

New perspectives on an old academic question

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1. The origin of language at the Berlin Academy

1.1.

The question of the origin of language was one of the eighteenth century's major philosophical problems. And it is once again, at the turn of this century, one of the most controversial scientific topics thanks to the confluence of linguistics, psychology, biology, and paleoanthropology. Since the New York Academy conference of 1975 (Harnad et al. 1976), numerous books on this subject have been published.¹ The renewed interest is noteworthy because linguistics officially forbade the discussion of language origin in 1866 when the *Société de linguistique de Paris* struck consideration of both universal language and language origin from its agenda. Linguistics was considered a historical science that should not speculate about language's prehistoric beginnings or its post-historic end. Instead, it was supposed to dedicate itself exclusively to the historically documented middle and to *faits positifs*. Since then, linguistics has largely adhered to the Paris Society's ban. Right up to our times, hardly any prominent linguist has written about language origin, with the characteristic exception of Hugo Schuchardt, who did so in 1919-21 at the Berlin Academy, the institution that has served as the discussion's traditional forum.

But the verdict of linguistics did not, of course, affect the life sciences, which, from Charles Darwin onwards, have dramatically increased our knowledge about the natural history of humans and consequently about the natural aspects of language. Today, evolutionary biological and paleo-anthropological insights and a more precise understanding of the genetic make-up of man and of the functioning of the brain combine with a linguistics which is no longer exclusively historically oriented. The question of language origin is back on the agenda of the language sciences because quite a few sciences have turned out to be language sciences which previously were not and because linguistics – at least an influential part of it – has itself become a natural science. The linguistic profession's prohibition against the origin problem is obsolete. The new linguistics integrates insights from the other

natural sciences into its own research agenda, thus generating new scenarios of the origin of language and new perspectives on its evolution, scenarios which preceding centuries could not have imagined.

But even if the new discussion is clearly initiated by the natural sciences, its development shows a growing interest for and a growing participation of the cultural disciplines and culturally oriented linguists. Human beings belong to both realms, to nature and to culture, and these realms are interwoven in the most intricate ways in every field of human reality, and in language more than in any other. To discuss the origin of language is, hence, necessarily also to discuss how nature and culture come together. This is what the myth of Babel already tried to explain: how cultural differences originate within the universal and natural unity of an adamitic mankind.

1.2.

Ever since its foundation, the Berlin Academy has been the most prominent forum for the European debate about language origin. It is a topic which Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz himself, the Academy's founder, launched in the Academy's first publication, the *Miscellanea Berolinensia* of 1710, with his article about the origins of peoples and languages: "Brevis designatio meditationum de originibus gentium ductis potissimum ex indicio linguarum". In it Leibniz considers a primordial human language, a *lingua adamica*, pieced together from onomatopoeic roots. When sensualist philosophy had made its way into the Berlin Academy – the French philosopher Maupertuis was the Academy's first president – the empiricists argued with their more orthodox Christian colleagues about the origin of language, a subject which had achieved major philosophical significance in the wake of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* of 1746. The debate not only concerned language, but nothing less than humans' role in the cosmos. Do we, by inventing language, create ourselves or does the Creator give us the gift of language? This is what was at stake in 1769 when the Academy posed its famous prize question about language origin. Johann Gottfried Herder's winning essay, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), settled the dispute with a sort of sensualist exegesis of the Bible. Fifty years after Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, in his inaugural Academy lecture on the topic of "comparative language studies" (1820), referred to Leibniz's and to Herder's theories on language origin, but gave a transcendental-philosophical twist to the problem which simul-

taneously brought about its scientific end. Because the beginning of language is outside the scope of empirical knowledge, we cannot say anything scientific about it. We do, however, know the “eternal” fountain of language because it is inherent in every word, at all times. Every speech act is the origin. Jakob Grimm’s ideas (1851), initiated by Schelling, ignored Humboldt’s insight and did not thus differ much from eighteenth-century speculations about the early history of language. Heymann Steinthal (1851), by contrast, reaffirmed the Humboldtian answer to the question that the Academy had raised anew. That is, he closed the debate by interpreting the origin as an eternal source and not as a temporal beginning. In the twentieth century, however, Schuchardt returned to the question of the temporal beginning of language in his essays presented at the Berlin Academy in 1919-21.

