

Linguistic Relativity, Interpretative Empathy, and the “Connection of Ideas”:
Eighteenth-Century Theories of Linguacultural Development

by

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Abstract

This thesis looks at theories of the emergence of linguistic difference put forward by three philosophers of the (long) eighteenth century—Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). The conventional, and in most regards accurate, assessment of these figures places them in different traditions (respectively rationalist, empiricist, romantic); however, I argue, on the matter of the growth and diversification of natural languages, they operate to a nontrivial extent on common ground, unified by a view of language as *creative*, using metaphor, analogy, and similar figurative operations to expand its expressive base; *social*, rooted in the desire for human communion; and *relativistic*, meaning both that language shapes or constitutes thought and that the precise nature of this effect varies according to the individual characters of different languages. These common ideas emerge, despite the different preoccupations of their authors, as a result of their common need to grapple with the “linguistic turn” effected by the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of John Locke (1632–1704) and the emergence of proto-linguistics as a field in its own right.

I then consider the implications of this creative–social–relativistic episteme for the current (twentieth- and twenty-first-century) line of research on linguistic relativity inaugurated by BL Whorf (1897–1941). I will try to illustrate that Whorf is connected to the eighteenth century, and Leibniz, Condillac, and Herder to each other, by several specific shared concepts: 1) that linguistic and cultural variation happens due to the use of words to organize the world in ways that vary across communities (what Condillac calls the “connection of ideas”); 2) that alongside or underneath its relativism, meaning is always to some degree universal and innate, a notion to which each writer considered here brings a different admixture of rationalism, empiricism, and theosophy; and 3) that Herder’s advocacy of a translinguistic, interpretive *Einfühlung*, or ‘empathy’, dependent on the preservation of both universal and relativistic principles, is crucial to the attainment of an intercultural harmony that respects and does not reduce the differences in linguacultural thought-worlds.

Preface

To fulfill UBC requirements, this preface affirms that this thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Martin Francis Emmett McCarvill.

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To my child

[P]eople learn from the so-called failures [of communication]. They learn of others' experiences—the differentiations, distinctions, proximities and estrangements. They orient to one another (which does not mean that they understand or identify with the other language-user, but that they find a position vis-à-vis). And through these means they improve their own orientation to the world (not to perfect it, but to enrich it, complicate it; the enrichment may be perverse). [...] As I have said somewhere recently (can't remember where), every utterance is an experiment, an attempt and an estimate of another speaker/hearer's mind-world.

—Janet Giltrow

Ich kann in diesem unermäßlichen Felde wieder nur Blumen brechen.

—Johann Gottfried Herder

Introduction

This thesis looks at theories of the development (that is, both emergence and change) of natural languages put forward by three philosophers of the (long) eighteenth century—Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). These three thinkers are generally seen as members of different movements and eras: Leibniz, a rationalist of the high Enlightenment; Condillac, an ultra-empiricist or radical Lockean; and Herder, a *Sturm und Drang* romantic nationalist. Accordingly, their views of language have also been interpreted quite differently. On the matter of the growth and diversification of natural languages,¹ however, I hope to show that they operate to a nontrivial extent on common ground, encompassing Leibniz’s monadic sense of multiplicity-within-unity emerging from creative² variation and the individuation of languages, Condillac’s focus on group identity emerging from “sympathy” as the force driving language change and the emergence of different cultures according to the way they carve up their sense-perceptions (the “connection of ideas”), and Herder’s theory that gaps between language communities can be bridged through interpretive “empathy.” I will argue that these accounts are unified by an interest in language as 1) *creative*, using metaphor, analogy, and similar figurative operations to expand its expressive base; 2) *social*, rooted in the desire for human communion; and 3) *relativistic*, meaning both that language shapes or constitutes thought and that the precise nature of this effect varies according to the individual characters of different languages and cultures.

¹ That is to say, real languages as actually spoken in the world, rather than artificial (constructed) languages.

² This thesis uses *creativity* in the everyday sense of, roughly, the faculty allowing the creation of something original and valuable (Csíkszentmihályi 1996), in this case linguistic phenomena (words, sentences, analogies, metaphors, proverbs, jokes, etc.), not the jargon sense, current in the field of linguistics, of the ability to produce infinite novel utterances using finite linguistic structures (Chomsky 1965).

This common ground does not amount to a shared creed or “-ism,” nor fully a common *paradigm* in the Kuhnian (1962) sense, since it lacks a unified methodological framework or common body of disciplinary knowledge. These scholars share something less conscious and more fundamental—an *episteme*, per Foucault (1966): a set of “conditions of possibility” giving rise to common questions (here, psychological, cultural, and genealogical as well as linguistic) and orientations (non-dualism, linguistic constitutivism, cultural essentialism, and with the exception of Leibniz, empiricism). Their themes do not so much build or advance on one another as abut and overlap. I will share with other writers the view that the features unifying this episteme stem from the “linguistic turn” effected by John Locke (1632–1704) in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which rejected theories of innate or natural meaning³ and raised new questions about the relation between words and thoughts. Besides Locke’s *Essay*, I will focus on Leibniz’s *Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain* (*New Essays on Human Understanding*, written 1704 but published 1765); Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (*Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, 1745); and Herder’s *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 1772).

As a coda, I will follow this creative–social–relativistic episteme into the realm of descriptive linguistics, as manifested in the account of *linguistic relativity*⁴ by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), whose work has become relativity’s *locus classicus* (or *infamosus*). In doing so, I hope to illustrate several points involving the relation between linguistic relativism and *universalism*:

³ That is, an intrinsic, not arbitrary or conventional, connection between words and referents (whether abstract “ideas,” Platonic forms, mental modules, objects in the world, or what-one-may). A notable latter-day version is Chomskyan *nativism* (e.g. Chomsky 1965). This thesis uses “innate” to avoid confusion with “natural language.”

⁴ Or *relativism*; broadly, the idea that language (e.g. lexicosemantics, grammar, conventional usage) influences or determines thought. My usage will be basically agnostic toward the many theoretical and terminological niceties.

- 1) that Leibniz's creative, relativistic, and social account of the development of natural languages complicates the standard picture of him as a linguistic naturalist, universalist, and system thinker, and that in this (limited) sense he is a precursor of Condillac, not an opponent as has been argued by Losonsky (2006);
- 2) that Condillac's (creative, relativistic, social) *liaison des idées* is also essentially the mechanism of linguistic variation in Leibniz and Herder and of Whorf's "cryptotypes," culturally specific idea-clusters reflected by linguistic differences;
- 3) that Whorf's theosophic interest in the future development of language and humanity to some higher state echoes Leibniz (in its transcendentalism), Condillac (in its positivism), and Herder (in its multiculturalism); and
- 4) that Herder's concept of translinguistic and -cultural *Einfühlung*, or 'empathy', which underpins his theories of hermeneutics, translation, and history, depends on the presence of both universal and relativistic principles and is crucial to the intercultural harmony through multilingual awareness that both he and Whorf hope to foster.

In a general sense, I have chosen to focus on eighteenth-century views of language divergence and change since I do not know of any recent work that treats these matters in their own right and not as either an adjunct to the related debate on the origin of language or a prelude to the emergence of nineteenth-century comparative–historical linguistics; I hope this thesis will justify my choice.

The six sections of the paper will look respectively at the study of language in the seventeenth century (Locke's context; section 1); Locke (section 2); Leibniz (section 3); Condillac (section 4); Herder (section 5); and Whorf, with a conclusion (section 6).

1. Seventeenth-century innatism and the rise of interest in natural language

In this section, I survey the study of language in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period preceding Locke's "linguistic turn." In large part this is the story of linguistic innatism and the increasing skepticism toward it. I consider three (interweaving) innatisms: the *scholastic* tradition, which "treated Latin syntax as a transparent mirror of external reality" (Hudson 2013: 4); the *rationalist* tradition, which treated (usually French) syntax as a correlate of human reason (Chomsky 1966); and the *mystical* tradition, in which linguistic signs bore encoded divine or occult meanings. Next, I consider the move away from innatism in England, where the founders of the Royal Society tried to ensure the clarity of scientific language and where Thomas Hobbes (1588–1769) developed an "ultra-nominalism" (Leibniz 1670) that preadumbrates elements of Lockean arbitrarism and Condillacian relativism.

1.1 The scholastics: Syntax as a mirror

What did Locke "turn" away from? In his early years at Oxford, the tradition of the "schoolmen" remained dominant; rooted in the syllogistic logic of Aristotle, its concerns were ontological and epistemological, not linguistic per se. Medieval "modists" (*modistae*) developed a system in which "modes of signification" depended on "modes of understanding" and thence "modes of being" (Zupko 2011)—a kind of "double conformity" (Locke, *Essay* III.ii.5) in which the parts of a sentence clove to the mind's operations, and those to physical reality, transparently: the relation between subjects and predicates in language mirrored those between "universals" and "accidents" (intrinsic and incidental attributes) in the world. Thus, Boethius of Denmark says,

[b]ecause the nature of things is the same everywhere, thus the modes of being and understanding are the same among those who have different languages, and consequently the modes of signifying are similar, and consequently also the

modes of constructing discourse or of speaking. Thus the grammar of a language in its entirety is similar to that of another language. (cited in Formigari 2001: 75)

Linguistic innatism and universalism are obvious elements of this *moderate realism*, which was challenged by the *nominalism* prominently advocated by William of Ockham, who rejected any universals outside the mind. Nevertheless, Ockham still sees words as “signs subordinated to mental concepts or contents” (*Summa Logicae* I.1), and the constitutive role of these concepts in thought as unmediated by language.

1.2 Rationalism and mysticism

McKusick (1986: 8) traces the distinction between “mimetic” and “expressive” innatism⁵ back to the Greeks.⁶ In the former, the shape of words bears an innate relation to the shape of the world, and in the latter, to the shape of the human mind. The scholastics reflect both principles (since the logic they saw in language was both mental and “real”), but René Descartes (1596–1650) departs from mimetism with the argument (1649) that the human linguistic capacity, which separates us from the beasts, consists in the removal of words from the “natural” context in which their actually present referents inspire vocal responses (not only words but also laughter and weeping; cf. Condillac’s “cries of fear and desire” [*Essai* 150]), allowing their creative use in other places and ways (Losonsky 2006: 70). This is a power of the human *mind*—unavailable to beasts, which are automata—and thus an expressive innatism. Variation in how societies do this (especially in the speech sounds they prefer) reflects the mental predispositions of peoples (70). Descartes does not grapple with the relativistic implications here: language remains parasitic on thought, and he says that Hobbes’s constitutivism (see 1.4 below) would have the

⁵ He says “naturalism.”

⁶ Mimetism to Plato’s *Cratylus* and expressivism to Epicurus’s “Letter to Herodotus.”

absurd result that a Frenchman and a German could not reason about the same things (Losonsky 71). Nevertheless, he prefigures Condillac's shift from "natural" to "instituted" signs (*Essai* 36).

Likewise, the authors of the "Port-Royal Grammar" (1660), Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) and Claude Lancelot (1615–1695), disliked the idea of words constituting thought because it seemed to preclude common mental representations across languages (Dascal 1998: 372; this could be called the "translatability problem"); but of more concern to them was how conventional reference could be established in the first place if nothing is perceived outside of language (the "bootstrapping problem"). In the end, the Port-Royalists take grammatical features common to French and Latin as universally "required by *logic*" (Losonsky 2006: 72; italics mine) rather than positing a deep *grammatical* stratum across languages (contrary to Chomsky's [1966] reading).

It has been a frequent argument of Aarsleff's (e.g. 1964, 1970, 1982b) that the goal of Book III of Locke's *Essay* was not primarily responding to, and certainly not rejecting, rationalism, but instead the occult tradition that Aarsleff calls "Adamicism"⁷ (1982b: 25). Aarsleff says Locke saw this as key to ensuring that truth-claims rest on public and not esoteric grounds (1970: 116); if so, Locke might be disappointed to learn that a mystical strain of innate-universal signification persisted in later years as a part of many theories of the relationship between words, thought, and meaning, not only those of avowed innatists like Leibniz, but also of relativists like Whorf. Adamicism, rooted in the Bible and the medieval "book of nature," located the origin of language in the naming of beasts by Adam (Genesis 2:19–20) and the origin of linguistic difference at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Adam's ideas of things were true ideas, and the names he invented for them, likewise. "The greatest philosopher, etymologist, and

⁷ Yates (1972) says "hermetic-cabalist"; the best term may be Formigari's (2001: 92) *Logosmystik*, but I will use Aarsleff's term, which reflects our focus on the origin and development of language.

naturalist who ever lived on earth” (Aarsleff 1982b: 25), he stood as guarantor (with God) of the connection of signs and referents.

Scholars in the Adamic tradition went from these foundations in Christian folk-belief far into the theosophic: Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) identified transcendent meanings in the sacred sounds of Hebrew (Hudson 1994: 21), a “sound symbolism” that might confer power over the building blocks of nature; Athanasius Kircher (c. 1601–1680) studied Egyptian glyphs, which he believed had been invented by the legendary magister-figure Hermes Trismegistus as a tool for doing philosophy (Hudson 1994: 20); and Robert Fludd (1574–1637) held that the hermetic approach could keep us from being led into error by our fallible senses (Pauli 1994: section 21).

