily from the middle of the 18th century onwards, a genealogical view of man took the place of the theocentric order, which had regarded the diversity of languages as the result of the construction of the Babylonian tower and more as a curse than a blessing. Condillac's and Rousseau's conceptions of the origin of civilisation assign a central role to language. In his *Discours de l'inégalité*, Rousseau illustrates how linguistic criticism can lead directly to social criticism by describing language as an instrument permitting the domination of one part of society over the other.

Rousseau's critical vision of the emergence of language and society in his *Discours de l'inégalité* is severely attacked by numerous scholars such as Süßmilch, Herder, Francesco Soave and the anonym participants in the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language. Since Rousseau was unable to disentangle the complex relationship of anteriority between language and thought as well as between language and society, his argumentation was misused by scholars such as Nicolas Beauzée, Noël-Antoine Pluche or Johann Peter Süßmilch to justify a resacralisation of the question of the origin of language. However, this interpretation was completely incompatible with Rousseau's conception since the Genevan philosopher had been above all eager to show how human faculties had developed from a state of nature to a civilised condition and did not properly intend to demonstrate that language had been a divine gift.

By focussing on the Enlightenment's anthropological conception of *perfectibilité*, the Berlin Prize Question on the Origin of Language aimed at investigating the natural faculties of Men for which a differentiation from those of the animals was necessary. Herder's polemic assertion «Schon als Thier, hat der Mensch Sprache» has to be seen in the light of this typically Enlightenment conception. Due to the complexity of the origin-of-language issue and its interdisciplinary nature, this philosophical problem was linked in different ways with anthropological, political and social theory as well as with philological and poetic aspects. The patterns of interpretation that emerge are very diverse. Starting with the darkness that surrounds the biblical myth of creation and the confusion of the tongues at Babel, through attempts to reconstruct the lost original language motivated by nationalism, to a genealogical explanation that

attempts to explain the origin of language, thought and society as the results of a long reciprocal development in the history of Mankind, a large variety of topics is addressed in connection with the multifaceted question of language origins, which never ceases to puzzle scholars.

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