1.3.

Since the Berlin Academy is where the discussion on the origin of language was held in the past, the Academy decided, as part of its tricentenary celebrations, to bring the new discussion back to Berlin. It invited researchers who are currently involved in the debate to a colloquium at the Academy in December 1999. This volume presents the results of that discussion. Gordon Hewes was right when he predicted that the conference at the New York Academy of Sciences in 1975 might be a turning point, but was wrong when he continued: “or perhaps it will be another 200 years before any Academy of Sciences thinks the topic is worthy of such treatment” (Hewes 1976: 3). In 1997 the Californian Academy organised a conference on the topic (see Jablonski and Aiello 1998), and it only took 25 years for the debate to arrive in Berlin.

2. Herder on language origin

Hans Aarsleff, the historian of the eighteenth-century debate on language origin at the Berlin Academy (see Aarsleff 1974), was correct to criticise the tendency of German linguistic historians of the past to underestimate the discussion’s wider European context in the eighteenth century. Herder inserts himself in a European discourse: he discusses Condillac, Rousseau, and English theoreticians. Moreover, the Prussian Academy is an institution which is thoroughly integrated into the French tradition. Not only was

Maupertuis, a follower of Condillac, its president, but also King Frederick II of Prussia – Voltaire’s friend and correspondent – preferred to philosophise in French. In the eighteenth century philosophy and science were international affairs. But this does not mean, as Aarsleff’s critique of German historiography seems to imply, that Herder’s response to the question posed by the Academy in 1769 could therefore not be completely novel. The famous question – in French, of course – was: “En supposant les hommes abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, sont-ils en état d’inventer le langage? Et par quels moyens parviendront-ils d’eux mêmes à cette invention? On demande une hypothèse qui explique la chose clairement et qui satisfasse à toutes les difficultés” (Herder 1772: 138-139).

Herder’s answer is revolutionary because he inverts the traditional conception of language. His response to the origin question differs fundamentally from those of his predecessors. Condillac, whose *Essai* was the Berlin competition’s point of departure, famously tells the first enlightenment story about the origin of language as part of the history of the Human Mind’s ascent from perception to Reason. His tale is a kind of thought experiment in the manner of Psammetichus. He imagines two children living alone in a desert. First they develop the basic intellectual operations that they have in common with the other animals. Then one day the primordial linguistic scene takes place. The first child cannot reach an object he desires and cries out in distress. The second child observes him, perceives both the body movement and the cry, and – moved by pity – comes to his assistance. This interaction is repeated, reversed, memorised, habitualised, and finally reproduced by free will. The gesture and the concomitant cry become the first arbitrary (that is, the first voluntarily created) sign. From here, the evolution of human semiosis proceeds. The gesture is transformed into dance, the cry into words. And from here as well, the ascent of the Human Mind toward Reason takes place.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau sketches an alternative story. It was not published until after his death (Rousseau 1782) and was therefore unknown to Herder when he wrote his *Abhandlung*. Rousseau criticises Condillac for presupposing something that must be invented, namely pity. For Rousseau, the human being in its prehuman phase is a loner. Its social sense must first be created. Humans’ developing an interest in other humans requires an evolutionary step. It is only at the moment of the apparition of love that language arises: as a love song (which later, in another situation, can then be transformed into the expression of pity).