1.3 Natural and scientific language: Bacon and Wilkins

During the Italian Renaissance, there arose a lively group of thinkers (notably Lorenzo Valla [c. 1407–1457] and Juan Luís Vives [1492–1540]) who mocked the abstruse metaphysics of the scholastics, instead looking back to the Roman orators to valorize rhetoric and communication for actual (and very worldly) political and suasive purposes. Losonsky (2006) credits these Renaissance humanists with focusing attention for the first time on natural language: how to adapt one’s speech to different “places, circumstances, and persons” (Vives, cited in Losonsky: 37), in contrast to the subject–predicate schemata of the old days. This concern with natural language was taken up by the “natural philosophers” in England, preeminently Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Unlike the Renaissance humanists, Bacon’s concern was once again the referential function of language; but unlike the scholastics, he saw signification as anything but transparent. He expressed this in two vivid metaphors: the “idols of the marketplace” or town square (Losonsky 2006: 44)—words that lead to illusions and error since they have been shaped by common use and the limited faculties of common folk—and the “Tartar’s bow,” which “do[es]

shoot back on the understanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle and pervert the judgment” (Bacon 1605: 137–8). Bacon’s concern was developing a better logic, one that need not rely on shifty words (Land 1986: 6) or resort to syllogism. This was an early preoccupation of the Royal Society (f. 1660); in particular, John Wilkins (1614–1672) strove to create a “true” philosophical language which would “repair the ruins of Babel” and achieve the transparent connection with the physical world that natural language had failed at (Aarsleff 1976: 241). Though he gestured back at an originary innateness, Wilkins’s goal was a constructed language of science (251).

In contrast to Bacon, Wilkins retained faith that words could adequately connect reason and experience. But he shares with Bacon a concern with language’s reliability, since speech framed by the vulgar is a source of error—here lies the seed of Condillac’s hierarchy of tongues from imprecise to precise. The limits of natural language are the limits of what Whorf (1939a: 189–190) would call the “thought world” of its speakers. Wilkins’s philosophical language would instead employ the impeccably logical principle of one-to-one correspondence between sounds and meanings;⁸ he felt it would be learnable in about a month (Aarsleff 1976: 262).

1.4 Hobbes’s arbitrarist challenge

Hobbes shares Bacon’s awareness of the unreliability of words, but seems rather invigorated than troubled: “words are wise mens counters,” he says “they do but reckon by them: but they are the mony of fooles, that value them by the authority of an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas, or any other doctor” (*Leviathan* [1651]: I.iv). The choice of names is of course no accident: Hobbes is rejecting syllogistic innatism. As Dascal (1998: 369) notes, Hobbes’s challenge to innateness was to call into question the prevailing view that the units of mental activity consisted in ideas, vaguely understood as functioning like images. Instead, Hobbes argued, mental representations

⁸ E.g.: *z*– ‘animals’; *zi*– ‘beasts’; *zit*– ‘beasts of the dog kind’; *ziti* ‘dogs’; etc. (Wilkins 160).

represent like words do—not naturally but arbitrarily or conventionally. To the rationalists, this was ridiculous and dangerous, making truth itself arbitrary. “They banned language from the inner *sanctum* of the mind, and continued to grapple with [...] the nature of mental representation and its relationship with the world” (369). In contrast,

Hobbes’s suggestion [would appeal to] thinkers such as Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Condillac, and Humboldt, who tended to attribute to language a central role in cognitive processes [at the cost of] relativization and arbitrariness of a knowledge achieved by manipulating socially and historically produced public signs. (369)

Thus, the Lockean “linguistic turn” can be seen as a response to Hobbes’s challenge.

For Hobbes, knowledge begins in sense-impressions made by bodies in motion (Land 1986: 8). The perceiver is entirely passive, and thus epistemology is forced into the Procrustean bed of physical forces—leading to the question of when we first wake up to engage in volitional knowledge-making. Hobbes feels that cognitive volition is a matter of inertia—over time, sense-impressions fade in strength and are crowded by new ones; their unitary bond to the world needs to be bridged by *imagination*, a meaning-making act that is the needed correlate of decaying sense (Land: 11–12), and of which words are the product, separating us from the memoryless animals (14). Words glue together this eroding foundation and eventually come to constitute knowledge, as the original sense-impressions “wander [...] as in a dream” (*Leviathan* XX.ix). Reasoning is then “*marking* [our thoughts] when we reckon by ourselves, and *signifying*, when we demonstrate or approve our reckonings to other men” (I.v, 1–2): mental shorthand and natural language. In the “signifying” capacity, language is the basis of the social compact and thus social authority and control (Losonsky 2006: 45). Adam aside, this seems to be the seventeenth century’s nearest approach to a “conjectural history” (Stewart 1811–12: 450) of language.

2. Lockean arbitrarism

Leibniz, Condillac, and Herder tackle language development within a “post-Lockean” episteme, that is, one emerging from the “linguistic turn” effected by John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke’s concern with language was twofold. First, he wished to refute theories of innate signification, which were not compatible with his main thesis that humans acquire knowledge idiosyncratically through sense-perception and inductive reasoning. Therefore, he argues, linguistic signification is *arbitrary*. Second, Locke, an associate of the Royal Society, wished to establish the reliability of language for scientific purposes, a problem he viewed in terms of a *double conformity* of words to ideas and ideas to things: the issue was that for communication, the words of different people had to conform to the same ideas.

This section will describe Locke’s argument against innate ideas, presented in Books II and especially III of the *Essay*; explore his concepts of arbitrariness, double conformity, and the association of ideas; and identify three questions implicitly posed by the *Essay* that affected the subsequent originary debate—the first on the origin of language, the second regarding its dual nature as private and shared, and the third regarding the proper means of its extension.

2.1 Locke’s “turn” and its motivations

Several writers, Losonsky (2006) at greatest length, have argued that Book III of Locke’s *Essay* constituted a “linguistic turn,” one which, as Hudson (2013: 1) notes, made “the relationship between language, thought and the world a topic of energetic discussion and debate in both British and continental philosophy.” Given its influence, it should be remembered that the *Essay* emerged from “an esoteric background in the world of Boyle and the men of the Royal Society, [and was not an] exoteric work of the Enlightenment” (Hacking 1988: 135). Locke presents his project as epistemological, not linguistic, the work of an “under-labourer” (*Essay*, “Epistle to the

Reader”) to physical scientists like Robert Boyle, Christiaan Huygens, and Isaac Newton. That means dealing with the reliability question, and *that*, for Locke, means rejecting innatism. He discards words like “substance” and “essence,” which convey, he argues, nothing at all (*Essay* III.ix–x); and states that Adam used arbitrary signs (III.vi.44–51). As Willard (1991: 147–9) shows, these arguments push back on two fronts against the idea of real as opposed to nominal essences. The latter, “abstract idea[s] which the general, or sortal name[s] stand for” (*Essay* III.iii.15), are “the inventions and creatures of the understanding” (III.iii.14). Words apply to ideas, and ideas to things (III.ii.2); simple ideas derive directly from perception, (II.ii.2), and exist prior to being signified (but see “mixed modes” below). Thus, Locke flips the Adamic idea that our perceptions are fallible and that language, which is from God, is our truest guide (Aarsleff 1982b: 26).

Locke himself would reject the leap from arbitrarism to full relativism, since language still refers to rather than constitutes ideas—the reference is just not innate, which is to say he is still *designativist*, not *expressivist* or *constitutivist* (Taylor 1985). This is a bit of a vexed question in the *Essay*, since Locke also says that words “produce” or evoke their referents in us (*Essay* II.viii.8), and that nominal essences are separated only by “*the Workmanship of the Understanding*” (III.iii.13). But as a rule, he is content to assert that the link is arbitrary—words designate ideas “not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain *Ideas*, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by an arbitrary Imposition, whereby such a word is made voluntarily the Mark of such an *Idea*” (III.ii.1).

2.2 Double conformity, the “cheat of words,” and public v. private language

As Hacking (1988: 140) notes, the phrase “double conformity” appears only once in the *Essay*, at II.xxxii. However, the concept of double conformity is fundamental to Locke’s argument on

language and would have remained in need of invention by critics had Aarsleff (1964) not excavated a name for it from Locke's actual text. As mentioned above, the conformity of words to ideas and ideas to things, intrinsic to the scholastic understanding of language, had been problematized by Bacon and especially Hobbes. Locke agrees with Hobbes that the unitary sign must decay and language serve as a mnemonic, but sees this as a matter of deviation and deterioration in the word—the “cheat of words,” in fact⁹—in relation to the unchanging idea. Arbitrariness allows this slippage or “cheat”—without it, language is merely an aggregate of true or false propositions. The fact that ideas are shared raises another problem, one that makes the “double conformity” itself a doublet: alongside the generative relation *thing* → *idea* → *word* is the referential relation *word* → {*idea in the mind of the speaker, idea shared among speakers*}.

This exposes a relativistic aporia between internal and external language. Locke believed traditional logic was “a very useless skill”; “a curious and unexplicable Web of perplexed Words” that disrupts the use of language as “the Instrument and Means of Discourse, Conversation, Instruction, and Society” (III.x.8–10). Language itself is Locke's weapon against the scholastic legacy; the “understanding” of the *Essay*'s title refers to mental operations performed on nominal essences, constituting a translucent but irremovable layer between human cognition and the physical world. But the language of “understanding,” be it internal or external, is not the same as the “Means of Discourse,” etc. A distinction is needed between the mere use of words to make one's private ideas public and a fully interactional perspective on language. Locke allows that external language is essentially social: “God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, [...] furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument and common Tye of Society” (III.i.1). However, in the mould of internal language, which is a

⁹ Locke uses “cheat” in this way in the *Essay* (III.x.5, 34), but I have found the full term “the cheat of words” only in a letter to William Molyneux of December 26, 1692.

mnemonic—essentially a note-to-self—to Locke external language remains monologic: humans use “*Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions*; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within [their] own Mind[s], whereby they might be made known to others” (III.i.2). Otherwise, such ideas are “hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear” (III.ii.1). This is thus still a “propositional” model—the speaker speaks, and the listener is passive and implicit.

‘Tis true, common Use by a tacit Consent appropriates certain Sounds to certain *Ideas* in all Languages, [and] unless a Man applies it to the same *Idea*, he does not speak properly: [but] their Signification, in his use of them, is limited to his *Ideas*, and they can be signs of nothing else. (III.ii.8)

Despite Locke’s protest, it seems that in this speaker-centred model “the allegedly *primary* function of words in communication is in fact no *function* at all” (Land 1986: 40, italics in original). But if ideas are radically private, how can we be sure what words mean when spoken?

2.3 Mixed modes, relativism, and the “association of ideas”

As mentioned in 2.2 above, Locke feels that the existence of different languages is powerful evidence for arbitrariness—if signification were innate, we would have only a single common language. As Land (1986: 34) notes, this is not necessarily true (or even likely): “[t]hat different words are now used by different peoples ceases to be a bar to the natural language theory as soon as we adopt an etymological perspective which presents the possibility of deriving these different words from common roots.” While the *Essay* pre-dates the insights of comparative philology by a century, the concept of genetic relationships between languages was certainly available, and was explored by Locke’s contemporary Leibniz (see next section). In fact, Locke seems to see linguistic *structure* as universal; it is individual “expressions” (*Essay* II.xxii.6) that cannot be translated. In this context only, Locke presents language as a collective construction of meaning:

Languages, [...] being suited only to the convenience of Communication, are proportioned to the Notions Men have, and the commerce of Thoughts familiar amongst them [...]. Where they had no philosophical Notions, there they had no Terms to express them; And 'tis no wonder Men should have framed no Names for those Things, they found no occasion to discourse of. (IIxxviii.2)

As Land (1986: 53) says, “[i]mplicit in Locke’s remarks is a weak form of linguistic relativism: each society evolves a vocabulary suited to its own culture and philosophy in such a way that its members cannot *without deliberate effort* conceive reality in ways other than those embodied in their language” (italics mine). The priority of ideas to words is maintained; words do not determine what is *expressible*, but instead influence what is *easier or more difficult* to express.

In practice, simple ideas are uniform across languages; relativity emerges with *mixed modes*, “Combinations of simple *Ideas* of different kinds” (*Essay* II.xxii.1), for example *triangle*, *gratitude*, *murder*, *obligation*, *drunkenness*, *a lie*. Unlike simple ideas, these are “bundles [...] made by the mind”; the word is “as it were the Knot, that ties [several simple ideas] together” (III.v.10). In other words, mixed modes are constituted arbitrarily but become sharable when they receive names, and then conventionalized when the name gains currency among a group of speakers, who in adopting the mixed mode adopt a way of seeing (that facet of) the world.

Thus, languages bundle the world differently; Aarsleff (1964: 54) cites Pierre Coste’s French translation of the *Essay*, prepared under Locke’s direction, to show that Locke saw mixed concepts present in one language and not another, such as *parricide*, to be “untranslatable” (though he does not talk about “worldviews” or what these differences mean in the aggregate). For the first time, the social is preeminent: individual association of ideas, always given to profusion, perversity, and madness, is reined in by the need to communicate ideas socially. As

Land (1986: 41) says, in interpreting an utterance, we may ask whether the speaker *intends to say* *x* or whether *x* is a *term in the language* he or she speaks. The former option is preferred by Locke, but it is a poor method, since without a shared framework, the speaker's externalized words give us no evidence what he means. This complicates Locke's rejection of "the association of ideas" (in a chapter not added till the 1700 edition of the *Essay*), a stance which is more reasonable if it applies only to logical or scientific language than if extended to everyday speech. Only diffidently, in the *Essay*'s last chapter, are semantic relations represented not as idiosyncratic and individual but instead as a conventional and culturally specific "semeiōtiké." As will be seen, the linguistic intersubjectivity with which Locke is uncomfortable is addressed by Condillac's *sympathie* and his revision of the "association of ideas," and expanded into a hermeneutic model of communication with Herder's *Einfühlung* or 'empathy'.

