

FICHTE, HERDER, AND CONDILLAC ON LANGUAGE AND THE SOCIAL CULTIVATION OF REASON

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the essay

Fichte famously portrayed his *Wissenschaftslehre* as a faithful systematization of the insights contained in Kant's transcendental idealism, differing primarily in their presentation. However, he took Kant to have neglected the social dimension of human reason, and noted that the latter's formulation of the critical system hence nowhere provides an account of how an agent comes to recognize other rational beings.

Attempts to make up for this neglect are found throughout Fichte's early texts, and are most extensively dealt with in the *Foundations of Natural Right* in which the self-consciousness of rational agents is argued to be dependent on their mutual recognition. Reason is argued to be essentially social, as the «Summons» by which a human being is raised by another to the level of individual self-consciousness is identified as the process of upbringing, by which the rational capacities of the child are cultivated. Fichte thus introduces an insight that is today frequently regarded as of the cornerstone of German Idealism²: that the realization of reason depends on intersubjective recognition, and that human nature is second nature.

In this paper, I will examine important aspects of one particular account given by Fichte of the social cultivation of rational capacities, provided in the 1795 treatise *On the linguistic capacity and the origin of language* (henceforth «*Sprachfähigkeit*»), in the context of the views of language and self-consciousness established in Condillac's 1746 *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* and Herder's 1772 *Treatise On the Origin of Language*. I will argue that Fichte presents a novel conception of how the *suus generis* nature of rationality and language (a fundamental tenet of Herder) can be preserved alongside a commitment to the social nature of these capacities, and of the necessary development they have to undergo within a social, communicative context in order to be properly cultivated (a fundamental thesis of Condillac). This investigation will be carried out in several sections. First, give a brief overview of the intellectual context of Fichte's essay and indicate the contribution on his part by reference to the main differences between two earlier texts tackling the same issues: the treatises on language by

Herder and Condillac. Second, I will more extensively summarize these two accounts by focusing on those aspects relevant to Fichte's approach. Third, I will turn to Fichte's conception of attention and language, by first relating attention to the cognitive role Fichte typically reserves for the «productive imagination», and then going to examine the manner in which he puts this notion to work in his account of the nature and development of language.

1.2 The intellectual context and contribution of Fichte's essay

Holger Jergius remarks that the *Sprachfähigkeit* «stands entirely within the tradition of those enlightenment inquiries into the origin of language of which Herder's price essay is the most famous»¹. Similarly, Surber comments that Herder's essay would have represented «something of the 'state of the art' with regard to theoretical matters»² concerning the origin of language at the time of the writing of the *Sprachfähigkeit*, and «had come rhetorically to occupy center stage»³. Jergius further claims that, although Herder grounds language in a purely contemplative rather than practical need, the «difference between Herder's and Fichte's language essays are rather negligible [*geringfügig*]», the latter containing «nothing essentially new»⁴ when compared to the former. An even more negative assessment is provided by Helmut Gipper, who claims that a comparison of the two essays reveals Fichte's approach to «remain far behind»⁵ Herder's more sophisticated treatment.

It is true that Fichte and Herder express the basic tenets of their approach in similar ways. Both strongly reject any attempt to postu-

¹ H. Jergius, *Philosophische Sprache Und Analytische Sprachkritik*, N.p, Symposium, 1975, p. 125.

² J.P. Surber, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy*, Humanities Press Books, New York 1996, p. 13.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ H. Jergius, op. cit., p. 132.

⁵ H. Gipper, «Sprachphilosophie in Der Romantik», *Sprachphilosophie: Ein Internationales Handbuch Zeitgenössischer Forschung*, edited by Marcelo Dascal, De Gruyter, 1992, p. 221. Gipper claims that Fichte did not seriously consider the importance of language for thought rationality until the 4th of 1808s *Addresses to the German Nation*, and takes himself to be supported in this point by the essays contributed by Müller-Vollmer, Schrader und Zahn to *Der transzendente Gedanke: Die gegenwärtige Darstellung der Philosophie Fichtes Internationale Fichte-Tagung, 8.-13.8.1977 in Zvetl* (1981). Although I will not directly address these criticisms of Fichte's earlier writings on language, I will sketch an alternative to Gipper's view in the third section of this essay.

late a continuity between involuntary animal vocalizations and human language, and claim to instead derive the linguistic capacity from the nature of human reason, of which it is a necessary manifestation. They also both make heavy use of anthropological staples³ in their depiction of the human being's basic mental capacities such as attention, imagination, and reflection. Against Jergius estimation, I will argue that comparison between the two treatise reveals significant differences. Fichte's claim that self-consciousness necessarily has a social component, and that the function of language is inherently communicative, sharply separates his approach from the broadly Leibnizian theory of apperception that informs Herder's treatise.