Despite their poetic charm, these two stories are traditional in that they conceive of language mainly as a communicative device. They merely continue what common sense always knew and what, more than two millennia before them, Aristotle taught about language in *De interpretatione*: language is a device for designating “ideas” and for communicating those ideas to other people; language is sound (which differs from country to country); language is a communicative instrument. But Condillac’s and Rousseau’s origin stories do not reflect what their predecessor, John Locke, had already recognised, what European linguistic theory had gradually realised beginning in the Renaissance, and what Condillac himself in fact also knows, namely: that language is also – or perhaps primarily – “thought”, cognition. Rousseau is not interested in “thought” or the cognitive nature of language. For him, language is exclusively social and communicative (and passionate). As for Condillac, he tells a communicative story to explain the genesis of a cognitive device.

This is precisely what Herder criticises. Language, human language (that is, language-thought), could never have arisen, he argues, from a communicative, passionate, and expressive act. Herder reverses the priorities, conceives of language as primarily cognitive, and tells an origin story that reflects language’s cognitive character. The human being creates the first thought via an encounter with the world, namely with a sheep. And the human’s representation of the sheep’s bleating – this completely interior mental act – is language. Language is cognition. The sound of the voice and communication are added later in a second step after the initial and essentially cognitive event. Communication is something humans share with animals. This explains the *Abhandlung*’s famous opening sentence: “Schon als Tier hat der Mensch Sprache [Already as an animal the human being possesses language]”. Humans have animal language, externalised communication, by virtue of their being animals. Human language is essentially internalised language, cognition. Herder is the first Chomskyan in the history of linguistic theory (for more details, see Trabandt 2000).

After this first radical step, Herder’s *Abhandlung* continues with reflections on the evolution of the first wild language, on the first social uses of language, and on the genesis of linguistic diversity. Man’s encounter with the sheep – ovine bleating as the initial (acoustic) event that via the ear’s mediation (acoustically) creates the first thought-word – is the new story.² It is easily recognisable as a version of a very old story: Adam’s naming of the living creatures.

3. The debate and its traditions

3.1.

The eighteenth century was of course not the first time that the question of language origin was posed. The question seems to be asked whenever humans ask who they are, which often means that they ask where they come from. The foundational texts of Western culture – the Bible and Ancient Greek philosophy – contain the founding myths about the origin and the first rational discussion of the origin of language. Like all myths, the Biblical story represents a first attempt to understand the world and its mysteries: Adam’s naming of the living creatures, the Serpent’s seductive conversation with Eve, and the Tower of Babel are “linguistic” stories that try to grasp the origin of language and words, the effects (and the dangers) of speech, and the origin of linguistic diversity. These stories have informed the conception of language for centuries. But they are still stories. In the West’s first enlightenment, the Greeks critically examined the certainties of myth. Plato’s question about whether language is “natural” or “established by man” is an expression of rational doubt. But religion and myth reigned again in the Christian period. Only when theology and religion loosened their grip on European intellectual life was it possible to take a critical view of religious myths. And it is exactly at such moments that the question of language origin arises.

3.2.

Thus for instance around 1300, in a time and a place of nascent enlightenment, the most pious of the Italian poets, Dante, already calls the Biblical myths into question.

Nunc quoque investigandum esse existimo cui hominum primum locutio data sit, et quid primitus locutus fuerit, et ad quem, et ubi, et quando, nec non et sub quo ydiomate primiloquium emanavit. [Now I think that we have to investigate to which humans speech was first given, what was said in the beginning as well as to whom, where, when, and, finally, in what language this first speech emanated] (Dante [1304] 1988: 14, my translation).