Besides mixed modes, ideas associate in two other ways, both rooted in *relation* (II.xii.7): first, "natural Correspondence," like *sweetness* with *an apple*; and then a second association:

wholly owing to Chance or Custom; *Ideas* that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Men's Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them; they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its associate appears with it [...]. (II.xxxiii.5)

In *Essay* II.xi ("Of Discerning"), Locke suborns these associations to the faculty of "*wit*," which uses "metaphor and allusion" to find any "congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy" (2). It may seem that the wit to identify commonalities between unlike things must play a role in right apprehension, but Locke places more stock in its partner faculty of "judgment," "separating [...] *Ideas* wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude" (2). The legitimate scope of "natural Correspondence" and

the extension of ideas through figuration seems minor indeed, squeezed by judgement-segmented experience on one hand and illegitimate connection by “Chance or Custom” on the other.

These idiosyncratic connections descend by degrees from wit through audacity into “madness” (*Essay* II.xxxiii.11): all Locke’s examples involve vivid emotion, and most entail an association between the intrinsic and the incidental features of some remembered threat or injury, leading to trauma and irrational behaviour as “the whole gang” (II.xxxiii.5) of associations barge uncontrollably in. This uncontrollable negative side of the “association of ideas” leads Locke to reject it as unsound. In contrast, Condillac, who focuses in the *Essai* on the rational “connection” of ideas, will see a role for untrammelled association in poetry (*De l’art d’écrire*, 1775).

2.4 Locke’s “three questions”

“Locke had made language central to a whole new set of problems. He had inspired the conviction that language not only reflected the world or the mind, but that it *constituted* reality in ways far more profound than he himself had acknowledged” (Hudson 2013: 12). These problems can be formularized as follows:

1. If signification is arbitrary, why and how does it take the forms it does? That is, how does language originate and develop?
2. If signification is arbitrary, and individual experience varies, how can verbal signs correspond both to internal ideas (and thus to the unique experience of the individual) and to shared ideas? How can ideas be communicable between individuals and translated across languages?
3. If complex ideas are mediated by language, how can we know that language reliably reflects the real world? That is, how can the illegitimate or uncontrolled *association of ideas* be avoided?

3. Multiplicity within unity: Leibniz

Leibniz's theory of language has been widely characterized as formalist and innatist, in opposition to Locke's, which is communicative and arbitrarist. Aarsleff (e.g. 1980) views Condillac (with his interest in natural language and communication) as Locke's heir, the "central figure who brought about the change that lies behind the romantic aesthetic and the role it assigned to language," and Leibniz as lying against the grain of these intellectual developments. Losonsky (2006: Chapter 3) sees Leibniz and Condillac as two emerging poles or camps: on Leibniz's side, innatism, universalism, formalism (a "system" view), and atavism; on that of Condillac, arbitrarism, relativism, functionalism (a "use" view), and progressivism.

Neither of these views is adequate; in fact, significant relativism emerges within Leibniz's universalism when his view of the development of languages and the connection of ideas is considered. He shares with Condillac a focus on multiplicity and hierarchy, but in Leibniz's view, languages orbit a single pole of "true" signification, and intentional intervention is needed to reunite them with it. (Cf. Condillac's progressive-telic view, in which newer languages emerge in a more perfect form than older ones and supplant them). And for both Leibniz and Condillac, language develops from concrete to abstract by processes of metaphor, metonymy, and analogy. This awareness of the role of the connection of ideas in (diachronic) linguistic development stands in contrast to Locke's (synchronic) focus on discernment and separation. The "innatist" Leibniz's real problem is how to reconcile unity and multiplicity.

3.1 Unity

Leibniz's main concern in the *Nouveaux essais* (completed 1705, published 1765) is to rebut Locke's *Essay*, reject nominalism, and salvage innate signification. He attacks nominalism from, so to speak, the right: in sharp contrast to the "progressive" empiricist critiques of Locke made

by Condillac, Berkeley, and Hume, he wishes not to reduce the role of idea-referents and increase that of word-constitutivism but to maintain the first part of the double conformity as well, the relation of words (via ideas) to things. He calls Hobbes an “ultra-nominalist,”

[f]or [...] he says that the truth of things itself consists in names and what is more, that it depends on the human will, because truth allegedly depends on the definitions of terms, and definitions depend on the human will. This [...] cannot stand. In arithmetic, and in other disciplines as well, truths remain the same even if notations are changed, and it does not matter whether a decimal or a duodecimal number system is used. (cited in Duncan 2012: 17)

Like Wilkins, Leibniz thus envisions a proper philosophical language as mathematical, constructed through a science of “combinatorics” (Leibniz 1670: 428), and designative rather than constitutive.

Hacking (1988: 145–6) makes a biographical observation regarding Leibniz’s interest in universal signification (and his need to come to terms with linguistic difference):

Born at the end of the Thirty Years War, in one of the heartlands that was ravaged with a savagery that Europe had not known for centuries, Leibniz devoted a lot of his life to what would now be called peace studies. It was one of his grave concerns to establish that all humans were of the same stock. Why? It was still being denied in his own day that inhabitants of Central America are human [...]. In campaigning for a common humanity, Leibniz was not advocating some Adamicism but rejecting mad Eurocentrism like that.

Thence, if we accept this motivation, come two key aspects of Leibniz’s interest in language: his desire to develop a philosophical language and his interest in etymologies.

With regard to the former, Leibniz's focus, even fixation, on achieving a "general characteristic" (*Nouveaux essais* 340–2) accessible to all peoples goes back to his earliest major work, the *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria* ("Dissertation on the Combinatorial Art," 1666) and is reflected in his most-quoted passage, from the *Project for an Art of Discovery* (1685: 176): "The only way to rectify our reasonings is to make them as evident as those of the mathematicians, so that we could find our error at a glance, and when people have disputes, we could simply say: 'Let us calculate, without further ado, in order to see who is right.'" However, languages as they stand are far from intertransparent. As Leibniz's mouthpiece "Théophile" says in *Nouveaux essais* (397), "the situation is that our needs have forced us to abandon the natural order of ideas, [which] would be the one for us to follow if we had no concern for our own interests." Leibniz deplores the differences in our ways of encoding reality in language, but sees them as inevitable as tribalism.

3.2 Multiplicity

Universal language, for Leibniz, is not only a future promise. He is also crypto-Adamic, and believes that present-day languages have fallen away from an originary unity. This degeneration is a historical, not a speculative, problem, and Leibniz's tool for solving it is etymology; his conclusion is that the German language, though not the language of Adam itself, is older, purer, and philosophically more robust than the other ancient tongues, Hebrew and Arabic: "more natural—or as Jacob Boehme would have said, more Adamic" (*Nouveaux essais* 281). German

seems to have remained more natural, [...] somehow in closer accord with the Cosmos and Nature, with Creation and the Creator, with truth and reality.

Consequently, it is also better able than other languages to record the truths of natural philosophy, for it is itself 'natural.' (1697, cited in Aarsleff 1964: 47)

“On the other hand, the German language is easily the poorest for expressing fictions, certainly far less fitted for this than French, Italian, and other languages derived from Latin [...] [German] is incompatible, not with philosophy, but with barbarous philosophy” (Aarsleff 1964: 47).

The *Nouveaux essais*, in focusing on the characters of different languages and their scalar arrangement from passionate to precise, prefigure Condillac. Leibniz’s innatism, however, is utterly incompatible with Condillac’s and Locke’s conventionalism, which Leibniz assigns in the *essais* to one Philalethe (‘lover of confusion’), who is vehemently (even splutteringly) refuted by Théophile (‘lover of God’). This tension persists in Leibniz’s etymological work: ostensibly concerned with the common (innate, universal) roots of words and languages, he cannot avoid the inherently arbitrary, relativistic processes of their variegation and profusion.

Luckily, Leibniz’s concept of monads comes to the rescue. As Leibniz says in the *Monadologie* (§70) with reference to the monadic makeup of animals, “Thus we see that each living body has a dominant entelechy, which in the animal is the soul; but the limbs of this living body are full of other living beings, plants, animals, each of which also has its entelechy, or its dominant soul.” This statement applies in a much less obscure way to languages than to living organisms. Capital-L Language is a monad; each of its subordinate monads, the individual languages, dialects, and idiolects of the world, also contains its own monads, down to the infinite range of sentences in all languages, their constituent word-forms, usages, phonemes, and so on. There is nothing empirical about monadology, and Leibniz’s phonological and etymological efforts do not bear scrutiny (as discussed below), but as a pure model they still skip many of the conceptual problems regarding, for example, linguistic levels, or what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect, that have given modern linguists pause. Further, the idea that “there are infinite degrees of life in the monads” (*Monadology* §4) and that each exists on its own terms but

with an awareness of the universe as a whole, allows the radical fluidity of Leibniz's etymology (see 3.3 below). English can never be German, but words, meanings, and sounds can move between both and retain their character. Rather than boxes containing smaller boxes, language becomes a dynamic system in which monads of every level retain their own agency. This then implies the retention by each monad of an individual perspective, given the "mind-likeness" with which Leibniz imbues monads, "the result of each view of the universe, as seen from a certain position, is a substance which expresses the universe in conformity with this view, should God see fit to render his thought actual and to produce this substance" (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §14). This looks like a move from designativism to constitutivism—words and languages bearing their own character and import without reference to an external class of idea-referents.

The worldview and character of each language, word, and sound is thus radically different but also radically compatible with all others; and in language, as opposed to the monads of a dog or a drop of urine (Voltaire's caustic example; *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 22: 434), this inspires a special kind of proto-*Sprachwissenschaftliche* investigation. He begins by elaborating a relativistic *Lautphilosophie*: in German, for instance, "the letter R naturally [innately] signifies a violent motion, while the letter L signifies a gentle one" (*Nouveaux essais*, 278; although he does not elaborate similar analyses for other languages, he makes clear that these sound-symbols are specific to the "Real Character" of German). But he is no Böhme; he writes the latter's *Natursprache* off as "a multitude of follies" (340), and his own sense of the special character of sounds is etymological and comparative, not esoteric. That is, the past is not a source of divine or mystic authority, but a proving ground for scientific—philological and genealogical—work: he hopes to find and elaborate an ancestral *Ursprache* systematically connecting modern languages, a proposition quite unlike Condillac's abstract, conjectural *première langue* (*Essai* 160).

3.3 Etymology and Bisterfeld's theses

Following this practical bent, sound-meanings for Leibniz are derived from plain, plausible processes of language development, like onomatopoeia; develop and extend through metaphor; and spread from interchange between peoples. *Nouveaux essais* 282–289 gives many examples: for instance, the croaking of the frog leads to German *quaken* and Latin *coaxare* ‘croak’, thence to (Middle High) German *quek* ‘life, lively’, then to English *quick* ‘alive’, ‘speedy’ and German (and English) *Quecksilber* ‘quicksilver’. This is barely faulty (*Online Etymology Dictionary*); and even connections that we do not now accept, such as French *loup* ‘wolf’ with German *lauf* ‘run’, stand or fall on their own merits, without any esoteric Böhmmism. (Nor is Leibniz strident about the correctness of his etymologies; his language is modest and speculative.)

Thus, to Leibniz, meanings are rooted in observation and imitation of the natural world, although this may be at some remove; and sounds have intrinsic meanings. How then do differences between languages develop, and is this development necessarily degenerative? To tackle these questions, we should begin with Leibniz's critique (again in the *Nouveaux essais*) of Locke's mixed modes. Any “general characteristic” purporting to be more rational than other languages must maintain that the meanings of its words (lexicosemantics) are somehow more logical than those of natural languages. Leibniz, following Locke, conceives this variation in terms of the knotting-and-bundling of ideas, but focuses more on differences across languages as opposed to speakers. This makes sense given that to Leibniz the connection of ideas is neither arbitrary nor private, not associated with “madness,” and not all bundles are created equal:

The basis of truth lies always in the very connection of the characters [words] and the way they are put together. For though the characters are arbitrary, their use and connection has something which is not arbitrary, namely a certain proportion

between the characters and the things, with the relations to one another of different characters expressing the same things. And this proportion or relation is the ground of truth. (cited in Losonsky 2006: 64)

The greater this proportionality, the less the slippage between terms, and the more a language operates *salva veritate*¹⁰—‘with unharmed truth’. Rutherford (1998) and Arthur (2013) discuss at length the debt of Leibniz’s philosophical language project to the ideas of *immediation*¹¹ and *panharmonia* expressed in four theses (1661) by Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld (1605–1655), which amount to the assertion of 1) *universal harmony*; 2) the *connection of all things*; 3) the mixture in “every single body” of *perception and appetite*, which let that body determine what is or is not “congruent” to it; and 4) the *intrinsically active* nature and meaningful role of every creature in the “republic of beings” (Leibniz’s, not Bisterfeld’s, term; italics are mine).

These Bisterfeldian theses start to give us an idea of how to reconcile Leibniz’s universal-formalism with a relativistic, use-based perspective like that of Condillac or Herder. Universal harmony leads to a rapport between beings that enables them to understand one another, and also to an affinity between ideas that means that they can be connected, compared, and extended in non-arbitrary ways—not to the point of madness, as in Locke’s “association of ideas,” but according to the underlying harmony existing between the interlocutors in a communicative exchange. Then, communicative acts in natural languages, which do not operate *salva veritate*, themselves resolve into *essaies* to bridge the gap between bodies. The language-viewpoint is static, but the individual agent can transcend it. But communication or interpretation, if correct, is never free, since it must be done with an orientation to the universal truth that both interlocutors imperfectly reflect. As Arthur (2013) notes, Bisterfeld’s idea

¹⁰ Quine (1943) offers ‘indiscernibility of identicals’ as a less oblique term for this idea.

