

Kiesow, Karl-Friedrich

**J. G. v. Herder and W. v. Humboldt: reflections upon the origin of language: a comparative essay,
with a commentary on recent developments in the philosophy of language**

Pro-Fil. 2014, vol. 15, iss. 2, pp. [14]-28

ISSN 1212-9097

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/pf15-2-1032>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134118>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



**J. G. v. Herder and W. v. Humboldt: Reflections upon the Origin of Language.
A Comparative Essay, with a Commentary on Recent Developments in the Philosophy
of Language**

Karl-Friedrich Kiesow

Abstrakt: V této studii se pokusím prozkoumat paralely mezi Herderem, Humboldtem a některými moderními výzkumy vzniku jazyka. Herder se přiklání k panpsychickému pojetí přírody a předkládá teorii, která tvrdí, že pouze jazyk může zařídit zprostředkování mezi lidským abstraktním uvažováním a obsahem, který lidem poskytují smysly. Humboldt pak preferuje kantovskou transcendentální analýzu formy jazyka, formy závisející na lidské mentální aktivitě a tudíž mající dynamický charakter. Výsledek je možné shrnout v tezi, že zatímco Herder spekuluje o vzniku jazyka, Humboldt se pokouší o podání teorie vznikání jazyka syntetickými akty. Problémy spojené s narativním stylem teoretizování mohou být demonstrovány na kontrastu s dvěma moderními autory, totiž s R. G. Millikanovou a M. Tomaselem.

Abstract: In my essay I try to explore a parallel between Herder and Humboldt and some modern investigations into the origin of language. Herder favors a pan-psychistic account of nature, and he proposes a theory maintaining that only language can do the business to mediate between the abstract reasoning of man and the content delivered to him by his senses. Humboldt, in his turn, prefers a Kantian transcendental analysis of the form of language, the form being dependent on man's mental activity and therefore dynamical in character. We may summarize this result in the thesis that Herder is speculating on the origin of language whereas Humboldt attempts to give a theory of the origination of language by synthetic acts. Problems connected with a narrative style of theorizing can also be demonstrated by contrasting two modern authors, namely R. G. Millikan and M. Tomasello.

Klíčová slova: filosofie mysli, filosofie jazyka, vznik jazyka, vznikání jazyka

Keywords: Philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, origin of language, origination of language

Eventually an imaginary world is entirely without interest.
W. Stevens¹

In my present essay I wish to compare the positions of J. G. v. Herder and W. v. Humboldt as to the origin of language and culture and to draw some parallels to modern researches. Both Herder and Humboldt were fascinated by the problem of the origin of culture and language; however they gave answers to this problem that were not merely slightly different but divergent in the main lines. Herder had a naïve but profound vision of man's nature and he rightly conjectured that the gift of speech or language was needed to complete the human natural estate. Humboldt, although of lesser rank than Herder as a philosophical anthropologist, excelled his predecessor in his vast knowledge of languages. He abandoned the attempt to disclose the origin of culture and language and developed a theory of the originating of language, concentrating on its synthetic procedure.

1 Herder on the origin of language

Since the beginnings of post-medieval philosophy there has been a tradition to pose counterfactual questions modeled on the famous paradigms invented by Descartes and Hobbes. Descartes, in analyzing the famous, "*I think, therefore, I am*" deprived man of his normal sensations, of his body and even of the trustworthiness of his most intimate thoughts. Hobbes, in his turn, analyzed the transition of man from a natural state to a civic state, creating thereby another fictional story. In the year 1769, the Berlin Academy of the Sciences invited the contemporary authors to give an answer to two questions²; the first of these questions reads as follows: "*Supposing men abandoned to their natural faculties, are they in a position to invent language?*"

Herder answered to the question of the Berlin Academy in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* or, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*.³ As everybody knows, he was fortunate enough to win the prize of the Academy. Herder, although a Protestant theologian, plays an important role in the German history of ideas in that he has freed the philosophy of culture and language from theologian or other heteronomous premises. As M. N. Forster aptly remarks,

¹ W. Stevens, "Adagia".

² The full wording of the two questions of the Academy, formulated as usual in French, reads as follows: « *En supposant les hommes abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, sont-ils en état d'inventer la langue? Et par quels moyens parviendront-ils d'eux-mêmes à cette invention? On demande une hypothèse qui explique la chose clairement et qui satisfait à toutes les difficultés (...).* »

³ Johann Gottfried v. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, in: *Frühe Schriften 1764 – 1772* (= Werke Bd. 1), ed. by U. Gaier, Frankfurt a. M. 1985: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, pp. 695 – 810. English translation under the title *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in: J. G. v. Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, transl. & ed. by M. N. Forster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 65 – 164.