Let me briefly sketch his answers: Who, *quis hominum*? Dante is firm: it must have been Adam and not Eve, despite what we read in Genesis where it was clearly Eve (after the Serpent). What, *quid*? The first word was *El*, “God” (the Bible does not say anything about the first word). And since the first word was a whole utterance, it not only had a semantic meaning, but also an illocutionary function. It was an answer, *responsio*. To whom, *ad quem*? The addressee was of course God. When, *quando*? Adam uttered the first word immediately after having been given breath, *spiritus*, by God: immediately after his in-spiration. Adam’s first word is thus his breath, his first ex-spiration in God’s presence: Breath, human life, and language are the same. Dante has more to say about the pragmatic status of the first expiration. The first word is a response to God, but its function is not communication. After all, what can Adam tell God that God doesn’t already know? What God wants is adoration. Glorifying God: that is what man and language are created for. Where, *ubi*? This question is not as important to Dante. It was wherever God gave breath to Adam (theologians disagreed about whether it was inside or outside the Garden of Eden). What language, *sub quo ydiomate*, did Adam speak? Dante is very Chomskyan. He posits a “*certa forma locutionis a Deo cum anima prima concreata* [a certain form of language which God had created together with the first soul]” (Dante [1304] 1988 : 24). Language is innate to the mind. But Dante’s innate language seems to be more complete than Chomsky’s. It is not only syntax plus mentalese. It has all three parts of grammar: lexicon, syntax, and phonology: *vocabula*, *constructio*, and *prolatio*. The first *forma locutionis* that God created within Adam’s soul was of course a concrete language, namely Hebrew. Later, Hebrew was neither lost nor confused at Babel because the sons of Heber were not involved in the tower’s construction, the source of language diversity.

As we can see, Dante “corrects” and adds missing information to the Biblical narrative. For Dante, the Bible doubtless contains the truth about language origin, but it is still possible to ask questions. And questioning revealed truth is the first step of a free mind (which can still be a pious mind).

3.3.

But the crucial age for the question of language origin was of course the age of scientific inquiry usually referred to as the Enlightenment – and in which we are still living. Now, all truths have to appear before the Court of Reason, that is, of Science. This is why eighteenth-century philosophers construct

their alternative theories of language origin. Condillac proposes that language – a device for designating “ideas” – is created by the necessities of mutual practical interaction (pity). Rousseau replies that love must be invented first and that the first language must have been a love song, an expression of feeling. Herder rebuts both by stating that neither social interaction nor communication could have led to the creation of something that is essentially cognitive. These “theories” remain in the form of narratives and have strong intertextual links to the original Biblical stories. But unlike religious myths, they are not meant to be read as revelation. They are heuristic scenarios and have a completely different epistemic status. They are, as the Berlin Academy explicitly stated, “hypothèses”.

3.4.

If now – more than two hundred years after Condillac, Rousseau, and Herder – there is again a passionate interest in the question of language origin, it seems to me it is because a critical reflection on myth is (again) at work. We are implicitly or explicitly creating alternatives to these stories, these “hypothèses”, which we often view as rather naive myths. We tend to be proud of what we know today. But however smart we are, however sophisticated our knowledge may be, it seems to me that it would be fitting for us to show the same respect for these stories that the enlightened philosophers showed for the Biblical narratives. Enlightenment philosophers asked the right questions and came up with very intelligent answers on the basis of available knowledge. And this is precisely what modern theorists do. They use their knowledge about the functioning or the history of language, life, and society to generate conjectures about the prehistorical past. Manfred Bierwisch is aware of this methodological characteristic of origin research when he remarks that his reflections on the genesis of language are based on what he knows about the structural properties of normal linguistic expressions. Even if we today know more than eighteenth-century philosophers did, what we do is essentially the same. We construct hypotheses on the basis of our knowledge. Our hypotheses are less narrative than the eighteenth-century variety. There are (unfortunately) no children in a desert, no lovers dancing around a well, and no bleating sheep. But our hypotheses still retain the form of “scenarios”, a term which clearly designates a poetic creation, an imaginative construct. If, as Ernst Mayr says, “scenarios” are important heuristic instruments for modern research in the life sciences, it would be

churlish to deny to the stories of the past the dignity of being scientific instruments (Mayr 1998: 295).

4. New essays on the origin of language

4.1.