¹¹ ‘Passing into’ (←Lt. *immeāre*, OED).

that the immanence or connection among things is reflected proportionately in a connection of concepts in thought is what for Leibniz accounts for the fact that we can know things about reality at all. Hobbes's "ultra-nominalism" would lead to the untenable view that truth is dependent on our decisions.

The properties of real things restrain the association of ideas, fostering a more fruitful connection—again a doublet, between ideas and between the minds that share them—and addressing in one fell swoop Locke's questions given at the end of section 2: language "works" because we have 1) reliable sense-perceptions and 2) the desire for communion. (This model seems well suited to Leibniz's hope of reconciling his rationalism with Christian belief.)

3.4 Natural language development and the extension of meanings

In contrast to previous philosophical language-builders, however, Leibniz also extensively considers the use and improvement of natural languages, separate from the general characteristic. To explain the move from mimetic signs, derived directly from sense-stimuli like the croak of the frog, to composed or instituted signs, Leibniz relies on the operations of figurative language (Arthur 2013: 19–20). The idea is now commonplace that metaphor, metonymy, analogy, and similar capacities are a basic part of the human cognitive apparatus (see e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980), but in the eighteenth century it was more common to perceive these figures as highly cultivated forms of language associated with particular contexts like literature and oratory (an attitude with roots in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*). Leibniz's idea of figuration as part of the development and normal use of natural language was therefore quite original.

He exemplifies it in an interesting way, complicated by his innatism—not with a normal example of analogy or extension from within a language, as he often had used when discussing etymologies, but instead by making resort to a calque, a loan-concept translated from one

language to another. The “Hottentots” (that is, the Khoekhoe people of Southwestern Africa), he tells us, for the loan-concept “Holy Spirit” (Latin *Spiritus Sanctus*),¹² have charmingly adopted a word meaning ‘a benign and gentle puff of wind’ (Arthur 2013: 20). The Latin *Spiritus* originally means ‘breath’, ‘air’, and thus to Leibniz the calque is a tiny miracle, evidence for a connection of word with concept that transcends linguistic separation.

If we reject innate word–idea correspondence and sound symbolism, however, Leibniz’s understanding is not open to us: within-language semantic creativity rests in an uncomplicated way on semantic (and polysemous) availability—that the metaphorist knows what the word means—but to mean anything crosslinguistically words have to be *learned*. So how do we get to ‘a benign puff of wind’? At a minimum, for fruitful translation, the translator has to have either a deep awareness of the full polysemous sense of Latin *Spiritus* that suggests ‘wind’ as a translation (for example, a missionary trying to concretize the abstract), or a deep understanding of the mythopoeic resonance of ‘wind’ in Khoekhoe who comes to see the Spirit as ‘a type of wind’ (for example, a Khoe person trying to understand the missionary’s beliefs). Implicit in each case is a situation where European languages and Khoekhoe have not bundled matching ideas, and so the translator has to find a port of convenience within the Khoekhoe legendarium. Collaboration between a Khoe person and a missionary, or translation by one person deeply familiar with both cultures, will reduce the chance of failure; but the lack of a simple matching term means that even the aptest translation will bring new dissonances and valences to the concept, which becomes newly dialectical and the site of a continuing interpretive encounter between cultures. Müller (1884) tells us that in this case the term was from a Dutch translation of the Lord’s Prayer, but even as a colonial imposition it does add something to the Khoekhoe language; and we may also think of it like Leibniz does as the effort of a Khoe, who in bringing a

¹² Although since the settlers were Protestants, Dutch *Heilige Geest* would seem more likely.

new concept into her language (rather than projecting one out) has the opportunity to enrich and weirden her own frame of reference. Perhaps ‘benign wind’ is a banal choice, a flattening and dismissal of the Christian mysteries; or perhaps the translator has intentionally chosen this plain term for service behind the lines, “bending” it to express an alien worldview (see section 5). This points to a mode of crosslinguistic dialogue rooted not in a transcendent principle but in bridging solitudes through empathetic interpretation. Condillac will systematize “sympathy” as a basis for communication, and Herder will do the same in the fields of translation and hermeneutics.

Thus, Leibniz’s investigations into language development do not necessarily bear out his linguistic universalism. At the same time, where Locke’s arbitrariness led him to a view where there were few or no restrictions on the composition of mixed modes and where ideas could be connected, or languages vary, seemingly without limit, Leibniz’s conservative view of the possibility or impossibility of given innate meanings also holds different languages together. As he says, a new term does not constitute a new idea (*Nouveaux essais* 214). That which is thinkable and expressible by definition has some prior existence, and bundling and figuration are limited capacities. Not language, but reason, shapes our thinking; but reason is *itself* a language. Natural languages reflect a “natural order of things [...] common to angels and men and to intelligences in general” (*Nouveaux essais* 5). Overall, the image is of a harmony of spheres (or monads)—words, languages, speakers—each in its own set position around the ‘unharmful truth’; separate, but gradient, not heteroclit. It is a mildly innatist model with relativistic inflections, tolerant of and interested in natural languages, rather than radically innatist as has sometimes been stated. Most of all, it insists that language and communication are perfectible. What Leibniz is not is an empiricist; as will be seen in the next section, Condillac’s empiricism leads to a much greater emphasis on the incommensurability of languages.

4. Language as an instrument: Condillac

Too often, historically, the Abbé de Condillac has been seen as merely a recapitulator of Locke or an extremist empiricist (e.g., Mill 1867, Arens 1969). A revisionist perspective was provided by Aarsleff (e.g. 1974, 2001), but his overt, prickly partisanship may have hampered the acceptance of his argument that Condillac, as opposed to Herder or Humboldt, was the inaugurator of the central line of European linguistic relativity. However, later scholars like Forster (2011: 133) do accept Condillac as the source of the idea that the transformation of sense-perception into knowledge takes place by the “connection of ideas” through words, initially arbitrarily but then shaped by the characters of peoples (which themselves are moulded by language). In addition, it does seem that Condillac was one of the first European thinkers to combine the linguistic constitutivism of Leibniz-influenced German predecessors like Christian Wolff (1674–1754) with a serious focus on sociocultural and not only psychological aspects.¹³ Condillac’s conjectural history of the linguistic and mental development of peoples, which eschews God or innate ideas and instead sees language as a vocalization of the human need to comprehend reality and share this comprehension, for the first time makes language study into a truly anthropological discipline.

4.1 The *liaison des idées* and the epistemology of the *Essai*

Contrary to persistent rumour, Condillac is no pure sensationalist. Far beyond Hobbes, who sees words as mere “counters” to the wise man and a convenience for the social compact, for Condillac they are the *sine qua non* of the individual understanding and all social interaction. And far beyond Locke, who begins with the individual mind in a *tabula rasa* state, Condillac’s originary perspective is inherently social—his “two children in the desert” (see 4.2 below) start

¹³ The major predecessor who deserves mention in this regard, and a lacuna in this thesis, is the singular Giambattista Vico (1668–1744).

from scratch in a prelinguistic state, but together; and *their* child is born into a society of three, with a language and culture (see Gans 1999). The ultimate grounding is still in sensation, but for all real purposes language mediates thought: “the progress of the human mind depends entirely on the proficiency we demonstrate in the use of language” (*Essai* I.ii.11.107).¹⁴ Finding the origin of language in human sensation rather than God was a bold step (dictated by the logic of Lockean arbitrarism), but Condillac’s enduring radicalism is in his constitutivism, not his sensationalism: he takes us from the view of language as a “cheat” or flawed mirror to seeing it as a great human work and font of identity, a view that will dominate into the twentieth century.

For Condillac, sense-perception is a truth-claim: a non-linguistic grounding for a virtually total linguistic–cognitive system. “Let us consider a man at the first moment of his existence. [H]is soul feels at first different sensations such as light, colors, pain, pleasure, motion, rest; these are his first thoughts” (*Essai* I.i.1.3). In contrast to Locke’s model of passive sensation followed by active reflection, Condillac’s (infant?) “man” is already actively using his perceptions to constitute thoughts, as words will later constitute his perceptions. But the path from perception to the “instituted signs” of real language is unparsimonious, Condillac’s attempt at a total theory of the “operations of the mind” (*Essai*, Introduction: 5). His *terme clé* for this theory is the “connection of ideas” (*liaison des idées*): “Ideas connect with signs, and it is, as I will show, only by this means that they connect amongst themselves” (5). The signs in question come in three types (I.ii.4.35), covering not just the words of natural language but all signification, and ultimately rest on a sequence of basic bodily operations¹⁵ that culminate in the

¹⁴ In citations of the *Essai*, the numbers indicate part/section/subsection/paragraph.

¹⁵ That is, *sensations* of physical objects; *perception* of the vibrations of sensations in the soul (hence I.i.1.1, “we do not go beyond ourselves; and we never perceive anything but our own thought”; cf. the “incomprehensible inane” of Locke, reached when simple ideas cease to refer to the outside world [*Essay* I.ii.8.10]); *consciousness* (awareness) of the perception (*Essai* I.ii.1.16); *attention* to the fact that there is some specific perception and not some other (I.ii.1.16); *reference* back to the thing (I.ii.1.11); *judgment* that the reference is proper (I.ii.1.11).

incidental association of a perception and its context—an *accidental sign* (e.g., the cock’s crow and the dawn); this is akin to the free association of ideas in Locke. Crucially, an accidental sign does not need to be objectively accurate: “the snow is ‘white’ if by whiteness we have in mind the physical cause of our perception, but it is not white if by ‘whiteness’ we understand something similar to the perception itself” (I.ii.1.14). The deepest roots of signification are thus legitimately idiosyncratic, as compared to Locke’s simple ideas, which reflect only inane, illegitimate variation except when compounded. Accidental signs, thus, do not confound Condillac as they do Locke; he focuses instead on the further operations they open up,¹⁶ allowing us to by degrees to recombine, extend, pull apart, analogize from, and otherwise manipulate ideas, in a wordless, internal language that scaffolds our further cognitive development.

But as our language and ideas develop in tandem, we also interact with our fellows, and natural *sympathy* comes into play to make our language external and intersubjective. Condillac compares human experience to theatre (I.ii.1.5)—what we behold can be interpreted intellectually, but also gives rise to involuntary emotional responses, to which our natural *sympathy* (I.ii.3.32) with our fellows causes us to attend to, mirror, and share. In other words, “theatre” indicates not mere spectacle but a collective “audiential” or witnessing experience, which binds people(s) together. The verbal cries that accompany sympathy responses—say, the cry of pain at another’s wound—constitute *natural signs* (II.i.1.4), the first integument of sympathetic communion. These provide a germ and rationale for the *liaison des idées* by social convention (but not conscious compact; see 4.2 below), between the too profuse, idiosyncratic “association” of Locke’s madman and the failure to draw connections at all shown by the (asocial) “idiot” (I.ii.3.32): we can only make meaning together.

¹⁶ Viz., the *imagination* to retrieve the image of the object signified (I.ii.1.2); volitional *reflection* on that image; (I.ii.1.5); then *reminiscence*, the similarly intentional retrieval of past perceptions as *memories*; and *contemplation*, the retention of such memories in mind (I.ii.1.2).

4.2 “Deux enfants [...] égaré dans le désert”: Sympathy and “instituted signs”

Condillac’s linguistic origin-myth takes us from natural sympathetic signs by degrees to conventional or *instituted signs* (*Essai* I.ii.1.4), which allow the various ways of organizing experience that characterize the languages of the world. Where natural signs are shared with animals, instituted signs are uniquely human: “the similarity between animals and men proves they have a soul; the difference proves it is inferior to ours” (I.ii.4.43). (Herder will adopt this view.) Instituted signs regulate powerful associations by allowing us to pull signifier and signified apart. Contra Locke, words do not lead us into error; they filter experience to prevent it.

But how do we achieve such control? Part II of the *Essai* begins with a parable: what if “two children, one of each sex, sometime after the deluge, had gotten lost in the desert before they would have known the use of any sign” (II.i, introduction: 113)? These children use all the prelinguistic operations of the mind, but do not reflect on the accidental signs that present themselves—for example, a tree laden with fruit (II.i.1.2). Instead, it is a natural sign that garners the response: the hunger the children suffer when, lacking the symbolic capacity to recall the tree and return to it, they discover it (or some other food source) again by accident—one

would not merely cry out; he made as if an effort to obtain it, moved his head, his arms, and all parts of his body. Moved by this display, the other fixed his [here, they seem to be of the same sex] eyes on the same object, and feeling his soul suffused with sentiments he was not yet able to account for to himself, he suffered by seeing the other suffer so miserably. (II.i.1.2)

The children interpret the sign automatically on the basis of the identical emotional response it calls forth, and by degrees come to use it to evoke that primal, socioemotional experience in each

other at other times—making language the fulcrum or instrument of their collaboration. External language is not just monologically expressive, as in Locke, but a tool and social habit.