Despite these novel features, many of those basic points on which Fichte differs from Herder can be seen as drawing and building on themes common to other notable investigations into the nature and origin of language. The most important of these are the focus on the social function of language, and the associated idea that linguistic competence (whether it be characterized as intrinsically communicative or not) depends on its proper development on habituation in communicative contexts. Versions of this approach are found both in contemporary German rationalists such as Mendelssohn and Platner, and in empiricist-influenced expressivist criticisms of earlier Cartesian rationalism such as Condillac's. For Condillac in particular, language serves an essential role in that the attainment of competence in the use of arbitrary signs grants agents control over mental capacities the exercise of which previously depends on elicitation by sensory stimuli.

In order to show what is «essentially new» in Fichte's treatment of language, it is therefore highly illuminating to examine these differences from Herder's account alongside the commonalities with Condillac's earlier treatise. Like Herder's, this latter treatise had a pervasive influence⁶ on inquiries into the nature and origin of language, including that of Herder. Thus, Hans Aarsleff argued against a widespread view ascribing decisive novelty to Herder's approach, claiming that Condillac introduced the «characteristic 18th century formulation of this problem»⁷, and emphasized the latter's «significance [...] in the

⁶ See also R. Schreyer, *Condillac, Mandeville, and the Origin of Language*, in «*Historiographia Linguistica*», 5, 1978.

⁷ H. Aarsleff, «The Tradition of Condillac», in H. Hymes Dell (ed.), *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, Bloomington-London, Indiana University Press, 1974, p. 93. The question of the relation between Condillac and Herder has been contested within the scholarship. See R. Schottlaender, *Die Verkannte Lehre Condillacs vom Sprachursprung*, in «*Beiträge zur Romanischen Philologie*», vol. 8, 1969, pp. 214-245. For the revolutionary aspects of Herder's es-

discussions that preceded Herder's renowned prize essay»⁸. Condillac conceived of language as rooted in involuntary vocalizations (such as cries of pain) that are understood by means of a sympathetic mechanism, and took communication to be the engine of the further development of signs (from involuntary vocalizations signifying sentiments to arbitrary signs capable of signifying all sorts of ideas) as well as the correlated development of the relevant human capacities (attention, imagination, and reflection). While Herder claims that reason is fully developed from the first instance of sign-use in a kind of private language, Condillac takes the primitive employment of our rational capacities by which we enter into sign-use to be in need of development by means of communication. This is not so much a claim about the relative priority of reason and language (as Herder maintains), but about whether our rational capacities are capable of significant cultivation, and about the social context of this cultivation. Lia Formigari, who has written extensively on the issue, expresses Condillac's contribution to the debate as follows:

Condillac's description of man's transition from natural signs to arbitrary signs (and hence from the use of so-called lower faculties that man shares with animals to the higher faculties that are peculiar to him) was destined to become something of a standard model [...] he made a decisive contribution to the view that man is not born such, but, as it were, gradually fashions himself as his natural faculties develop⁹.

It is this «standard model» that Formigari has in mind when claiming that «for Fichte the empirical history of language is still that described in the philosophical anthropology of his predecessors: lan-

say see J. Trabant, S. Ward, *New Essays on the Origin of Language*, Mouton De Gruyter, Berlin-New York (NY) 2001, pp. 3-9; on the discontinuities between Condillac and Herder see V.A. Spencer, *Herder's Political Thought: a Study of Language, Culture, and Community*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto-Buffalo-London 2012, pp. 32-34.

⁸ A. Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: the Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 11.

⁹ L. Formigari, *Signs, Science, and Politics: Philosophies of Language in Europe, 1700-1830*, J. Benjamins, 1993, p. 3. Similarly, Jürgen Trabant claims that «it will always be the merit of [Condillac's *essai*] to have introduced language, or rather signs, systematically into the theory of knowledge» (In K. Mueller-Vollmer, *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference, Nov. 5-8, 1987, Stanford, California*. W. De Gruyter, 1990., p. 357).

guage arises from life in society, from a community of aims and feelings»¹⁰.

Let us formulate the main claims operative in this disagreement between Herder and Condillac in two theses:

(SGT) The *sui generis* thesis: the capacities required for language are not continuous with animal capacities, but grounded in reason, which differs from any animal capacity in kind rather than degree;

(CCT) The communicative cultivation thesis: the capacities essential to reason are cultivated by means of communication.