[Herder's] motives are not strictly secular. Rather, he is assuming (...) that explanations in terms of natural laws are not only explanatory superior to, but also ultimately better testimony to God's role in nature than, ones in terms of particular divine interventions in nature.⁴

Herder, in the polemical part of his work, criticizes three of his contemporaries, namely, J. P. Süßmilch, E. Bonnot de Condillac, and J. J. Rousseau. Süßmilch had advocated a literalist interpretation of the bible, insisting on the alleged fact that man's language was one of the gifts that God had given him. Herder did not find it difficult to refute his position. Condillac, a fervent supporter of a Lockean sensationalist epistemology, had developed a gradualistic theory of language acquisition that is faulty in Herder's eyes because of its circularity. Rousseau, by far the most important of the three authors, held to an interjectional theory of language, and Herder was prepared to accept its partial truth.

In the constructive part of Herder's essay, we see him receive many influences, e.g. from A. A. Shaftesbury, H. S. Reimarus, and M. Mendelssohn. Shaftesbury, the theoretician of the plasticity of nature, delivered the term of an inner form and structure of language to him that was to gain importance for Humboldt, too. Reimarus reformed the mechanistic anthropology of Descartes and Locke, anticipating modern conceptions of the instinctual drives of animal and human behavior. Mendelssohn, in his turn, developed the thesis that the origin of language is dependent on the functional interplay of the sensory modalities of man and a relative preeminence of his vocal facilities and auditory receptivity above all other information channels.⁵

There is a background hypothesis behind Herder's theorizing that must be commented on in a few words because it will seem strange to most modern readers. Leibniz, the great Baroque philosopher was a pan-psychist, i.e. he was convinced that most beings were gifted with a hidden psychic life. Herder, in a very free interpretation of the Leibnizian monadology, maintains that the human soul is characterized by a household economy, a certain quantum of energy that can and must be spent in several psychic acts of distinct kinds. The qualitative difference of the sensory modalities is not to be disputed away but it is generated, overarched and relativized by a system of differences of a more gradual and intensive character. Herder's fascinating conjecture is that the inner form and structure of language mentioned above is rooted in this psychophysiological matrix.⁶ More important still, language will remould the latter in its fashion.

⁴ M. N. Forster, "Introduction" to his edition of Herder's *Philosophical Writings*, p. xiv.

⁵ Also, Mendelssohn seems to have inspired Herder to exemplify his theory by exemplifying the origin of language with the help of a little episode or scene of pastoral poetry, namely the shepherd's giving a name to the sheep that had crossed his way twice; *vide* J. G. v. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, p. 87 – 89.

⁶ An application of this theorem is to be found in Herder's thesis that the sense of hearing is "warm" whereas the sense of sight is "cold". The medieval background of Herder's conception of the human soul and his view of man, mankind and humanity is discussed in a book of importance, namely, P. Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, The Hague (Netherlands): M. Nijhoff, 1963, pp. 114 – 16.

In my essay I am concerned primarily with these pan-psychistic aspects of Herder's conception. In the following passage he is asking himself the crucial question:

[...] What language (*besides the earlier mechanical one*) does the human being possess as instinctively as each animal species possesses its language in, and in accordance with, its own sphere. *The answer is short: none! And precisely this short answer is decisive.*

*With each animal, (...) its language is an expression of such strong sensuous representations that these become drives. Hence, language is, along with senses and representations and drives, innate and immediately natural for the animal. The bee hums just as it sucks, the bird sings just as it makes a nest (...). But how does the human being speak by nature? Not at all! – just as he does little or nothing through sheer instinct as an animal.*⁷

But, as Herder hastens to declare, man's nature cannot be determined by a negative feature only:

(...) gaps and shortcomings cannot, however, be the character of his species. (...) *With the human being everything stands in the greatest disproportion – senses and needs, forces and the circle of efficacy that awaits him, his organs and his language. We must therefore 'lack a certain middle term for calculating the so disparate terms of the equation'.*

If we were to find this middle term, then by the whole analogy of nature 'this compensation would be the human being's distinctive feature, the character of his species', and all reason and justice would demand that this discovered trait be treated as what it is, as a natural gift, as essential to him as instinct is to the animals.