Herder (*Abhandlung* 99), will criticize this thought experiment for being artificial, as though it were an etiology and not a parable. The point for Condillac is to mythologize the language instinct: his children desire communion by nature, and the “invention” of language is thus a priori inevitable. Not only are coincidences in the physical world and cries of emotion elevated to “signs”; the combination of natural signs, before we learn to manipulate and institute them, still earns the name of “language of action,” and if it is less ductile than the “language of articulated sounds” that follows, yet with it we already express our usness. Condillac thus shares Herder’s apriorism (see section 5): both ascribe language to “human nature,” shelve the origin question, and get on with theorizing language’s relation to character and culture.

4.3 *Génies des langues*: Condillac’s view of language development

Condillac’s Adam and Eve grow up and have a child of their own, moving us from legend into putative prehistory and a view of the development of natural languages that is positivistic and “ameliorative:” new languages address the analytical flaws of their forebears and form a telic progression from passionate to precise over time. (In the posthumous *Langue des calculs* [1798], Condillac will portray his try at a philosophical language à la Leibniz in similar terms: “the art of speaking is the art of thinking and the art of reasoning, which develop in the same measure as languages approach perfection” [cited in Aarsleff 1974: 166].) This hierarchy is discontinuous, with little sense of evolution or genetic links between languages: they are mostly static, and change happens as one people’s linguistic-historical genius gives way to a new tribe’s novel connections of ideas, driven by the creative brilliance of individuals but moulded by culture.

The new child tries to innovate linguistically:

His very flexible tongue bent itself in an extraordinary manner and pronounced an entirely new word. Full of surprise and having at last figured out what the child wanted, the parents gave it to him while at the same time trying to pronounce the same word. [...] By that sort of procedure the language was not very much improved. (*Essai* II.i.1.7)

Already culture (and usage) is king. And since our ideas are constituted by language, the individual human may seem destined to move in lockstep with his culture—a total psychosocial complex of exogenous social convention, practice, ritual, and expectation, or what Friedrich (1989) calls “linguaculture.”¹⁷ Sympathy makes for strong collectivities more than strong-minded individuals; the robustness of language as a tool renders early people (and modern illiterates) childlike (II.i.14.138).

The individual’s saving grace is the key role that his or her linguistic creativity plays in fully developing the genius of the language (and therefore of him- or herself). The “connection of ideas” for Condillac applies not only to mixed modes, but also to analogy, which in the hands of individual creative geniuses allows the development of each language according to its own ruling tendency—the poorer a language in analogy, the worse it functions as an aid to thought (II.i.15.146). These language artists or “eminent men,”—first poets, then philosophers (II.i.15.155)—do not create the character of their language, which already “expresses the character of the people who speak it” (poorly and brutishly at first, reflecting “only the most necessary arts”; II.i.15.144). Instead, they fill and saturate it, turning it from “a bizarre heap of heterogeneous expressions” to something with “a sustained character” (II.i.15.146). Room for individual genius gradually recedes; a rising tide lifts all boats, and though “superior geniuses

¹⁷ I use Friedrich’s term for its general aptness, but I think it has much to give Condillac’s model, for example the notion of “rich points” (Agar 1994), accretions of cultural specificity in language, such as the *tu/vous* distinction.

cannot arise in nations until their languages have already made considerable progress,” if we were to move Corneille forward in time to Condillac’s era, “in the end we would come to a Corneille who could not give any proof of his talent” (II.i.15.150, 147). Rousseau has less talent than his predecessor Marot but a superior style (II.i.15.148). Genius is incremental and social.

Although the arc of history thus seems to bend toward some more perfect linguistic–cognitive–artistic future, this does not mean that only one way of connecting ideas has value. The earlier distinction between the idiot and the madman persists, softened in the aggregate into one of “charm” versus “coherence” in linguistic character (I.ii.3.34). Both of these are of course positive traits, and Condillac will have trouble deciding whether to argue for a passionate-to-precise hierarchy or this more lateral structure. Given his cognitivism, the former option implies that some nations are mentally superior to others due to their language, which will be a source of rue to this Enlightenment universalist: thus he often prefers the latter model, which buys some dignity in the form of “charm” (or “passion” or “liveliness” or “expressiveness”) for the *génies* of less precise languages at the expense of a stress on radical crosscultural difference.

Our passionate peoples are of course the ancients, Orientals, and savages: the American tribe that cannot count past 20 and the one that must resort to the sign *poellarraroerincourac* for ‘three’ (I.iv.1.fn25); the lexical tones of Chinese, which to Condillac constitute a primal prosody (II.1.2.15); the Egyptians, obtuse enough to believe that the inaccessibility of their hieratic script made the knowledge written down in it more potent, even as this deep lore became common knowledge among the Greeks and Romans (II.1.13.135). “The [psychic] materials are the same in all human beings, but their agility in the use of signs varies, which causes the inequality we find among them” (I.iv.1.11). The then-famed deaf-mute of Chartres is evoked as a sad case of

cognitive inferiority due to “idea-poverty” arising from language impairment (I.iv.2.13); the thin line between men and brutes is alluded to (I.ii.6.57, I.iv.1.19).

The modern European languages, especially French, naturally provide the complement. Abstraction, beginning with the use of the “language of articulated sounds” to refer to what is not present, is a clear advance over concrete analogy (though both processes are driven by metaphor, similar in fact to the development of language according to Leibniz except that for him, figuration takes place from a base not of empirical sense-perception but of innate ideas). And yet a counterthread persists: “charm” is Condillac’s recompense to the passionate peoples for the loss of a portion of rational humanity. Hudson (1994) discusses the declining stock of written language for the eighteenth-century mind, from the civilized tool *par excellence* to a clumsy technology inferior to speech.¹⁸ In this sense, Condillac’s quarrel is really with Böhme and crew, not with any imaginary Egyptians. Nevertheless, in valorizing natural speech Condillac can portray ancient and foreign peoples as temperamentally Other rather than less advanced, which is more tolerable. He does so by focusing on two aspects of language—“music” and “dance.”

4.4 Gesture, prosody, and national character

Early discourse, says Condillac, was a mix of words and gestures, the “language of action.” Its development into a language of “articulated sounds” alone was a historical process: Condillac cites Warburton (1738–41, 2.83) on several Biblical examples of actions taken as signs, and argues that this language possessed the potency to leave forceful mental impressions for the moral instruction of the Hebrews, whose minds were yet unformed (*Essai* II.i.1.10). Condillac adapts “dance” (*danse*) as a technical term for this performative, perlocutionary language of action, implying that when David “danced before the Ark” (2 Samuel 6:14) upon entering

¹⁸ The corresponding increase in interest in speech, for its prosodic nimbleness and emotive force, is probably inseparable from the “rise of the social” of which Aarsleff (2001) identifies Condillac as an exemplar.

Jerusalem, he was not only venerating God but also, through force of gesture, projecting his own authority (II.i.1.10). The functions of “dance” specialize over time into the “dance of gestures,” used to communicate thoughts, and the “dance of steps,” used to express personal feelings and national character, as with the “lively” Italians v. the “grave” French (II.i.1.11).

With regard to prosody, as to gesture, Condillac asserts that French and the other modern (European) languages have lost some measure of the social and sympathetic in developing from passion to precision (II.i.1.12). The growth of the individual mental capacity is predicated on a predictable and philosophically well-organized language—once again, a major common point between Condillac and Leibniz, and one overlooked by the opposition that Losonsky (2006) sets up between their “use” and “system” views. But this also leads to the loss of sympathy within society, and to anomie. In contrast, the language of action was still echoed, and sympathy expressed, in the violent prosody of the classical languages, as in David’s dance. As in Leibniz, the first names of things were onomatopoeias (II.i.2.13), and in fact—though Condillac did not mention this in re the *deux enfants*—the older languages were in fact sung or chanted (II.i.2.14). The earliest retrievable stage of this evolution is seen in the tones of Chinese, but even the Greeks “would find our pronunciation monotonous and soulless” (II.i.3.19), and “for the Romans, [Michel] Baron would have seemed cold, while Roscius would seem deranged to us” (II.i.4.39). This difference is elaborated at length, not a simple binary but a nuanced arrangement of differences in national character: French subtlety, Italian comedic sense, etc., etc. (II.i.4.39).

Here, Condillac seems quite suddenly to quit the field of hierarchy. He is eloquent on the vigorous Greek imagination, needed to wrestle with the blunt instrument of their language (II.i.5.49), and on the copiousness of Biblical Hebrew (seemingly, taking scriptural style for everyday speech); and he is sometimes ambivalent on the refinement and incisiveness of “the

northern nations [with their] cold and phlegmatic temperament,” especially given the attendant weakening of the sympathy and social ties Condillac celebrates as the germ of language. Nevertheless, classical pleonasm remains a piling-up of synonyms where French would slay with a *mot juste*, and here Condillac’s philosophy of language becomes also a literary criticism (e.g., II.i.4.38) and philosophy of history (e.g., II.i.14.141) that closely prefigures Herder’s (and Hegel’s): the sensual vigour of nations sinks into a “moral [...] decadence,” their poetry into “figures and metaphors [...] overloading the style with ornamentation”; and this happened first in the fecund south, while in the north, “dance,” music, poetry, prose, and technical language had the opportunity to differentiate completely. Accompanied by innovations like fixed word order and (as Condillac took it) more highly developed syntax (II.i.12.125) and the artistic bequest or creative “starter culture” of previous *génies* (II.i.8.75), and by the whole growing linguacultural complex, the new language eclipses its predecessors when it reaches its peak strength. Condillac tries (II.i.12.126) to demur on the superiority of French to Latin, but ultimately declares French not only the most logical but also the most beautiful language yet seen (II.i.15.157); to language as a scientific instrument for processing sense-data and as an instrument or tool of collaboration is now added language as a musical instrument.

While rejecting Condillac’s account of language’s origin, Herder will largely accept his account of its development—strengthening the thread of linguacultural relativism and clipping that of hierarchy, and attenuating but not totally discarding the idea of linguistic universals.

5. Language as a spark: Herder

Herder's language philosophy is the most relativistic of those I will consider, because he rejects the existence of transcendent meaning (even in the *Abhandlung*, his least relativistic work). Thus, languages do not evolve toward and cannot be wrangled into a single state (cf. Leibniz's *salva veritate* or Condillac's telic hierarchy); they are irreducibly multiple and *incommensurable* (cf. Kuhn 1962). Underlying this idea is what Forster (2010, 2011) argues is the unifying thesis of all Herder's work: that thought is bounded by meanings, which are at once constituted by word-usages (with no external referents such as "ideas") and reliant on sense-perceptions (Forster 2010: 73), and thus differ radically between cultures, historical eras, and also individuals, as expressed most richly in works of artistic (especially literary) genius (e.g. Forster 2010: 16 and ff.). Herder's linguistics is thus best seen as a special case of his investigation of differences in worldviews, of which his hermeneutics, philosophy of history, and translation theory each make up a part and through which they inform each other.

Nevertheless, the sense that language expresses an underlying universal *humanity* does sometimes appear in Herder, most notably in the *Abhandlung*. Though this essay is famously an attack on previous theories of the origin and development of language, including Condillac's, this is largely a matter of posture: Condillac and Herder's functional disagreement on language's origin and initial development is negligible, although their sense of the relations between established languages differs. Herder's view of language development, employing onomatopoeia (sensation), figuration (creativity), sympathy, and the connection of ideas, reflects also the influence of Leibniz, but his cultural–historical–linguistic concept of *Volksgeist* 'spirit of a people' is less passive and more agentive than Leibniz's view. Herder rejects "egotistical monads" as making "severed blocks of rock" of the universe, and replaces them with "forces"

(*Kräfte*; Forster 2010: 44) through which languages and peoples attain expressive autonomy and articulated identity. This sense of radical difference leads him to a major conceptual contribution to communication across cultures: *Einfühlung* or ‘empathy’, in essence *sympathie* as praxis.

5.1 The cry of man: Herder on language’s “origin”

Herder’s *Abhandlung* was written to answer a question set by the Berlin Academy as part of a debate on the origin of language that emerged after the publication of the *Essai*, “Supposing men are abandoned to their natural faculties, are they in a position to invent language? And by what means might they arrive at this invention by themselves?” This question was owed largely to Condillac, for whom, as for Herder, the origin of language was not important in itself as much as to shed light on our subsequent cognitive–linguistic development; Condillac says “the progress of the human mind depends entirely on the proficiency we demonstrate in the use of language.”¹⁹

Herder begins the essay by cutting the Gordian knot, rejecting all previous theories of language’s origin with the gusto of a prizewinner: “While still an animal, man already has language” (87). Humans signify by nature in the same way as spiders build webs (and songbirds sing, etc.); it is our animal capacity and does not need to be gifted, deduced, or arrived at by reflection or convention. The Academy’s question is nonsensical, and misunderstands not only language but also human nature. In an oblique riposte to Condillac’s *deux enfants*, Herder evokes the Greek Philoctetes, who as related by Sophocles (in the *Philoctetes*, 409 BCE) walks on sacred ground and is bitten by a snake, leaving a wound with a horrible smell that makes him unbearable to his fellows and causes Odysseus to exile him on the island of Lemnos:

All violent sensations of [man’s] body, those which cause him pain, and all strong passions of his soul express themselves in screams, in sounds, in wild inarticulate

¹⁹ This is present in the second French edition of the *Essai*, of 1745, but not the first or subsequent editions. It is reflected in the English translation of 1756 by Thomas Nugent, and not after. (See Aarsleff 1974: 150.)

tones. A suffering animal, no less than the hero Philoctetes, will whine, will moan when pain befalls it, even though it be abandoned on a desert island, without sight or trace or hope of a helpful fellow creature. (*Abhandlung* 87)

Two points are clear: 1) solitude is pain; and 2) the suffering hero's cries make him animalistic. Are these "inarticulate" cries language? Condillac's children collaborate out of hunger, and transform themselves through social action from beasts into signifying beings, while Philoctetes traces the reverse arc: with "no one to whom he could cry out a lament that would be answered" (*Philoctetes* l. 695), he relinquishes instituted signs and returns to natural ones to cry his "burning, frightened spirit" (195). Such is man bereft of communication with his fellows! When Philoctetes hails the Achaeans, it is a becoming-human through the word,²⁰ a speech act of self-creation: "O strangers! [...] Speak to me, if indeed you have come as friends. O answer!" (*Philoctetes* 219–230). When they betray his trust, speech reverts to cries: what has been Englished as "Alas, alas!" or even "Oh, the pain, the misery!" (Jebb, 1898) is really "Apappapai, apappapappapappapai!"²¹ (745). In the end, he accepts the verbal compact and with it tribal allegiance, and sails for Troy.