For Herder, these theses are opposed as he appears to take Condillac's portrayal of the social character of signs as rooted in a sympathetic capacity as a paradigmatic instance of CCT, and hence as establishing a continuum between animal cries and human language. Consequently, he rejects CCT and has no significant use for the distinctions between different types of signs, which mark important developments in the use of our rational capacities for Condillac. Fichte, on the other hand, presents us with a theory of the human being's social drive and communicative capacities that is not based on some kind of sympathetic mechanism, as he intends to preserve the *sui generis* rational nature of linguistic communication. Instead, he develops the rationalist theme of the interplay of attention, imagination, and reflection, to ground communication in an inchoate but highly suggestive portrayal of the capacity of agents to structure one another's attention and enter joint attentional states. This allows him to commit to CCT and present a developmental account of signs and the capacities required for their employment akin to Condillac's approach. Like the latter, he presents the capacities constitutive of rationality and sign-use to admit of gradation, and takes the competence to use arbitrary signs to mark an essential manifestation of these capacities in their fully cultivated form⁴.

A belief shared by all three authors is that human reason is essentially characterized by the capacity to voluntarily direct one's attention, and that the sign-use depends on this capacity¹¹. Consequently, the concept of attention will be of particular importance in this discussion¹². Attention is here understood as a mode of cognitive en-

¹⁰ L. Formigari, «The Birth of Idealism in Linguistics», *Geschichte Der Sprachtheorie. Sprachtheorien Der Neuzeit 1: Der Epistemologische Kontext Neuzeitlicher Sprach- Und Grammatiktheorien*, edited by Peter Schmitter, 1999, p. 239.

¹¹ See also L. Formigari, *Signs, Science, and Politics*, cit.

¹² Attention is, as we will see, closely associated with the notion of «reflection». Hence, Dorothea von Mücke claims that «if one were to formulate the difference between Condillac and Herder in a nutshell, one could say that it lies

gagement intimately related to consciousness. To attend to something is, in some sense, to make it the object of one's conscious awareness. Treated in this context, attention can primarily differ alongside the dimensions of being (i) directed or undirected, (ii) directed in a voluntary or involuntary way, and of (iii) having a particular strength (which can be further subdivided into the intensity and extensity of attention, as in accounts such as Wolff's and Herder's). The distinctions ii and iii are often correlated in what I will call the concept of attentional salience, which differentiates the potential of objects to involuntarily direct one's attention, some objects attracting attention more strongly than others. Furthermore, it is an important feature of attention of being selective. To attend to something is to attend to it in exclusion of something else. Hence both Fichte and Herder conceive of attention in accordance with its depiction in Kant's *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, where attention is defined as the partial consideration of some feature or features in abstraction from others¹³.

2. Language and attention in Herder and Condillac

2.1. Condillac and the communicative cultivation of signs

For Condillac, language is the use of signs to indicate «ideas». He distinguishes three kinds of sign:

- (1) Accidental signs, or the objects that some particular circumstances have connected with some of our ideas so that those ideas may be revived by them. (2) Natural signs, or the cries that nature has established for the sentiments of joy, fear, pain, etc. (3) Instituted signs, or those that we have ourselves chosen and that have only an arbitrary relation to our ideas¹⁴.

The necessity of sign use for human mental life is stated in the claim that «ideas connect with signs, and it is [...] only by this means that they connect among themselves»¹⁵. The necessity of distinguishing

in their different notions of the faculty of reflexion. For Condillac reflexion means the control over the operations of the soul: memory, imagination and attention» (E.D. Von Mücke, «Language as the Mark of the Soul: Herder's Narcissistic Subject», *Herder Today*, p. 332)

¹³ J.P. Surber, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy*, cit., p. 26.

¹⁴ E. Bonnot De Condillac. *Essay on the origin of Human Knowledge*. Ed. Hans Aarsleff, Cambridge UP Cambridge, p. 36.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 5.

between different kind of signs lies in Condillac's belief that language must undergo a development⁵. In a 1747 letter to Gabriel Cramer, Condillac commits himself to what I have above called the communicative cultivation thesis when he summarizes what his «entire system comes down to» in the following way:

Social intercourse gives occasion (1) to change the natural cries into signs; (2) to invent other signs that we call arbitrary; and these signs (the natural as well as the arbitrary) are the first principles of the development and progress of the operations of the mind¹⁶.