The new discussion about the origin of language depends to a large extent on the success of the linguistic theory of Noam Chomsky and consequently on some of the central assumptions of Chomskyan linguistics: that language is an innate human faculty (and as such the result of an “exaptive” step in evolution), that language is mainly syntax, that language is a specific mental capacity independent of general intelligence, and that language has nothing (or very little) to do with communication or “speech”. The debate on language origin largely represents a critical examination of these fundamental assumptions. Chomsky’s universalistic biological conception of language has forced linguistics (which had previously been a cultural and social science) to examine the findings of the other life sciences of which it had become a part: evolutionary biology, neuroscience, genetics, primatology, paleoanthropology, and so forth. Linguistics is, all of a sudden, surrounded by biology. As a natural science, linguistics must attempt to tackle the problem of the origin of language, which is a crucial aspect of the natural history of man. Some of the most important steps in the evolution of the human being have to do with language (or speech): upright posture (which implies, as Leroi-Gourhan [1964-1965] says, the liberation of the “face” from prehension and the liberation of the hand from locomotion), enhanced brain size, brain lateralisation, the development of the vocal apparatus, and so forth. Becoming a natural science was thus a somewhat risky step for Chomskyan linguistics. Whatever the individual contributors to it might think, this volume as a whole suggests that the Chomskyan school’s reductionist view of language is ultimately untenable. For this volume subjects its central assumptions to critical revision from an evolutionary perspective. “Language” is perhaps not only or primarily syntax: lexicon plays a crucial role in its development. “Language” is closer to animal behaviour than the rationalistic abyss would indicate. “Language” and its evolution cannot be separated from general intelligence, communication, or the bodily prerequisites of “speech”.³ Finally, “language” is likely to turn out to be the

result of highly complex adaptive and selective processes, not merely of a single exaptive leap.

4.2.

The two papers of the first part of the book deal with the biological problem of selection for language. They show right from the beginning the profound divergence in the understanding of what “language” essentially is and thus represent two fundamentally different approaches to its origin.

Philip Lieberman is known as a fierce critic of Chomsky’s conception of language as an innate cognitive device and evolutionary “miracle” (see Lieberman 1984, 1991, and 1998). In his paper he adds further arguments to his scenario of a continuous adaptive selection for language as speech. Vocalisation is the centre of his concept of language which is therefore linked to an older part of the brain, namely the subcortical basal ganglia. This proposition roots language much deeper in the history of life than the “normal” cortical localisation.

Eörs Szathmáry, by contrast, sides with Chomsky’s conception of language as syntax and with Steven Pinker’s and Derek Bickerton’s account of language origin (see Smith and Szathmáry 1995 and Szathmáry 1996). For Szathmáry, the origin of language is thus primarily the origin of hierarchical syntax. He argues that recent advances in primatological, psycholinguistic, genetic, and neurological research do not make solving the origin problem any easier. Neural activity patterns point to a “language amoeba” in the human brain, a notion that in fact vastly complicates the possible evolutionary processes involved in creating this “simple” faculty.

4.3.

The second part of the book contains papers that deal primarily – but not exclusively – with the formation of the first language. What evolutionary steps are necessary to form a fully fledged language? What is the relation between lexicon and syntax – is there an automatism of an innate universal grammar at work? What are the communicative constraints on these processes?

Manfred Bierwisch starts with an account of the origins problem from a Chomskyan perspective: the language faculty is the result not of adaptive

selection (of a cognitive or a communicative behaviour), but of exaptive evolution. In other words, it does not offer a selective advantage (see also Bierwisch 1994). On this genetic basis, first a lexicon is formed, after which the combination of these lexical items must develop.