*Were we, moreover, to find 'precisely in this character the cause of those shortcomings, and precisely in the midst of these shortcomings', in the hollow of that great bereftness of drives to art, the germ of a substitute, then this attunement would be a genetic proof that 'the true orientation of humanity' lies here, and that the human species does not stand above the animals in levels of more or less, but in kind.*⁸

There is a certain fascination in Herder by the idea of the centrality of the human race in the world: Man is set by god in the midst of his creation, his sense of hearing is the middle sense; language is the middle term connecting his senses and needs with the hindrances and opportunities of the physical or social environment. Even the theorem of a compensation of man's organic or physiological deficiencies by his possession of language, often considered self-contained, seems to me to be dependent on this more general and somewhat mystical idea. Before turning to Humboldt, let me now summarize Herder's conception and add a few comments on his main ideas.

⁷ J. G. v. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in: *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by M. N. Forster, p. 80.

⁸ J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 81.

Herder's is a pan-psychistic theory of the origin of language which can be enfolded in the following theses: There is the "*great chain of being*"⁹, a chorus of living creatures praising God the Almighty. Man and beast are resonant with their praise of God, and for this reason they have been given their characteristic voice. Besides this common nature of all living beings, there is the human estate which, at first sight, is marked by the absence of a complete instinctual apparatus as can be found in all other animals. Man has his five senses, and he is gifted with reason; nevertheless, with all his talents he would be forlorn in the world without his specific human language. Creation of language and culture by means of his natural talents is distinctive of man's nature.

The pan-psychistic component of Herder's theory is at its very heart: As observed already by Aristotle, man has not only his five senses, but he is in possession of the so-called common sense, a unifying factor giving his sense-perception a unique format. However, the common sense is not a sensory modality at all; rather, it is a structural aspect binding the five senses of man together and elevating sensation to sense-perception. Comparing touch with the senses of sight and hearing, Herder comes to the conclusion that neither of them, not even the sense of hearing, can perform such a function. Human language, in which the higher senses are connected in a specific way, is the complex functioning system that can do the job.

If we are allowed to identify human consciousness with microcosm, and the world with macrocosm, we may say: The very commensurability of these two worlds is brought about by human language. The harmony of this set-up, however, is a precarious one because it is dependent on the functional synthesis of elements which are heterogeneous because of their different origin: Sound, a product of the human tongue, and conception, a product of the human reason, must be adjusted to one another. For Herder, as for Humboldt, language is the decisive factor in the make-up of human culture, or at least of its immaterial part. In a sense, God has man created to become the creator of himself (J. Lequier).

Herder, in the second part of his essay on the origin of language, formulates four so-called "*natural laws*" governing the progress of human civilization. Man is for him a "*freely thinking, active being, whose forces operate forth progressively*",¹⁰ but also "*a creature of the herd, of society*".¹¹ Therefore, the human race is subject to a process of diversification and is bound to produce "*different national languages*".¹² Nevertheless, he believes

*[that] the human species constitutes a single progressive whole with a single origin in a single great household-economy, likewise all languages too, and with them the whole chain of civilization.*¹³

⁹ For this term, vide A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): Harvard University Press, 1936.

¹⁰ J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 127.

¹¹ J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 139.

¹² J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³ J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 154.

Herder's concept of certain laws of nature governing the mental development of mankind is broken up by Humboldt who distinguishes with greater acuity between the natural history of the human race and an intellectual or spiritual teleology, a historic force that is responsible for the diversification of cultures and languages.

2 Humboldt on the origination of language

Humboldt's thought has been influenced mainly by Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Kant had criticized Herder for the alleged *naiveté* of an investigation into the origins of human cultural institutions whatsoever; his epistemology, culminating in a critical idealism, subjected any empirical enquiry as to the nature of language to certain restrictions. The influence of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel is of a more subtle nature: Fichte may have shaped his conception of the role of the system of personal pronouns in language; with Schelling he makes use of the principle of individuation and the principle of polarity; and with Hegel he knows of the different formations of the "subjective" and the "objective" "spirit".¹⁴

Occasionally, Humboldt, in the guise of a *Herder redivivus*, is speaking of an "intellectual instinct"¹⁵ built into human language; the overall tendency of his work, however, consists in a shifting of the view-point from physiology and biology to the science of culture. In a similar vein, he is commenting on a so-called "instinct of reason" ("Vernunftinstinkt"): It is enlightened common sense and guarantees, as it were, the rooting of reason in the life-world. His mature work on language begins at about the year 1820 with the so-called "Akademiereden" and has left us with the vast fragment of an introduction to the never-finished three-volume work about a dialect of the Malayan-Polynesian type, named after the island of Java.¹⁶