The manner in which signs, and thus ideas, can be connected depends on the development of the capacities of the agent, such as attention, imagination and reflection, and hence Condillac sets out to «study what assistance these operations draw from the use of signs»¹⁷. He traces this progressive development of signs and capacities by imagining infants that are isolated from human contact in order to establish what basic set of capacities must be possessed by human beings. Before coming into contact, human beings possess perception and consciousness in the form of attention, reminiscence, and a limited imagination¹⁸. Attention is that capacity to be consciously aware of some of our perceptions to the neglect of others⁶. It is linked to reminiscence, the capacity to be aware of the sameness of repeated perceptions, as well as the sameness of the self to which perceptions are ascribed, despite their «variety and succession»¹⁹. The «first effect of attention is to make the mind retain its perception in the absence of the object that occasioned them»²⁰. As such this effect is identifiable with imagination, the ability to recall absent objects or connections attention has previously formed between objects and certain series of perceptions⁷. Connections in the first place are only made possible by attention, as «the connection of several ideas can have no other cause than the attention we have paid to them when they occur together»²¹. To say that imagination is limited in this primitive state is to say that attention is not yet sufficiently within the agent's control to allow her to freely and actively form (or recall) connections. Voluntary direction of attention to different objects or different parts of an

¹⁶ Ivi, p. XXVIII.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 36.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 114.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 25.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 27.

²¹ Ivi, p. 32.

object in succession is what Condillac calls «reflection»²². Connections imagined to hold between things can only be retained through «the steady support of reflection»²³, which is lacking in this state of nature, in which associations are formed and called to mind by chance circumstances rather than by choice. The human being is still passive with regards to the capacities of its attention and imagination, and cannot exercise them voluntarily.

Hence, a person only competent with accidental signs requires the presence of the object to recall the connection, and something similar applies to the manner in which natural cries signify sentiments. It is only the third, arbitrary, kind of signs in which the agent takes control, and Condillac's history of signs thus tells us how «reflection can only be acquired by the use of signs»²⁴.

With regards to natural and accidental signs, the human being is passively guided by contingent outside influences that possess some kind of intrinsic salience for her attention via instinct. In the case of accidental signs, sign-object connections are formed through involuntary attention, drawn to an object due to «the relation it bears to our temperament and everything that touches us»²⁵. That is, I might come to associate a tree of certain shape with apples, because in a situation of hunger I encountered such a tree and its fruit alleviated my need. Accidental signs are recalled involuntarily in the presence of the object that occasioned their formation. Natural cries are not, in their first instance, signs of feelings, but merely their effects. In the above cited Cramer letter, Condillac points out that such cries only become signs in a social context:

I answer that before social life, natural signs are properly speaking not signs, but only cries that accompany sentiments of pain, joy, etc., which people utter by instinct and by the mere form of their organs. They must live together to have occasion to attach ideas to these cries and to employ them as signs»²⁶.

While this is not a term used by Condillac, the functioning of natural cries as natural signs is grounded in an account of sympathy: natural signs «have the quality that, by themselves, without any choice on our part, they proclaim the impression that we feel, thereby causing

²² Ivi, p. 41.

²³ Ivi, p. 114.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 42.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 43.

²⁶ Ivi, p., XXVII.

others to feel something similar»²⁷. Humans living in community become aware of these intrinsic links, and come to employ natural signs in order to indicate their needs to another and request help. This is the first step in the development of signs, as the challenge of employing signs to occasion particular actions on the parts of others forces agents to further develop these signs in order to make themselves understood. Condillac believes that the primordial language must have therefore, at some stage, involved both vocal and gestural signs. For example, I am suffering pain due to hunger, and wish to ask you for food. Rather than merely crying out, which would only indicate distress in general, I must employ further actions to specify what I intend to signify. Hence, I mimic movements associated with eating or rub my belly whilst grimacing. Seeing the need indicated by the other's movements as well as sympathetically feeling their suffering by recognizing it through the other's cries, one is instinctually moved to help in the alleviation of their need²⁸.