Wolfgang Klein shares these theoretical assumptions. He distinguishes between the language faculty, the language system, and communication or speech (communication for Bierwisch and Chomsky is only a pleasant bonus). Klein treats the language faculty as a given and devotes his essay to the evolution of the language system. He provides additional evidence for what the second step, the creation of syntax, might have looked like. Like Bickerton, who used the genesis of grammar in creole languages as a proof for the innate language faculty, Klein imports observations from second language acquisition research. Like creoles, the varieties of "natural" second language learners display universal structural features in whatever languages are learned. He calls these the Basic Variety. The Basic Variety's universal features are candidates for proving the underlying universal language faculty and might be traits of the first language.

This is the place to mention Ray Jackendoff's paper, which was given at the conference, but which has already been published elsewhere (Jackendoff 1999). This already very influential paper sketches something like a plausible "normal" evolutionary scenario on the basis of our current knowledge about language.

Bernard Comrie asks what makes Dumbo start to fly? That is, what makes an innate disposition turn into concrete activity? What is it that "ignites" language, what makes syntax go? He discusses the problem by giving a critical account of the famous cases of language-impaired humans and of the creation of "new" languages which have been used as evidence for the existence of a language "instinct" independent of general intelligence:⁴ Genie, Ildefonso, creole grammar, and Nicaraguan sign language. His rather astonishing conclusion is that lexicon makes Dumbo fly; lexicon makes language go. The available evidence clearly shows that the crucial prerequisite for the creation of a fully fledged language is the input of a lexicon (at the right developmental moment) and that from then on grammar can be created anew within a speech-group of the right size.

James Hurford approaches the same problem by inquiring into "proto-thought". He studies Dumbo's ears before Dumbo uses them to fly. But what he actually discovers is that syntax does not depend merely on representational protocognitive mental activities, but that "protosyntax" requires communicative activity where topic and comment are involved.

This conclusion is similar to Jean Aitchison's, whose review of the most important problems of the language evolution process culminates in a scenario for the creation of syntax through informational constraints. As we know from her seminal book on language origin (Aitchison 1996), Aitchison does not believe in the cognitive origin scenario, but conceives of language as a profoundly social event. She assumes a slow process of habituation. Words are created first, followed by a categorial shaping of the words. Finally, order is established according to informational weight (newsworthiness).

The communicative aspects of the evolution of grammar sketched by Comrie, Hurford, and Aitchison are underscored by Daniel Dor and Eva Jablonka, who set out to demonstrate that grammar is not independent of meaning, that is, of a language-specific communicational device. Dor and Jablonka refuse to choose between communication and cognition. They attempt to show that language evolution is the evolution of conceptual structures with the aid of more complex communicative tools. Language, the conceptual system, and motor control evolve together in a sort of spiral. Bridging the gap between communication and cognition, the authors mediate as well between culture and genetics (see also Jablonka and Rechav 1996).

What all the papers in this section have in common is an emphasis on syntax – the Chomskyan heritage – even if it is criticised. Yet even though lexicon plays a crucial role in some of the contributions, the creation of the lexicon itself is more presupposed than tackled directly. The emphasis on syntax as the centre of language is of course the profound difference to eighteenth-century approaches. But if, as Comrie shows, the growth of a large lexicon is the condition for the launch of syntax, and if Hurford's concern for unities of "protothought" is correct, then the creation of "first words" should attract further attention. Interestingly enough, Terrence Deacon, who is not a linguist and therefore unburdened by linguistic prejudices (and who was also at the Berlin conference), concentrated in his 1997 book on the creation of a "word" as the first step toward language. It is not unlikely that the invention of words will be the next focus of the language origin discussion (see Martin 1998).

4.4.

The third part of the book consists of three articles that in one way or another do not share the concerns of the biolinguistic mainstream. Volker Heeschen's horizon is ethnolinguistic, Merritt Ruhlen is a historical com-

parative linguist, and Henri Meschonnic's approach is a very "culturalist" historical anthropology of language.