Humboldt maintained that language is an organism, i.e. a system of interrelated parts, the latter being supported by the organic whole. The concept of an organism was accompanied in the German history of ideas by the program of a general morphology, discussed by W. v. Humboldt and his younger brother, Alexander, with J. W. v. Goethe and F. Schiller in a series of conversations in the nineties. Alexander pursued the main idea into a systematic investigation into the physiology of plants, and life-phenomena in general; later on he devoted himself to a study of the geological formations of the earth and the physiognomy of landscapes all over the world. Wilhelm settled on a study of language, gathering information about a great many languages, e.g. the Basque language, the Mexican

¹⁴ Fichte's observations as to the nature of the system of (personal) pronouns are absorbed in Hegel's conception of the fluidity of concepts. Schelling's principle of polarity is used by Humboldt mainly in his anthropology; he ontologizes the respective roles of men and women by means of it – a rather disgusting feature of his thinking or, rather, of the *Zeitgeist* of German philosophy in general in the early nineteenth century.

¹⁵ W. v. Humboldt, "Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung" (1820), in: Wilhelm v. Humboldt: *Über die Sprache. Reden vor der Akademie*, hg. v. J. Trabant, Tübingen / Basel: Francke Verlag, 1994, S. 20: "If, per impossibile, we compare that whereof there is nothing equal in the realm of the conceivable to another phenomenon, we may call to mind the natural instinct of animals and describe language as an intellectual instinct of reason." (Translation by the author).

¹⁶ W. v. Humboldt, *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (1830 – 1835), in: *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (= Werke, III), ed. by A. Flitner and K. Giel, Stuttgart J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1963, pp. 368 – 756.

language and the Sanskrit, which he regarded as “a fixed point of comparison for all the rest.”¹⁷

In the introductory essay that was to open his work on the Kawi-dialect, Humboldt gave the final version of his views on culture and language. Neither of them is original because they are dependent on a “mental power” that in itself is inexplicable or even mysterious. M. Losonsky, editor and commentator of the authoritative English translation of Humboldt entertained by P. Heath, writes:

*Central to Humboldt’s thinking about human language is the idea that there is a mental power (Geisteskraft) that is responsible for language and the diversity of languages, as well as for culture and cultural diversity. For Humboldt, language is a kind of human action or a kind of human labor. As such, it is produced by states that are internal to the mind, for example feelings, desires, beliefs, thoughts, and decisions. These internal mental states are active powers or forces that bring about the external phenomena of culture, including human language.*¹⁸

There are a number of paradoxes in Humboldt’s views: The force whose efficacy produces both culture and language is beyond our intellectual grasp; nevertheless, its efficacy can be inferred from its products as manifested in speech and in the achievements of art and science. The force that is responsible for these manifestations of man’s “creative nature”¹⁹ is inherent in his general constitution but pertinent to the human individual, also. In a similar vein, the linguistic abilities belong to the nation, as well as they belong to the speaking person: Individuality is the mark of humanity, but it comes first to races and nations, and only in later times of cultural refinement to individual men.

Language development can be seen as the product of an interaction of two classes of causes: On the one hand, there is the influence of physical nature, i.e. landscape, climate, and the ecology of the region; further the shape of the economic and political institutions, including the mode of government. On the other hand, there is a creative urge to bring about immaterial culture:

*The bringing-forth of language is an inner need of human beings, not merely an external necessity for maintaining communal intercourse, but a thing lying in their own nature, indispensable for the development of their mental powers and the attainment of a world-view, to which man can attain only by bringing his thinking to clarity and precision through communal thinking with others.*²⁰

¹⁷ W. v. Humboldt, *On Language. On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, p. 216. In what follows I will make use of this translation of Humboldt’s work mentioned in footnote 15.

¹⁸ M. Losonsky, “Introduction”, in: W. v. Humboldt, *On Language. On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. xi.

¹⁹ W. v. Humboldt, *ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁰ W. v. Humboldt, *ibid.*, p. 27.

In one important point, the philosophy of nature has left its imprint in the work of the Humboldt brothers: The very process of organic development is beyond the reach of human understanding, and W. v. Humboldt does not hesitate to acknowledge that this truth, indisputable for him and most of his contemporaries, holds good also for the origin and development of language:

*All becoming in nature, but especially of the organic and living, escapes our observation. However minutely we may examine the preparatory stages, between the latter and the phenomenon there is always the cleavage that divides the something from the nothing; and this is equally so with the moment of cessation. All comprehension of man lies only between the two.*²¹