As Weissberg (1989: 554) notes, an earlier draft of the *Abhandlung* elucidates the overlap between Herder's themes and Sophocles's: man as an island and language as the bridge. The distinction between the cry of pain, the noise (*Schall*) bereft of sense, and the articulated sounds of speech (*Töne*, the same term used for the notes of the musical scale) is the absence or presence of the interlocutor, who rather than the speaker creates the conditions for meaning. On this basis, Herder dismisses the divine innatism of Johann Peter Süßmilch (1707–1767), to whom language was too magnificent to be other than a divine bequest (1766). He defeats Süßmilch on something

²⁰ Making him a response to not only the *enfants* but also the "speechless statue" of Condillac's *Traité des sensations* (1754), a tabula rasa who becomes human in the classic empiricist way, through sensation and reflection.

²¹ απαπαπαϊ, απαπαπαπαπαπαπαπαϊ.

of a technicality (119–120): if Adam was fashioned to speak, we are not “born with” language as such, but built like an Æolian harp to “let [our] feeling resound!” (88). Loquaciousness is the “true human origin” (119), and the divinity question is uninteresting. “Here is a sentient being which can enclose within itself none of its vivid sensations, which must, in the very first moment of surprise, utter each one aloud, apart from all choice and purpose” (88). The will or force (*Kraft*) underlying speech is *Besonnenheit* ‘awareness’ (translated following Forster 2010; but see next section); it and language, Herder insists, are no specialized “instinct” but a generalist faculty that compensates for the human *lack* of instinct by making us masters of all terrains and climes (107). This power is present a priori, but no particular word or language (sign or signifying framework) is; these instead reflect the characters of peoples (*Volksgeister*):²² the Arab speaks to his fellow as though to his horse, and the Lapp his reindeer (89). These usages are crosslinguistically ineffable (94). (On the source and emergence of *Volksgeister* see 5.3 below.)

Next Herder turns to Condillac, who in deriving language from cries (rather than making language and cries allo-contextual expressions of an innate linguistic drive, as Herder does) “turned animals into men” (103).²³ “Mold and refine and organize those outcries as much as you wish,” says Herder (99)—they will never constitute language. But is the gap between him and Condillac really so wide? He takes a cheap shot at Condillac’s bootstrapping argument: “words arose because words had arisen before they arose” (101). But his own argument can be placed on a similar merry-go-round “words exist because words had existed before they existed.” And really, for neither of them is this the point. When Condillac talks about *real* language, he begins not with the child-inventors but with their baby, born into a language community; his origin-story informs his account of actual linguistic development as little as Herder’s will prove to.

²² A term not used by Herder until *This Too a Philosophy of History* (1774); but the idea is in place here.

²³ And Rousseau (1754), who turned men into animals; where Condillac saw language as the basis of the social compact, Rousseau thought social relations would have to be established before people could agree on a language.

5.2 *Besonnenheit*

So Herder sweeps aside the originary debate with *Besonnenheit* (a term original to him; see Taylor 1995). What is the exact nature of this faculty and language's reliance on it? Modern German–English dictionaries translate it as ‘deliberateness, discretion, level-headedness, prudence, sober-mindedness’ (*LEO*, *Beolingus*), but it is jargony and archaic in feel. The closest Herder himself comes to defining it is as the “entire disposition of men’s forces” (109). Gode’s 1966 translation of the *Abhandlung* renders it as ‘reflection’ (e.g., 112, 115), a poor choice given the potential confusion with *Reflexion*; even worse, ‘reflection’ to Gode is elsewhere *Besinnung* (110), which makes hash of Herder’s whole point, which is that *Besinnung* is the action or activity of *Besonnenheit*!²⁴ (See Forster [2002: 82, fn.] and Frazer [2007: 15], who respectively render *Besinnung* as ‘taking-awareness’ and ‘consciousness’.) We can perhaps see *Besonnenheit* as the self- and world-knowledge (*savoir-faire*, *savoir-être*, *savoir-savoir*, *savoir-apprendre*) that *Besinnung* requires to emerge. It is intrinsically linguistic and empirical (115), meaning that understanding and right action in the world are basically matters of right interpretation—a point which narrows the gap that Forster (2010: 131) sees between the *Abhandlung* and Herder’s main body of work, and which is taken up in 5.4 below.

5.3 Linguistic development and ethnogenesis

Besonnenheit, then—not the *Schall* or cry for communion but the drive by which the *Töne* of actual language are produced and the principle by which they are interpreted—is what makes us human. But this accounts only for the fact of shared language and not its varied forms—that is, it

²⁴ Forster’s (2002) translation, which uses ‘awareness’, looks better (in Google Books preview); I have continued to use Gode’s edition, which was available to me on paper, but have checked all quotes against Forster and the original (ed. Matthias, 1901). Other authors render *Besonnenheit* ‘reflective awareness’ (Frazer 2007), ‘reflectiveness’ (McNeil 1992), ‘active reflection or awareness of the world’ (Lifschitz 2012), ‘power of thinking’ (Barnard 1965), ‘focused consciousness [...] consciousness of consciousness’ (Bauman and Briggs 2003), ‘a synthetic, intuitive sense behind the physical senses’ (Errington 2008), ‘the science of self’ (Bent 1996). It is also the Greek *sôphrosunê* (but this is a later innovation by Schleiermacher, based on Herder’s usage), and has a lengthy later career.

does not dissolve Locke's "arbitrariness problem." To explain the emergence of different languages, Herder moves on to the physical senses, the pseudopods through which the *ur*-sense of *Besonnenheit* "single[s] out one wave" from "the vast ocean of the sensations which permeates [the soul] through all the channels of the senses" (115).

Hearing is the Goldilocks of the senses, neither too coarse nor too rarefied (128–129; cf. Condillac's "idiot" and "madman"), and thus, language is aural. Our *Bildung* begins with sound, providing *Besonnenheit* with grist and opening up what Taylor (1995: 88), discussing Herder, calls the "linguistic dimension" of life—the "space of attention, of distance from the immediate instinctual significance of things." (In this way, although *Besonnenheit* is not reflection, it allows it.) Like Condillac's *enfants*, Herder's human *sensorium commune* (139) climbs to *Besinnung*, social existence, and advanced language use from sense-data; but unlike them, though like *their* child, the process is reflective and linguistic from the get-go—he never starts from scratch.

The new human cries or giggles or coos: this is the "language of feeling" (88), analogous to Condillac's "natural signs." But as he first isolates some sound and puts to it a "distinguishing mark" (117), he engages in an extraordinary act of self-creation all at once (not incrementally like the *deux enfants*). Herder's example is a bleating sheep: hearing its *Schall*, the soul "bleated" in response "when it selected this sound as a sign of recollection, and bleated again as it recognized the sound by its sign. Language had been invented (*Erfinden*)!" (118). (And simultaneously, ideas: "[h]ere Herder was closer to Condillac than he admitted, for the French philosopher had similarly distinguished between a mere 'perception' and an 'idea', the later being a sensation that was held in the mind through the power of reflection" [Hudson 2013: 30]).

This is Herder's paradox—language, as *Besonnenheit*, has always been intrinsic in the human; but language, as everyday *Sprache*, undergoes a perpetual invention and reinvention *that*

is *progressive*—a perpetual kindling and rekindling of *Besonnenheit*'s spark but then also a spreading candescence that illuminates the world, makes it thinkable and speakable. Three points here: first, the only difference between “invention” and “creativity” is esoteric.²⁵ Second, as with both Condillac and Leibniz (recall the *quakende* frog), “nature meets man halfway” (*Abhandlung* 150): sense-stimuli remain the ultimate source of our words and ideas—and so neither the progressive colonization of thought by a linguaculture (in Condillac) nor the radical priority of *Besonnenheit* (in Herder), stops these from being fundamentally empiricist philosophies.

Third, while Herder may seem with his focus on individual reflection and invention to be returning to a view of real language as essentially internal—what I called a “propositional” model in section 3—this is not so. On the basis of the first word—let us say, *baa-baa* ‘sheep’—the *Erfinder* can produce a family of related terms for whiteness, fleeciness, etc., that is, related but non-audible phenomena (139). Perhaps my word for ‘(white, fluffy) cloud’ is *aab-aab* and yours is *bababa*. Sound symbolism and synaesthesia are implied here (140), and poetry and the “bold verbal metaphors” contained therein are designated as the engine of early language (151); but to address common concerns, we need common tokens, as Hobbes also saw.²⁶ Our habitats, subsistence methods, national upheavals, and so on will contribute to and shape the features of this common language, which will thus reflect and transmit the “custom, character, and origin of the people” (155). For Herder there is no need for extralinguistic “ideas” as referents, only sense-data; this in turn means linguistic differences, *Volksgeister*, and the great human diversity that Herder values are not idiosyncratic, but rooted in features of the physical environment. This view has excesses, such as Herder’s theory that all racial difference was the result of exposure to

²⁵ In that to Herder we continually “invent” language in response to sense-stimuli. I am not sure this idea is coherent.

²⁶ Though he says the compact is set by fiat of Leviathan, while Herder trusts people to come up with it on their own.

different climates (Frazer 2007: 15, fn.) But it is superior to Condillac's *génies*, which have a chicken-and-egg problem that is only vaguely addressed by arbitrariness and *sympathie*.

The *emergent* character of linguistic difference from an undifferentiated initial state is important, since it absolves Herder from the *Blut und Boden*–type readings he was commonly travestied with up into the post–World War II era (Barnard [1965] seems to be the first widely cited revisionist study). These readings, and the false equivalency between Herder and Hitler that they open up, are not just mistaken; they are lazy and reductive. That is, Herder's real model of human cultures rests on a complex balance of three nuanced positions. The first is that language and culture express a universal human nature: “[a]s all languages had been created according to common principles unique to all human beings, all represented local translations of ‘the universal voice of nations’ ([*Abhandlung*] 159)” (Hudson 2013: 28). The second, however, is that tribalism and competition breed “complete division and separation. Who wanted to have anything in common with such an enemy...? No familial customs, no remembrance of a single origin, and least of all *language*” (*Abhandlung* (F)²⁷ 152–153). But third, Herder is a deeply committed multiculturalist and cosmopolitan: all cultures are to be valued not despite but because of their differences. In *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), he states that cultural phenomena are all intrinsically valid and rejects the notion of a “*Favoritvolk*.”

Thus, the languages of the world are valuable precisely because they are such a rich vault of cultural difference: “characteristic word of the race, bond of the family, tool of instruction, hero song of the fathers’ deeds, and the voice of these fathers from their graves” (*Abhandlung* (F) 153). This idea of a bequest from the past recalls Leibniz, who felt that languages diverge from their early purity, more than Condillac’s telicity—to Herder, languages become richer as their history lengthens, but they do not “improve” as such and may become less themselves (as

²⁷ Forster’s edition; I have used it when quoting Book II of the *Abhandlung*, which Gode omits to translate.

in Herder's injunction to Germans to "spit out the ugly slime of the Seine. Speak German, O you German!").²⁸ Herder does, however, agree with Condillac that languages become less expressive and more logical over time (148–149); grammar evolves as a pacing and organizing mechanism, promoting a poetic-to-rational shift (137, 162); but essence wins out over perfectibility: "French writers of later times cannot lose themselves in the clouds because the first inventors of their language did not [do so]" (152). That is, *if* Herder sees any languages as "better" than others, it is earlier, more "primitive" ones, for their passion and sensuousness (Forster 2010: 135).

In the charming series of "canons" toward the end of Book I of the *Abhandlung* (147–65), Herder adopts the role of anthropological enthusiast, eager to convince us of language's magnificent multiplicity. This relativistic song embraces novel features of dozens of languages,²⁹ across the realms of sound, lexicon, and grammar. In light of this catalogue, his definitive rejection of a divine origin for language expresses a humanism that is almost aggressive: "Is it possible to look away from all these traces of the roaming, language-making spirit, and to seek the origin of language in the clouds? [...] Is there in any language anywhere a single pure and universal concept that was handed down to man from Heaven?" (158).

5.4 Friendly *Geister*: *Einfühlung*, agency, and Herder's hermeneutics

While Herder never disavows *Besonnenheit*, the universal, linguagenic mental force, he chooses in much of his other work to focus on the radical differences between languages, *Volksgeister*, and (linguistic and culturally constituted) individual worldviews, on the basis of the twofold proposition that language sets bounds on thought and that meanings consist in word-

²⁸ Which may seem less incompatible with "cosmopolitanism" of any sort in light of the linguistic chauvinism, cultural imperialism, and triumphalist humanism of the French Enlightenment, which were inimical to Herder.