If multimodal signs of this sort are to be understandable, the human being in its natural state must not only be capable of being sympathetically affected by the natural cries of others, but also be able to interpret their actions in the sense that certain gestures and movements are immediately apprehendable as expressions of certain (emotive or otherwise sensible) states of agents. Condillac's term for this manner of signification is the «language of action»²⁹. Through repetition and habituation, agents eventually come to associate certain sets of vocalizations and gestures with ideas, and thereby gradually acquire the ability to call these ideas to mind by employing cries and movement as signs: «their memory began to have some exercise; they gained command of their imagination, and little by little they succeeded in doing by reflection what they had formerly done only by instinct»³⁰. Condillac portrays the «use of signs» and the «exercise of the operations of the soul» on which they depend as mutually reinforcing, the extension of one leading to the improvement of the other³¹. Eventually, the exercise of one's imagination through sign-use allows agents enough control over capacities to form arbitrary significations:

When they had acquired the habit of connecting some ideas to arbitrary signs, the natural cries served as a model for them to make a new lan-

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 37.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 115.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 114.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

guage. They articulated new sounds, and by repeating them many times to the accompaniment of some gesture that indicated the objects to which they wished to draw attention, they became accustomed to giving names to things³².

The ability to create and employ arbitrary signs makes us «masters of our attention» in the sense that we can «direct it as we choose»³³. Rather than being passively compelled by circumstances and connecting ideas through contingently given contiguities and associations, «the mind is in control of itself, it draws ideas from it that it owes only to itself, and it gains enrichment from its own resources»³⁴.

This characterization of arbitrary signs closely corresponds to the one Fichte would later give in the *Sprachfähigkeit*, as I will show in section three.

2.2. Herder and the *sui generis* nature of reason and language

According to Herder, the competing theories of the origin of language respectively explain the linguistic capacity as (i) an extension of animal calls, (ii) divinely given, and (iii) as «invented» by human beings through reason. He ascribes the first to Rousseau and Condillac, the second to *Süßmilch*³⁵, and defends an instance of the third himself. The first part of Herder's essay outlines a theory according to which human language is continuous with involuntary animal calls, such as cries of pain. As in Condillac's theory, the recognition of a call as a sign is grounded in a sympathetic mechanism whereby the feeling which elicited this call is also felt by the hearer. Herder thoroughly rejects any theory of this kind, and claims that such a «language of sensations» is merely «the natural law of a sensitive machine»³⁶ from which human language is different not in degree, but in kind. In order to investigate human language, Herder therefore first sets out to establish the significant differences between human beings and other animals.

The first comparative claim with which he opens this investigation is «that the human being is far inferior to the animals in strength and sureness of instinct, indeed that he quite lacks what in the case of so

³² Ivi, p. 116.

³³ Ivi, p. 41.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 42.

³⁵ On Herder's criticism of *Süßmilch*, see A. Gesche, *Johann Gottfried Herder: Sprache Und Die Natur Des Menschen*. Königshausen & Neumann, 1993, p. 13.

³⁶ Herder, p. 74.

many animal species we call innate abilities for and drives to art»³⁷. Art here designates any kind of product of instinctive animal activity, such as beehives and beaver dams. Herder claims that there is a certain perspective which we take up in giving explanations regarding the nature of a particular kind of animal. This perspective identifies what he calls the «sphere» [*Sphäre*] or «circle» [*Kreis*] of an animal, which is constituted by the activities and drives characteristic of its life-cycle: «Each animal has its circle [*Kreis*] to which it belongs from birth, into which it immediately enters, in which it remains all its life, and in which it dies»³⁸. For example, it is part of the bee's circle that it lives in a eusocial colony, collects pollen, and produces honey and intricate hives. The ends of an animal's drives are called its «destiny» and their attainment is the «functions» of its abilities. Herder further posits a connection between an animal's circle and its sensory abilities, since an animal's abilities are suited to the activities pursued as part of this circle. In order to understand this connection, we must look at the manner in which Herder takes both notions to admit of gradation. A circle can be more wide or narrow depending on the diversity of the activities and products belonging to it. Sensory abilities can differ in their strength or intensity. These latter notions become clearer when we see how Herder conceives of attention and its relation to drives. The ends of bee activity are constant, always aiming at acquiring the same kind of food and shelter, and always involving the same manners of cooperation in doing so. Its senses are therefore suited to identifying sources of pollen, the shape of honeycombs, the movements of other bees and so on. A goat, on the other hand, is not dependent on any one source of food or shelter, and can realize its life-cycle in many different ways. It therefore has a wider circle than the bee, which Herder postulates as standing in an inverse proportion to the strength of its senses:

the more numerous the functions and the destiny of animals are, the more dispersed their attention is over several objects, the less constant their manner of life is, in short, the larger and more diverse their sphere is, then the more we see their sensuousness distribute itself and weaken³⁹.

It is the function of an animal's sensuous capacities to aid in the production of those effects belonging to its circle. By means of their

³⁷ Ivi, pp. 77-78.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 78.