Dividing the causes of the origin of language and language development into two classes, the external ones, and the internal ones, Humboldt gives a concise description of the difficulties which the philosopher of culture has to meet. The external causes are causes proper, following one another in an uninterrupted order or sequence that can be made intelligible to the human mind. The emergence of the spiritual genius of man, as manifested in nations and individuals, has the character of an unpredictable, spontaneous outbreak of a transcendent power. Its activity is not to be ascribed to the bearers of culture and language, not even to the system(s) of culture and language themselves, but to a remote first cause.²²

As everybody knows, Humboldt centers his discussion of language on the Aristotelian notions of “*Energeia*” and “*Ergon*”, and I want to conclude my presentation with a few remarks about the possibility of an adequate and up-to date interpretation of these terms. In an impressive passage of Humboldt’s work we read:

*Language, regarded in its real nature, is an enduring thing, and at every moment a transitory one. (...) In itself it is no product (Ergon), but an activity (Energeia). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated mental labour of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought. In a direct and strict sense, this is the definition of speech on any occasion; in its true and essential meaning, however, we can also regard, as it were, only the totality of this speaking as the language.*²³

If I may use Humboldt’s own words: What is the true and essential meaning of the two notions, “*Energeia*” and “*Ergon*”? Obviously, “*Energeia*” is the fundamental term whereas “*Ergon*” is the derivative term, but neither of them seems to be suited to our purpose. H.-G.

²¹ W. v. Humboldt, *ibid.*, p. 43. The reader will notice that Humboldt is repeating here paradox of becoming that was known already to Plato and is said to have been solved by his most famous pupil, Aristotle.

²² If we want to strengthen the spinozistic element of our interpretation of Humboldt’s philosophy of language, we may identify the “*Geisteskraft*” with *natura naturans*, with the *proviso* that this force or power is becoming more and more intellectual or even spiritual in the cultural life of mankind.

²³ W. v. Humboldt, *ibid.*, p. 49.

Gadamer, who has opened his philosophy in his latest works for a universal cultural hermeneutics, proposes to translate the fundamental notion into the German as “*Lebendigkeit*” or “*Wachheit*”.²⁴ Returning to Herder, we feel vindicated in following this proposal when we read that “[*man’s*] *condition of awareness [...] is his very own*”²⁵; awareness, or spiritual vivification, is the distinctive feature of our species. Of course, Herder’s is a theory of the origin of language, whereas Humboldt’s is a theory of the origination of language, as may be seen from the following considerations:

The establishment of the speech process is a human achievement that follows the rules that Kant had established for the synthetic processes of human thinking.²⁶ But it is dependent on certain contingent factors that had little or no importance for Kant’s conception of the powers of the human mind. The analysis of the organizational principles of a given language must take notice of the fact that it makes use of a sound-material or phonemic system that is specific to this language in distinction to all other languages. Whereas the thought-contents of language are common to mankind, the expression of affective states of mind and of emotional experiences is bound to reflect group-specific features of the linguistic community and the make-up of the speaking individual itself. Therefore, the organizational principles of language must be shaped in part as principles of individuation.²⁷

From this we may draw an interesting conclusion: Humboldt rearranges Herder’s pansychistic conception of the origin of language in the guise of a transcendental analysis of linguistic form in general. The abstraction of this form, however, must take into consideration that there is a plurality of languages whose organizational principles diverge by necessity from one another. Again, this problem is known from the development of German idealism: The task of a transcendental deduction of the specificity, the “*thisness*” of an individual person or the character of an institution, is an unsolved or even unsolvable problem of philosophy. It is not without reason that Humboldt tried again and again to stipulate the general linguistic form, and that his repeated attempts have had only fragmentary results.²⁸

In recent years, N. Chomsky’s attempt to construct a generative grammar whose formative principles and so-called “*transformation-rules*” due justice not only to all known

²⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, “Wort und Bild - >so wahr, so seiend<“, in: *Ästhetik und Poetik I* (= Gesammelte Werke, 8), Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993, p. 389. In transplanting Aristotle’s notion from metaphysics and the philosophy of nature into the philosophy of the spirit, Gadamer makes a highly original and productive semantical shift.

²⁵ J. G. v. Herder, *ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁶ A full explication of this thesis will require an analysis of the synthetic procedure of language that is alluded to in the English translation of Humboldt’s work when it speaks of “*language construction*”. Humboldt, in his search for the pure form of a sentence or an ideal language, came to an identification of this language with an ever higher grade of formalization of its syntactical and grammatical apparatus and to a preference of Sanskrit and Ancient Greek, anticipating thereby the typology of languages initiated by Fr. Bopp and his followers.

²⁷ W. v. Humboldt, “Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung”, S. 24 / 25.