²⁹ Hebrew, French, Greek, English, German, Arabic, Siamese, "the language of the savage Caribs," Tibetan ("the language of Barantola"), the speech of the "Hottentots," Lapp, "the language of Ceylon," Finnish, Estonian, Topinambuan and other languages spoken "along the Amazon," Russian, Latvian, "Mexican," Swedish, the languages of "the Negro" and "the Chinghailese," Phoenician, Chinese and the "languages of the Orient."

usages (Forster 2010, 2011). One of Herder's goals is to develop practical principles to facilitate communication between languages and cultures, that is, to address the *translatability problem* mentioned as Locke's second question in section 2. As Forster (2010: 72) notes, the key tool for bridging translation or hermeneutic gaps is *Einfühlung* 'empathy', introduced in *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774) as an expansive principle needed not only to do useful work in these fields but in the end to communicate across languages, or perhaps at all. *Einfühlung* is not merely sympathy, or the self-projection that English *empathy* implies: it is "an arduous process of historical-philological inquiry" (Forster 2010: 19) requiring for success, at a minimum, 1) context, 2) reproduction of the original author's sensations, 3) sympathy (as distinct from hostility or indifference but also from emotional identification), 4) holism (to understand the word, look to the oeuvre), and 5) "divination"—progress by hypothesis and falsification, not the pure induction that Herder takes to be the method of science.³⁰

While the originary-developmental view and deep universal *Besonnenheit* underlying surface difference may initially seem like a distraction in light of these new issues and methods, *Einfühlung* depends on them for its conceptual cogency: the active reflection or "unique positive power of thought" (*Abhandlung* 110) intrinsic to *Besonnenheit* confers the individual with the agency or freedom of thought needed to think against the grain of his own language—"feeling himself in" to a different linguistic world, to the profit of his own language and understanding.

The *Einfühlung* idea expresses itself willy-nilly from Herder's larger body of work in hermeneutics, translation theory, and philosophy of history. These writings are underpinned by a sense of radical linguistic difference between cultures and by a very broad and pervasive concept of *genre*: one must understand the linguistic features of genres and the generic features of languages in order to navigate the differing generic characteristics of languages and peoples. For

³⁰ Forster includes other features that I take to be close enough to be lumped with these.

instance, in *This Too a Philosophy of History*, Herder introduces the principle of empathy in the interpretation of history: as “people’s linguistic-conceptual resources and beliefs differ sharply from historical period to historical period, and from culture to culture” (Forster 2011: 155), the goals, concerns, and actions of nations and historical figures cannot be understood in the terms of the present day, or of a Whiggish progression toward those terms; instead, the historian must *sich hinein fühlen*, ‘feel himself into’ this other world—an interpretive process achieved through language, but also by attention to their artistic productions, which allow a people to show the world its best, but sometimes also its more perverse, nature.³¹ The critic or hermeneut should err toward accommodation and assume the genre’s integrity and purpose (Forster 2010 147, 165).

However, the most fruitful form of hermeneutic practice, equal in status to artistic creation, is the interpretation and translation of literature: the literary artist gives his language to a people and becomes the “creator of the nation around him” (*Shakespeare* [1773], cited in King Alfred [1997]: 182). Importantly, to a people capable of humble cosmopolitanism and interpretive sensitivity, this influence can stretch across cultural barriers; thus the Greeks influenced modern Europeans, and Shakespeare, with his troth to nature, spontaneity, and (as Herder saw it) traditional Englishness, and not the artifice of French neoclassicism, could serve as inspiration for German resistance to French hegemony (King Alfred: 182). To best understand the characteristics of peoples, one might take some putatively unitary genre (e.g. the epic; *Critical Forests* 153–154) and map the differences between, for example, the epics of Homer, Milton, Ossian, and Klopstock, which will reflect the differences between their nations. In contrast to the maxim of John Dryden (1631–1700) that Virgil should be translated into the words he would have written were he “living, and an Englishman” (*Sylvæ*, Preface, 3:4), Herder

³¹ For instance, the *Critical Forests* (1769) make much of the difference between Greek and Egyptian sculpture (the former suffused with the grandeur of creation, the latter with the majesty of death), but also on the value of both.

proposes to translate authors according to their “genius” (*Fragments on Recent German Literature*, 1767–1768). This requires 1) stretching one’s *Einfühlung* to “accommodate” the text, for example by seeing that Homer’s *aretē* is neither ‘virtue’ (*Tugend*) nor “being the best one can be,” but a version of the latter that carries the moral weight of the former; and 2) reflecting insights like this in the target language. This is done through principles like musical faithfulness to the original and techniques like “bending,” or maintaining the unity of a source-language concept by using the same word for it throughout—putting the onus on the reader to change frames to match, rather than varying terms from context to context to make them unalarming. Forster’s example (2010) is using *Tugend* for *aretē* throughout a translation, even where it refers to (e.g.) the martial skill of a dread pirate. (Gode’s translation of the *Abhandlung* is perhaps Drydenian, or what Herder calls “lax,” and Forster’s, “accommodating.”) A blanket term for these processes could be *assimilation*. The cultural, genre, and individual-psychological levels (i.e., the translator’s retrieval of the author’s sense-perceptions) all matter, and combine freely in the *Fragments*: French v. German, comedy v. tragedy, Sophoclean v. Shakespearean tragedy.

Perhaps this discussion shows why Herder splits the relativistic idea into two theses: *language-binding-thought* and *word-usage-constituting-meaning*. The former represents an axis of *influence*, that is, the strength of the effect: the stronger the bonds of language, the more it *determines* instead of simply influencing thought. And the latter is an axis of *agency*: if my language gives me a certain inventory of conventional word-meanings (to Condillac, connected ideas), then to express different meanings, I must only choose to use a different language. Whatever the degree of influence at the structural level, the individual is not bound by it; there are other worlds. And the “creative genius” (Forster 2010: 24) of translation can bring back riches excavated by geniuses of literary creation to embiggen his own linguaculture and himself.

6. Toward an *emfühlsame* linguistic relativity

I began this thesis by suggesting that the views of Leibniz, Condillac, and Herder on the development and differentiation of languages, and to the extent that it is coterminous with that development the nature of language as a whole, belong to the same episteme, in Foucault's (1966) sense: in brief, that they are broadly united by common concepts and questions, but not necessarily shared methods, values, or goals—a common frame of reference but not a common ethos. I begin this last section by suggesting that there is one goal each of them would contend that scholars of language should hold in common, and thus one way at least in which they approach the status of a Kuhnian (1962) paradigm, geared toward disciplinary exigencies rather than the structures of “knowledge” as a whole. That goal is overcoming linguistic and psychological isolation. This is evident in Leibniz, who hoped his *characteristica universalis* would help goodwill reign among men, or Herder, who believed that every *Volksgeist* could enrich every other if only undistorted communication between them could be achieved. It is less apparent in Condillac, for whom the gaps between “rational” modern languages are slight compared to the rift between them and the earlier “passionate” tongues.³² However, if we recall how for Condillac language's whole motivation and use-value are social—the fruit of *sympathie*, collaboration, and an artistic creativity on which is borne the cultural genius—we can see that the point for him too is the communicative connection between people. Language is valuable for the singularly wide range of communicative acts it allows. That is, Condillac's concern is also with achieving mutual understanding across a psychological gap, but he focuses on individual speakers with a language as a protocol, not the relations between many such protocols.

³² And who, as a Paris *idéologue* in an era when even the Berlin Academy ran its contests in French, perhaps saw less need than the two Germans to get exercised over crosscultural communication.

I'd like to appropriate another Kuhnian (1962) concept to characterize this gap between communicative agents, one that has already cropped up a few times in this thesis. It is *(in)commensurability*. Say each of two languages presents its own way of speaking and understanding: a grammar that organizes the world in a unique way,³³ or a semantic “connection of ideas” that is different for some realm than how the neighbours do it,³⁴ or a gap in pragmatic and paralinguistic *habitus* that leads to communicative failure.³⁵ Largely separate from the *within-language* question of the degree of influence or determinism exerted by linguistic features is the question of the distance *between* languages, and whether it is crossable, and how.

As the methods of empirical linguistics and the knowledge gained thereby have developed over the past two centuries, the relative–universal axis has been perpetually contested. Speaking broadly, in the nineteenth century ethnographic and historical-comparative methods dominated, especially in Germany and the United States. Three common theoretical assumptions were 1) the influence of not only language in general but specifically the syntactic framework (isolating, agglutinating, or inflecting; see Humboldt [1836]) on thought and culture; 2) the hierarchical ranking of grammars (that is, that “some languages are better than others”); and 3) the existence beneath this diversity of some unifying motive force, called *Geisteskraft* ‘mental power’ by Wilhelm von Humboldt (though similar idealist notions of *Geist* were widespread).

In the twentieth century, speaking even more broadly, an anthropologically oriented linguistics pursued in the United States by some students of Franz Boas (1858–1942), notably Edward Sapir, gave rise to a new “linguistic relativity” (Whorf 1940a: 272 and *passim*) pursued

³³ Such as in Whorf's (1939a) observations on time in Hopi, which Comrie (1984) argues are best seen in terms not of tense but of aspect, that is, not of futurity/nonfuturity but of potential/manifestness.

³⁴ As in the Pama-Nyungan (Australian Aboriginal) language Guugu Yimithirr, which navigates space according to geographic directions (“north,” “east”), not “egocentric” ones (“left,” “behind”). Levinson (1997) shows that this makes its speakers better wayfinders with geographic terms and worse with egocentric ones than English speakers.

³⁵ E.g., Lakoff (1996), who says that the metaphors we adopt to refer to phenomena in the world affect our cognitive habits, leading us into political groupings that function as cultures rather than being based in (e.g.) common interest.

with intensity by Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf. This version of the idea emphatically rejected the nineteenth-century hierarchy of languages, adopting instead a principle of equality of all languages. Controversy came up around Whorf's "hypothesis"³⁶ in the mid-twentieth century due to empirical rejection of the untenably "strong" or deterministic relativism that he was felt to be advocating. The "weak" version has remained a source of empirical investigation, and Whorf has also seen a second career outside the scientific realm as a multicultural champion (e.g., Fishman [1978]). Little acknowledged is that he also inherits the idea of radical unity from the nineteenth century; I have only seen it discussed by Schultz (1990) and Alford (2002), who suggests that the overt mysticism of Whorf's universalism makes it *non grata* to his critics.

To conclude this paper, I will review Whorf's version of linguistic relativity and the mystical unity he sees underlying it, which is his basis for crosslinguistic communication and crosscultural understanding. I will argue that Herder's commitment to a translatability achievable through *Einfühlung*, a mechanism for speakers of different languages to understand and learn from each other without any such unifying stratum, is superior from the viewpoint that values multicultural, or even just dialogic, understanding, since it maintains the priority of difference.

6.1 Whorfian relativity

Whorf wore many hats: fire safety inspector, expert in Mayan writing, flagbearer for linguistic relativity. As has been widely observed (e.g. Penn 1972), his statements on relativity also vary and vacillate. There is an overt "strong" relativity or linguistic determinism:

[T]he world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as

³⁶ He says "principle"; the strong/weak division was by Chase (1956), the "hypothesis" set by Hoijer (1954) and the strong version canonically disproven by Berlin and Kay's "colour studies" (e.g. 1969); see Alford (1978).

we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way [that] holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data that the agreement decrees. We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (1940a: 272)

However, note the ways in which this is also congruent with a “weak” relativity, especially one where, instead of simply weakening the determining effect of language on thought to an “influence,” we focus on the agency of the speaker to move in and out of the system. Its terms do not “stare us in the face”: they are “absolutely obligatory” only according to agreement, that is, only insofar as we wish to communicate with others. This implies a weaker determinism, but a much greater relativity, as each speaker is free to develop his own internal “thought world” (Whorf 1939a: 189) without interference. (Slobin [1996] argues on this basis that we should talk not about an “influence of language on thought” but instead about “thinking for speaking.”)

Further, there remains an “underlying reality” that is nonlinguistic and also a possibility that linguistic backgrounds can be “calibrated” to it and one another. This eschews any notion of a simple *effect* of language on thought in order instead to explore language as an embodiment of cultural differences that words may reinscribe, but that are preexisting (making Whorf, in those moments, a weak linguistic relativist indeed, but a strong *cultural* relativist):

Yet, if MYSTICAL be perchance a term of abuse in the eyes of a modern Western scientist, it must be emphasized that these underlying abstractions and

postulations of the Hopian metaphysics³⁷ are [equally] justified pragmatically and experientially, as compared to the flowing time and static space of our own metaphysics, which are *au fond* equally mystical. (1936: 75)

What I do not think has been observed by a secondary literature that has often been happy to take Whorf as a feckless fabulist is that the strength of his linguistic relativity varies by his *audience*. The collection *Language, Thought, and Reality* (1956, ed. John Carroll) includes Whorf's most influential papers and is surely where most readers encounter him; the essays in it can be placed into three groups. First are those written for linguists and anthropologists, often on North American aboriginal languages and cultures (Hopi [e.g., 1939a], Mayan [1931], Shawnee [1939b]), but also on theoretical matters; these often involve detailed, cautious treatment of the relativistic implications of particular linguistic features. This group includes (Whorf 1939a), his most-cited paper (Lee 2000); it is on relativity of "habitual thought," a restrained formulation.