Acknowledging that the construction of reality (naming, mapping the world) – cognition more broadly defined than in "cognitive" linguistics – is the first function of language and conceding that communication might only be a side effect of language, language use in small traditional societies sheds a completely new light on the priorities. Much of the direct speech that we think to be the essence of linguistic behaviour might just be a consequence of the social organisation of large modern societies. According to Heeschen, traditional societies often make only indirect use of language or use language for non-communicative purposes. But these aesthetic uses of language – play, embellishment, the poetic creation of alternative realities – are not simply "parasitical" (Austin), but rather are vital necessities in such societies. Heeschen's reflections, based on his experiences in New Guinea, show how much our theoretical assumptions about language depend on our own linguistic experiences in modern Western societies, assumptions that might be subject to revision in the light of different cultural experiences.

Merritt Ruhlen addresses some of the theoretical issues of his well-known provocative reconstruction of the first language (Ruhlen 1994d). If it is true that modern humans all descended from ancestors who wandered out of Africa some 100,000 years ago, then why not assume that they spoke one language – Proto-Sapiens – and that traces of this Mother Tongue can still be found in modern languages? Traditional diachronic linguistics refrains from going further back than the well-established language families like Indo-European allow, that is, about 6,000 years. But since we now have information on all the world's languages, why not go further? Ruhlen's bold reconstructive efforts represent, by the way, a realisation of what Leibniz, the founder of historical comparative linguistics, started in his first academic text for the Berlin Academy, the "Brevis designatio". Leibniz was convinced that there had been one first language – *lingua antiqua* – and that extant languages contain its traces, which he attempted to find.

The volume ends on a very sceptical note with the essay of Henri Meschonnic, the French linguist and poet. For him (a little bit like the *Société de linguistique de Paris*), language is essentially historical. And so because the origin question is ahistorical, it cannot be asked – let alone answered – scientifically (see also Meschonnic 1996). Meschonnic's paper also points to some ideological questions that have traditionally been linked to the origin question. Whether or not we share Meschonnic's doubts, they lead us to the question of why the question is asked and why it is asked now,

and hence to a reflection of further motivations for the origin question outside its narrow scientific context.

4.5.

To understand our own motives, it might be useful to look back again at the eighteenth century. At stake in the language origin discussion was the very notion of Man, especially of how much was his own creation and how much was God-given or, as the *philosophes* preferred to say, given by Nature. The typical enlightened, optimistic answer was that human beings played the decisive role in the creation of language. Today's situation displays a number of parallels. The sciences – biology, genetics, the neurosciences, paleoanthropology – have so dramatically changed the place of the human being in the cosmos that the question has returned. How much is given by Nature, how much do we create by our own cultural activities? The modern answers seem to be more sceptical regarding human auto-creation.

Another issue raised by Meschonnic in his sceptical remarks is whether, beyond these scientific developments, there are other, more general historical conditions for the timeliness of the question, mainly whether there are political reasons for it. Perhaps. In the eighteenth century, Europe discovered the depth of historical and cultural differences between human beings and tried to hold things together by means of universalistic assumptions (like Reason, Human Nature, and Human Rights). Is it possible that after two centuries of emphasising differences – and of the sometimes deadly political consequences of this emphasis – universalistic assumptions are today politically important for mankind's survival?

5. Convergences and differences

5.1.

Even if the aim of the conference at the Berlin Academy was to discuss recent developments in the area of language origin, as a historian of ideas I could not resist the temptation, in this introduction, to make some connections to the past. I think that not only the old institution can learn something

new, but also that the modern debate can learn from the past. For instance, it is fascinating – and rather enlightening – that, notwithstanding the differences, the opposition between Condillac and Herder is structurally still a primary point of contention in the current discussion: is communication or cognition the very essence of language and hence the nucleus of its origin? And when Merritt Ruhlen reconstructs the oldest language of mankind, the *Ursprache*, he is realising a research project proposed by Leibniz in 1710.