²⁸ A survey of some later developments in the philosophy of language is given in K.-F. Kiesow, “Zeichenkonzeptionen in der Sprachphilosophie vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart”, in: R. Posner et. al., *Semiotik. Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur / Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, Berlin / New York: W. de Gruyter, 1998, pp. 1512 - 1553.

languages but to any language whatsoever has created a problem-situation that corresponds to our principal conclusion. Generative grammar is not a language proper but functions as a filter or lattice that must be passed through by any system of elements that is to count as a “(natural) language”. Interestingly enough, this statement seems to go back to a discussion entertained by philosophers and evolutionary and developmental biologists.²⁹

3 A commentary on recent developments in linguistic philosophy

There is a remarkable parallel between the investigations of Herder and Humboldt into the origin of human language(s) and some contemporary authors that have devoted their scientific life work to a post-Darwinian philosophy of language. The impact of Darwin’s groundbreaking hypotheses about the development of life on earth and the descent of man consists in a general shift of contextual assumptions that must be taken into consideration by any serious writer in this scientific field. Herder’s pan-psychistic speculations, played down already by Humboldt, do not fit into a Darwinian frame, and even the more elaborated conception of Humboldt himself seems to loose influence in our days.

The participants in the discussions about the Gifford lectures referred to by me above posed the following questions that a theory of the origin of human culture and language has to answer: Is evolutionary biology in a position to give something like a step-by-step explanation of the emergence of rule-governed behavior, as the speech process is supposed to be? Can it give an explanation of the transition from natural signs to non-natural signs? Is it able to give an explanation of the need of grammaticalization in the development of language(s)? And how can we do justice to the fact that language as such seems to be diversified by necessity into a plurality of idioms and languages? In becoming language proper, the speech process acquires a more and more conventional character; therefore, linguistic intentionality seems to be the non-natural phenomenon *per excellence*.

There are today a great many theories about intentionality in general and linguistic intentionality especially, and I want to pick up only two of them that are connected with the names of Ruth G. Millikan and Michael Tomasello. Millikan, born in 1933, has become known for a bold attempt to shape language and thought as biological categories.³⁰ Millikan refers to C. W. Morris as an authority and expert on the theory of signs, and she favors, in her own words, “a strongly naturalistic view” of language.³¹ Tomasello, born in 1950, is the co-founder of a new project called by him “*evolutionary anthropology*”.³² Millikan and

²⁹ Kenny, A. J. P. et. al. (eds.), *The Development of Mind*, (second part of the Gifford Lectures of 1971/72 and 1972/73), New Brunswick (USA) / London: Aldine Transaction, 1973, *passim*. The discussion in this book is pertinent to the work done by R. G. Millikan and M. Tomasello, and some of their ideas are anticipated by its participants. Waddington suggested that sounds are transformed into symbols by their connection with parental authority; *vide* A. J. P. Kenny et. al. (eds.), *The Development of Mind*, p. 85. *Vide* also S. K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol. II, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1972, chap. 17 and chap. 18.

³⁰ R. G. Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories. New Foundations for Realism*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): The MIT Press, 1984.

³¹ R. G. Millikan, *ibid.*, in her dedication on p. 5.

³² M. Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): The MIT Press, 2008.

Tomasello have taken notice of one another, and have spoken approvingly about their respective publications.

Humboldt, in speaking about an “*intellectual instinct*” built into language, looked back to figures such as Reimarus, Mendelssohn, and Herder who had modified the rigid mechanistic conception of life-processes stemming from Descartes and Hobbes by incorporating Spinoza’s idea of a *natura naturans*, a nature not only created but creative by and in itself, into their conception of the nature of man and the origin of his language. Now, we may ask, what about such an intellectual instinct of language if it is transplanted into a Darwinian context of natural history? Is it possible to give this two-hundred years old theory-loaded concept a reasonable interpretation that is compatible with our present knowledge about man’s biological prehistory?

According to Millikan, linguistic intentionality is a feature that must be attributed not to the individual speaker but to the language-system itself. Wittgenstein, in his *Remarks about the Philosophy of Psychology*, published posthumously in 1982, had conceived of a natural history of the concepts used by human speakers, and in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), he has developed a theory of language-games that deprived them of any *a priori*-insight into the meaning-content of the words and sentences of their natural language(s). As it seems, intentionality is bound to mentalism, and mentalism is condemned by Wittgenstein and his followers as a sin against the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps I may cite from a longer passage in which Millikan expresses her naturalistic credo:

*If man is a natural creature and a product of evolution, it is reasonable to suppose that man’s capacities as a knower are also a product of evolution. If we are capable of believing and knowing things, it must be because these capacities, and the organs in us or organization of us that are responsible for these capacities, historically performed a service that helped us to proliferate. Knowing must then be something that man has been doing all along – certainly not something he might get to some day when the (...) end of enquiry arrives. Knowing must also be something that man has been doing in the world, and that has adapted him to that world, by contrast with which not knowing, being ignorant, is something objectively different and less advantageous.*³³

With only a slight exaggeration one could say that in the course of the natural history of man there have been created many (organic) functioning systems, among them his language and the spectrum of its devices.