Second are articles written for non-specialists (1940a; 1940b; 1941a) printed in the MIT *Technology Review*. Active since 1899, this journal presently (2013) describes its target audience as "an active, engaged, rapidly growing group of highly educated and affluent business leaders, innovators, thought leaders, and early adopters"³⁸—a bit like the tech section of the *Economist*, then. Whorf plays to this audience: beginning with first principles, eschewing field jargon, trying to entertain—as with his Rube-Goldberg-machine diagram of "General Linguistics Management" for "learning French without tears" (1940b: 288)—and evoking his engineering background (e.g., 1941a: 303). Extraordinarily, *all* Whorf's commonly cited statements of "strong" relativity seem to come from these articles, whether because he felt freer to speak his

³⁷ That is, of a unified space-time that is relative to one's viewpoint. "What happens at a distant village [...] can be known 'here' only later. If it does not happen 'at this place', it does not happen 'at this time'" (1936: 80–81).

³⁸ <http://www.technologyreview.com/about/>.

mind without challenge or simply because he wished to impress this high-rent readership with the significance of the field.

The third group of articles is a class of convenience made up of three oddities: a letter (July 12, 1927) to the psychologist Horace English; a draft manuscript giving some thoughts on psychology (not relevant here); and a lecture (1941b) delivered to the Theosophical Society of Madras, India (founded by “Madame” Helena Blavatsky in 1875). In the letter, from before Whorf began his studies with Sapir, he presents a version of the “connection of ideas” (1927: 46) strikingly similar to Condillac’s. “It is necessary to eliminate the ‘associations’, which have an accidental character not possessed by the ‘connections’” (46). He relates the results of an experiment in grouping words by perceived semantic relations, in which some words (e.g. *heavy*) proved to be polyvalent, associated by some participants with dragging *down* and by others with hoisting *up* (48). In sharp contrast to Humboldt’s deterministic grammars, these are mere lexicosemantic habits, grammatically unrepresented. Later, as Whorf’s interest in conceptual differences between *speakers* becomes a theory of differences between *languages*, he does take an interest in grammaticalized difference (Hopi time is one example); but alongside these *phenotypic* differences, he maintains a strong interest in *cryptotypes*, “hidden, cryptic [...] word-groups [not] strongly contrasted in idea, nor marked by frequently occurring reactances” (1937: 119). Another example is English order of adjectives, where terms for colour/material/physical composition sit closest to the noun (a *big red wooden barn*, not a *wooden red big barn*). Cryptotypes are not grammatically obligatory in the way that (e.g.) gender is in German; they are culturally driven and linguistically inscribed. To reconfigure one’s cryptotypes, one only need speak a different language. But on the cultural level, they are much more salient than grammar differences. A polysynthetic language like Shawnee is well able to say polysynthetically that one

‘cleans a gun with a ramrod’, but (allegedly) instead says ‘move a hole stickwise’ (1940a: 267): a cognitive-cultural relativism expressed and felt through language without relying on it.

6.2 Whorfian theosophy

The Theosophical Society lecture is rhetorically fascinating for the difference of tone from Whorf’s specialist or general-audience writings. “It needs but half an eye to see in these latter days that science, the Grand Revelator of modern Western culture, has reached, without having intended to, a frontier [...] given a name that has descended to our day clouded with myth. That name is Babel” (1941b: 315). “[I]f Western culture survives this present welter of barbarism [the war],” his audience “may be pushed by events to leadership in reorganizing the whole human future” (317). To transcend linguistic gaps, they will need a scientific linguistics, which (Whorf says) views language as a “great book of wisdom” (318) analogous, as “the watching Gods perceive” (319), to the universe itself. This is the introduction to a lecture on phonology!

It’s touching and unsettling to see Whorf’s tone shift to match his audience, but he comes by his theosophy honestly: Carroll (1956) traces how Whorf’s interest in linguistics emerged from his early cabalistic investigations into Hebrew, and notes his lifelong devotion to the French occultist Antoine Fabre d’Olivet (1767–1825).³⁹ However, Whorf is not just indulging an enthusiasm. Linguistics and anthropology are the end of war not strictly because they will foster *crosscultural* understanding, but because they are the salvation of *science*, which must either “go forward into a landscape of increasing strangeness, replete with things shocking to a culture-trammeled understanding” or become obsolete (Whorf 1941b: 315). “What we call ‘scientific thought’ is a specialization of the western Indo-European type of language, which has developed not only a set of different dialectics, but actually a set of different dialects. THESE DIALECTS ARE

³⁹ His planned *opus magnum* on language and reality was to be dedicated to Fabre d’Olivet and Sapir (Carroll 28).

NOW BECOMING MUTUALLY UNINTELLIGABLE. The term ‘space’, for instance, does not and CANNOT mean the same thing to a psychologist as to a physicist” (315–316).

Although Fishman (1978, 1982) would call Whorf a “neo-Herderian” for the value he placed on non-Western cultures, Whorf does not observe Herder’s tenet of valuing one’s own linguacultural tradition alongside others, disparaging what Herder saw as the rich differences among European languages by lumping them as “Standard Average European” or SAE (Whorf 1939a) and calling them “jejune” (1936: 109). Instead, the criterion of value for Whorf is an extralinguistic “reality” that our languages and cultures may only capture partially. Alford (1980) has shown that Whorf patterned his relativity after that of Einstein, and Whorf explains his special interest in the Hopi language and culture by aligning them with a “quantum” worldview, as against the “Newtonian” SAE view (1939a: 195–196). It may be best to take this “quantum relativity” as metaphorical (Alford does not), but even at that, the similarity is clear with Leibniz’s “cosmological” model, with linguistic worldviews orbiting transcendent reality from varying distances and perspectives; and also with Condillac’s positivist prospect of a more rational future: linguistics, says Whorf, is “essentially the quest of MEANING”; “its real concern is to light up the thick darkness of the language, and thereby of much of the thought, the culture, and the outlook on life of a given community, with the light of this ‘golden something’ (94). It is the “consideration of human thought on a planetary scale” (99). Where in the face of the scientific revolution, Locke turned to language to confirm its continued reliability; in the face of the quantum revolution, Whorf almost advocates that we throw the old language out entirely.

But the affinity with Herder is also real: we will not reach an objective linguistic view of reality with a monoculture of “wheat or oats” (even Hopi oats), but instead by actively seeking exposure to as many different languages and “thought worlds” as possible, valuing them as “rare

asters” (1936: 108). Thought worlds vary radically by individual sense-perceptions, which give rise to kinaesthetically and synaesthetically driven metaphors (199), which are also influenced by and influencing culture: in the West, “mechanical invention, industry, trade, and scholastic and scientific thought” led to the emergence of the distinct SAE language-world in the Middle Ages.

Whorf’s way of bridging thought worlds is to move from comparative to “contrastive linguistics,” focusing on the differences in how languages carve up the synaesthetic flow of being, “[f]or as goes our segmentation of nature, so goes our physics of the Cosmos” (309). Then, “to describe nature with absolute impartiality [...] the person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems (1940a: 274). Superficially this sounds much like Herder’s *Einführung*. But to Whorf, for whom language is a conduit of thought and culture and not constitutive of them, the reality underneath is not semantic in nature: he says there is “no such thing as Language [...]” at all!” (1941b: 037), and in the theosophy article refers extensively to two Hindu concepts: *māyā* ‘illusion’ or ‘the world of forms [*rūpa*]’, and *arūpa* ‘formlessness’—as interpreted by Whorf, the former is the world of psychological or cultural ideas referred to by language, and the latter a radical, mystical realm of pure patternization existing “behind the veil.” If we remove lexicality from language entirely, and with it the cryptotypic groupings that lead to linguistic difference, we have

completely ‘nonlexical’ vistas [...] ‘moving hieroglyphs’ composed entirely of ‘mathematical relations’ [...] non-Euclidean geometries, hyperspace, [...] a whole system of relationships never before suspected of forming a unity. The harmony and scientific beauty in the whole vast system momentarily overwhelms one in a flood of aesthetic delight.⁴⁰ (325)

⁴⁰ The quotation marks indicate places where Whorf is quoting the esotericist PD Ouspensky (1931).

To concretize this, Whorf turns back to language, although bleached of lexical meaning: all combinations of phonemes into syllables, syllables into words, etc., should be appreciated for their pure systemic beauty, an act somewhere between repeating a mantra and memorizing pi.

The vagaries of Whorf reception in linguistics are well summarized by Beek (2004): interest, then rejection, followed by a theoretical and experimental revival (e.g. Lucy 1992, Gumperz and Levinson 1996) during the late twentieth century, in a period of shifting “*Methodengeist*” (Fishman 1982: 4) away from Chomskyan generativism to the multiplicitous perspectives of the pragmatic–functional–cognitive era; it seems well established now that the only plausible direct effect of linguistic structure on cognition is a “weak” one. However, there has also emerged what Fishman (1982) calls a “Whorfianism of the third kind,” where Whorf stands as a kind of folk hero for non-nativism and non-universalism in language study, who “champions ethnolinguistic diversity for the benefit of pan-human creativity, problem-solving, and mutual cross-cultural acceptance” (1). Fishman refers to Whorf in this capacity as a “neo-Herderian champion” of “little peoples” and “little languages” (5) and compares his defence of aboriginal North American languages in the face of Anglophone encroachment to Herder’s defence of the Slavic languages in the face of German and of German in the face of French (8). However, Fishman does not really come to grips with Whorf’s transcendentalism; indeed, given his (accurate) summary of Herder as believing that “the universal is a fraud, a mask for the self-interest of the dominating over the dominated” (8), that “loyalty to one’s own tradition [and language is] a sine qua non” (7), and that “each collectivity [must] contribute threads leading to mutual reciprocity, learning and respect” (7), the universalist Whorf would surely be hard for him to swallow.

Another partisan of small languages and peoples who values Whorf as a partisan first and the initiator of an experimental research field only a distant second is Dan Moonhawk Alford, whose own views and take on Whorf are much more mystical. As mentioned, his work connects the Hopi concept of space-time (that is, as per Whorf, although Alford also published on North American aboriginal languages and knew at least something about it himself) with Einstein's relativity, a link which Whorf was eager to draw himself, and then with quantum physics (conflated to some degree with Einstein), ultimately to prosecute the argument that what "the physicists are used to calling [...] 'the subatomic realm'" is what "the American Indians for millennia have been calling the 'spirit realm'" (1995), or Whorf's *arūpa*. Alford sees "the particular time/tense system of SAE [as] pretty much peculiar to Western European languages" and uniquely ill-suited to doing physics, and Hopi, in contrast, as expressing quantum insights; he evidently does not place great value in the "SAE" linguacultural stock, or in dialogue between it and Hopi except insofar as Hopi can bring Westerners closer to the nature of things. There may be something to be said for this argument, especially given the power differential between the languages, but it does seem poorer for the lack of Herder's *emfühlsame* spirit and commitment to crosslinguistic engagement for mutual enrichment.

6.3 Final remarks

Often, where models seem incommensurable, it may be that they both apply, but to different realms, in complementary opposition, or in different degrees. This basic fact can be acknowledged in ways that are more, or less, helpful for fostering dialogue. I take the "neo-Herderianism" that Fishman values in Whorf, like Forster's overt partisanship for Herder, to be a recognition that those scholars took approaches that valued different perspectives and fostered dialogue between them. However (without citing names), in much of the post-Whorfian debate,

as well as the discussion of the proper lineages of linguistic ideas like relativity, nativism, and generativity, dialogue has taken a back seat to strawmen and contempt. I don't mean to revisit the "Linguistics Wars" decades after the fact, or to indulge some novitiate sanctimony, which would be too grotesque. I merely wish to recall Kuhn's (1970) observation that "what the participants in a communication breakdown can do is recognize each other as members of different language communities and then become translators" (200–201), "go native" (203).

The standard translation for *Einfühlung* is 'empathy', but when Herder coined the concept it was original (as much as anything is)—the Greek *empathia* means something more like 'strong passion' (for Plotinus, the opposite of *apatheia*). After Herder and Schleiermacher, *Einfühlung* was taken up as a term of art in German aesthetic philosophy, meaning very roughly the emotional-impressionistic and not logical-symbolological experiencing of a work of art (e.g. Vischer 1873) and borrowed into English in that capacity (OED). (See Nowak [2011], Depew [2005].) What is so pleasing about this is that it is a perfect example of Herderian *Einfühlung* at work: the "foreignizing" but familiar-seeming Greek term (cf. of course *sympathy*) is "bent" to take on the meaning of the German, carrying with it a complex sense of the psychological richness of the aesthetic theory of which it is a product—enriching the English language—and then, having assumed its new cluster of English meanings, being taken back into German as *Empathie*, an independent concept with its own (clinical-psychological) semantic domain, whose former genetic homology with *Einfühlung* now presents as a merely incidental or homoplastic resemblance.

Herder's work is rich with richly connotative untranslatables of this sort. Two are *Humanität* and *Billigkeit*, which might be banally translated as 'humanity' and 'fairness' respectively but have much more substance: the former allusive of dignity, self-determination,

and human potentiality; the latter, Rawlsian “reasonableness,” generosity, the Golden Rule. (See Frazer [2007].) These connotations are faint or absent from these words in everyday modern German; thus, Herder’s usages have the status of terms of art. Perhaps empathetic and operationalizable “bendings” of these words into English or other languages would have the potential to foster a productive understanding that can cut across standard configurations, fill in failures and gaps—whether the meaning-systems being bridged are natural languages or scientific paradigms—and afford scholars the agency to step outside those configurations and achieve an enriched collaborative insight—the recognition that linguistic relativity, whether “weak” or “strong,” seems powerfully inclined to be accompanied by an underlying principle of unity being a case in point.

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