On a larger scale, the discussion goes back to the founding myths of our civilisation. Science continues the incipient rationalisation of myth. Just as philosophy is – according to Whitehead’s wonderful remark – footnotes to Plato, the origins debate is, of course, footnotes to the Bible: to Adam’s naming of the living creatures, to Eve’s seductive first speech act, and to the diversification of language at Babel. Dante’s systematic approach to Genesis is already an example for how human intelligence struggles with myth. The Enlightenment wants to get rid of the Biblical myth, but all enlightened origins stories have very clear intertextual relationships to the Bible. Modern science as a whole continues this process of emancipation from myth. But it seems to me that here again science is not so far away from the storytelling of the past: in their scenarios, the authors of this volume use their creative imagination as good storytellers.

And, as a whole, our volume reflects a traditional compositional scheme. Structurally, it follows Condillac’s and Herder’s essays (or even Dante’s fourteenth-century treatise), which start by telling the story of the very first moment of “language”, the Promethean fire, the sparking of the first “word”. Then they ask what the first “wild” language might have looked like. For instance, what part of speech was first: verbs, nouns, or adjectives? And finally they turn their attention to the historical development of languages. Similarly, the first section of this book also addresses the genesis of the language faculty, the second part deals with the first language and its probable evolution, and the third section treats questions of a more cultural and historical nature.

5.2.

Notwithstanding the connections and structural convergences with the past, the way of doing things at the Berlin Academy in the year 2000 is marked by three major differences to the ways of the eighteenth century.

First, instead of an essay contest, modern academies organise conferences. This has to do with the possibilities offered by modern means of transportation and with a difference in the style of dealing with scientific issues: we believe in discussion and debate as important means of advancing knowledge.

This is connected to a second difference. The old Academy believed in the possibility of finding a definitive answer: “On demande une hypothèse qui explique la chose clairement et qui satisfasse à toutes les difficultés”. Today we lack the eighteenth century’s optimism. We gathered in Berlin certain that we would not solve all the difficulties. But we hoped to make at least some progress in identifying them.

Third, we use a different language. In 1769 the question was asked in French, and the contestants could answer in French, German, or Latin. Herder answered in German, which, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, became the Academy’s official language. The language of our conference was English. This is quite a remarkable change, especially at this Academy, because the other linguistic topic the Prussian Academy was famous for was its question about the universality of French in 1784. Antoine de Rivarol won the prize with his “Discours sur l’universalité de la langue française”. Rivarol was sure that the splendour of French culture and literature as well as the language’s structural properties predestined French to be the universal language of the future: the Latin of modern times. Moreover, he was convinced that French had won the geopolitical struggle with English, the more so since the American colonies had just won their independence from England with French help. But we know today that this victory is exactly the reason why this book is written in English.

These three differences between our debate and the eighteenth-century debate have resulted not in one prize-winning *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, but in a plurality of studies: *New Essays on the Origin of Language*.

Notes

1. See e.g. Aitchison 1996, Beaken 1996, Bickerton 1981 and 1990, Chomsky 1986, Danesi 1993, Deacon 1997, Gajdusek et al. 1994, Gessinger and von Rahden 1989, Hewes 1975 and 1977, Hurford et al. 1998, Jablonski and Aiello 1998, Lieberman 1984, 1991, and 1998, Lyons 1988, Maynard-Smith and Szathmáry 1995, Pinker 1994, Ruhlen 1994d, Trabant 1996, and Zimmer 1986.

2. That the ear – and not the eye or the hand – is the sensory organ at the origin of human beings' cognitive evolution is another aspect of Herder's radical anthropological revision of classical European epistemology. See Trabant 1990.
3. "[W]e can go beyond the idealization, perhaps appropriate for 1965 but not for now, of the language faculty as a *sui generis* mental phenomenon, unrelated to general cognition" (Jackendoff 1999: 279).
4. See Pinker 1994. The most famous of these cases, the "Gopnik case", seems to have been dropped in the research debate because it does not offer reliable evidence.