Millikan maintains that language devices can be compared to other natural devices such as a heart or a liver. For Darwin and his followers, form and function of an organism and its organs have been adjusted to one another by processes that have come about in natural history by an evolutionary stress resulting into differential selection according to “*fitness*”. Language devices have been shaped by evolution so that our ancestors could keep in touch with their

³³ R. G. Millikan, *ibid.*, p. 7.

fellows and gather some information about their physical environment; they have, as the author puts it, a “*proper function*”.³⁴

In contrast to the convictions of a Herder or Humboldt, man is not the creator of his language and culture; rather, it is the in-built rationality of adaptation that has come to do this business. As noted above, linguistic intentionality has two principal dimensions: We humans are under the functional pressure to develop stable relations to the members of our social group or society, and we must develop something like a rudimentary world-view. As a result of this, there are two paradigms of linguistic intentionality, namely, the intentionality of an “*imperative sentence*” and the intentionality of a “*declarative sentence*”.³⁵ It is a plausible paleo-anthropological conjecture that the intentionality of the imperative sentence is by far the older one.

In every field of empirical investigation it is necessary to balance the systematic architecture of the theory and the raw materials or stubborn facts of the enquiry. As a semiotician, Millikan looks at man’s natural languages from a systematic point of view. Her naturalistic credo or program has to be implemented by empirical facts drawn from evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology and other branches of knowledge.³⁶ Tomasello, in his turn, has started his investigations as a primatologist and is building his theory of human language on observations of the communicative abilities of monkeys, apes and man-apes, especially. For him, cooperation and gestural communication are much older than human language.

Being a late product of evolution, human language depends on an older cognitive infrastructure possessed by highly developed apes and early man. The intentional processes of apes and man have something like a characteristic style, the ape’s intentionality being rather individualistic whereas the intentionality of the human infant develops by means of joint attention. Moreover, paleo-anthropological observations support the hypothesis that there must have been an evolutionary stress in the prehistory of man that has resulted in the development of cooperative strategies of hunting. This selective pressure tended to enlarge the natural human mutualism and to produce a reciprocity and complementarity of roles.

The full format of shared intentionality resulting from this process can be characterized by a number of features, such as joint attention (as noted above), collective instead of individual representations, propositional knowledge as expressed in verbal form, recursion, reflection and the capacity of drawing conclusions in an informal manner and, last but not least, a susceptibility to the moral criticism of the members of the group. The thought-contents that can be coded in the words and sentences of a language enjoy now an unrestricted generality and exemplify the so-called view from nowhere, i.e. the world-view is not an individualistic one but is group-specific and relative to culture only.³⁷

³⁴ R. G. Millikan, *ibid.*, pp. 15 – 82.

³⁵ R. G. Millikan, *ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁶ Some theoretical progress has been made in R. G. Millikan, *Language. A Biological Model*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

³⁷ Of course, Tomasello refuses the nativistic conception of language that N. Chomsky has argued for in his *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

The story of the phylogenetic and ontogenetic acquisition of human language has never been told in full detail and may never be told in full detail. Every crucial step in its development from a gestural prototype to its recent verbal form must be made plausible by the advantage with which it must have been connected for our ancestors. Given the cognitive infrastructure of a shared or even collective intentionality, however, an explanation seems principally in reach. The substitution of a gestural modality by a vocal-auditory modality in the structure of the ancient communication-system may have been serviceable in communicative acts over greater distances.

In a short summary of his main arguments about the origin of language, Tomasello makes the following remarks:

Overall, it may be said without fear of contradiction that human skills of linguistic communication are multifarious and derive from multiple sources. The foundational aspects concerned with cooperative communication are due mainly to evolutionary processes, but the actual creation of the linguistic conventions and constructions that people use to structure their linguistic interactions with one another in particular languages are due both to cultural-historical processes that transcend individuals and to psychological processes during ontogeny of social learning, joint attention, analogy, and so forth. The shared intentionality inherent in communicating with a common goal within the context of common conceptual ground – in combination with various human tendencies of information processing and automatization – generates the possibility of language creation and change over cultural-historical time in particular linguistic communities.³⁸

As Tomasello frankly admits, there is a certain break in the line of his argumentation: Conventionalization and grammaticalization cannot be explained by biological causes alone; being structural in character, they rather have to be elucidated by specific linguistic principles. What about the notion of an intellectual instinct of language that gave occasion to the very fragmentary thoughts of my essay?³⁹ I think that we may finish with the following conclusions: Millikan and Tomasello have extended the intellectual instinct of language to a more comprehensive notion, including a dimension of natural history, on the one hand, and including a dimension of mutuality, reciprocity, and cooperative communication, on the other hand. In Millikan, there prevails a systematic semiotic approach and the aspect of natural history whereas in Tomasello there is an additional stress on collective intentionality. Both authors have made visionary contributions to an investigation into the origin of language.

A last remark in connection with the motto of this essay: The reconstruction of the human ancestry, both biological and cultural, must pick up a considerable amount of

³⁸ M. Tomasello, *ibid.*, p. 308. Vide also, by the same author, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, (1999), and *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (2014), both published in Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England) by Harvard University Press.

³⁹ In recent years, S. Pinker has tried to bring this concept anew into play, e.g. in a book under the title, *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: Morrow, 1994.

contingent data that are supposed to have framed our prehistory. But human behavior does not fossilize; therefore, when we probe into the depth of time, the facticity of the premises of our reconstruction is bound to become dubious. In other words, the reconstruction exhibits the methodological character of what has been called a “*conjectural history*” of the human race, oscillating between fact and fiction.

Speculations about the origin of human culture and language take share in a problem that has been spelled out in regard to the so-called contractualist theories of the origin of the state: They are conclusive if and only if the factual content of the premises of the argument can be raised to maximum plausibility or, better still, reduced to an undisputable minimum.

References

CHOMSKY, Noam, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalistic Thought*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

FORSTER, Michael N., “Introduction”, in: J. G. v. Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by M. N. Forster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. vii – xxxv.

GADAMER, Hans-Georg, “Wort und Bild - >so wahr, so seiend<”, in: *Ästhetik und Poetik I*, (= Gesammelte Werke 8), Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993.

HERDER, Johann Gottfried v., *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), in: *Frühe Schriften 1764 – 1772* (= Werke, I), ed. by U. Gaier, Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985, pp. 695 – 810.

HERDER, Johann Gottfried v., *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), in: *Philosophical Writings*, ed. by M. N. Forster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 65 – 164.

HUMBOLDT, Wilhelm v., “Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung”, in: Wilhelm v. Humboldt: *Über die Sprache. Reden vor der Akademie*, hg. v. J. Trabant, 11 – 32. Tübingen / Basel: Francke, 1994, pp. 11 – 32.

HUMBOLDT, Wilhelm v., *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (1830 – 1835), in: *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (= Werke, V), ed. by A. Flitner and K. Giel, Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1963, pp. 368 – 756.

HUMBOLDT, Wilhelm v., *On Language. On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. by M. Losonsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

KENNY, A. J. P., and J. R. Lucas, H. C. Longuet-Higgins, C. H. Waddington (eds.), *The Development of Mind*, New Brunswick (USA) / London: Aldine Transaction, 1973.

KIESOW, Karl-Friedrich, “Zeichenkonzeptionen in der Sprachphilosophie vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart“, in: R. Posner et. al., *Semiotik. Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur / Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, Berlin / New York: W. de Gruyter, 1998, pp. 1512 – 1553.

LANGER, Susanne K., *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol. II, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.

LOVEJOY, Arthur O., *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): Harvard University Press, 1936.

LOSONSKY, Michael, “Introduction”, in: W. v. Humboldt, *On Language. On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. vii. – xxxiv.

MERLAN, P., *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, The Hague (Netherlands): M. Nijhoff, 1963.

MILLIKAN, Ruth G., *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories. New Foundations for Realism*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): The MIT Press, 1984.

MILLIKAN, Ruth G., *Language. A Biological Model*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

PINKER, Steven, *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: Morrow, 1994.

TOMASELLO, Michael, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England): Harvard University Press, 1999.

TOMASELLO, Michael, *Origins of Human Communication*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England), The MIT Press, 2008.

TOMASELLO, Michael, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London (England), 2014.

The motto is from Wallace Stevens, “Adagia”, in: *Opus Posthumous. Poems, Plays, Prose*, ed. by Milton J. Bates, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 200.

Karl-Friedrich Kiesow

Institut für Philosophie der Leibniz Universität Hannover

kiesow@philosem.uni-hannover.de