³⁹ Ibidem.

instinctual exercise, the animal's «senses and representations are directed at a single point»⁴⁰, as when a bee tasked with the collection of pollen perceives a flower. Stimuli such as the flower possess an intrinsic salience to the bee's sensory system. An animal which is not instinctually bound to the pursuit of a very particular kind of nourishment thus has duller senses, not in that its sensory organs receive less data, or in that it can make less discriminations amongst the data received, but insofar as its perception does not contain elements that uniquely attract the animal's attention. The intensity with which a flower is presented to a bee, and the corresponding pull it has on its attention, is not matched by any of the many food sources available to a goat. An animal's circle thereby constitutes a constraint on its attentive abilities. While the bee possesses the powerful innate ability and drive to create hexagonal cells, «beyond these cells and beyond its destined occupation in these cells the bee is also nothing»⁴¹ – it cannot live outside the constraints provided by its circle.

Having thus developed the instincts and innate abilities of animals, Herder's claim that they are lacked by humans allows him to make some claims about the constitution of human sensation. As humans do not have a particular constrained circle of efficacy but finds «a world of occupations and destinies»⁴² not dictated by instinct, Herder infers that we have «senses for everything and hence naturally for each particular thing weaker and duller senses» which are not involuntarily guided by stimuli of intrinsic salience⁴³. In this sense, Herder sees an «advantage in freedom» in the lack of instinct in human beings. Their attention is entirely distributed and must be oriented in an entirely different manner than that of the animals. This «difference is not in levels or the addition of forces, but in a quite different sort of orientation and unfolding of all forces»⁴⁴ that marks the «distinctive character of humanity»⁴⁵.

The distinction from animal nature gives us a negative insight into the character of essentially human abilities. In order to provide a positive account, Herder names «reason» (later referred to as «awareness» and «reflection») as the essential, unified ability of human nature of which other abilities traditionally claimed for human beings, such as

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 79.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 78.

⁴² Ivi, p. 79.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 83.

intelligence and imagination⁴⁶, are just particular manifestations. More specifically, reason is to be understood as a distinctive kind of awareness which allows the human being to perform those tasks for which the animal requires instinct. As the basic ability constituting «an orientation of all forces that is distinctive» to the human species⁴⁷, reason must be possessed by the human being «in the first condition in which he is a human»⁴⁸. Even the sensations of a pre-linguistic infant are manifestations of reason, insofar as the infant is sensing with awareness. Herder calls this kind of awareness «reflection» which he describes as follows:

The human being demonstrates reflection when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can [...] separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and can be conscious of its own attentiveness⁴⁹.

Like Leibniz and Wolff, Herder links consciousness of an object that is brought about by directed attention with self-consciousness, or apperception⁵⁰. Reflection is thus manifested by apperceptive acts of voluntary directed attention. Like Kant before and Fichte after, Herder employs the metaphor of «hovering» to depict the activity prior to directing one's attention to a single element within a manifold of which other elements could also be selected. The elements «hovered» over and focused on he calls «images». Reflection further essentially involves the recognition of the object of attention by identifying these images with conceptual marks of its characteristic properties. Hence he elaborates that the human being «demonstrates reflection when he can not only recognize all the properties [...] but can in his own mind acknowledge one or several as distinguishing properties»⁵¹. This acknowledgement, Herder will claim, constitutes the first sign-use. He contrasts animal perception from that of humans by considering the examples of how a sheep is recognized from either perspective. The animal, he claims, will attend to the sheep in accordance with some sensual instinct, whether it be the hungry wolf who recognizes it as a source of food, or a sheep which may recognize it as a potential mate. These instincts belong to its circle and thus guide the

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 87.

⁵⁰ See *Nouv. Ess. Préf. u. II*, ch. 9.

⁵¹ Herder, p. 87.

attention of the animal in accordance with its distinctive needs and distinctive way of satisfying them. The «susceptibility to stimulation»⁵² characteristic of the involuntary attention of animal perception is opposed to the distinctly human kind of awareness [*Besonnenheit*]⁵³. Since human sensuality is precisely not restricted «to a single point»⁵⁴ by a circle of influence, its attention is a «freely effective positive source of his soul»⁵⁵ directed voluntarily, and with a consciousness of this action. Confronted with a sheep, the human «soul sees, feels, takes awareness, seeks a characteristic mark» and finds it in the sheep's bleating. While there might be many creatures who are «white, soft [and] woolly»⁵⁶, this sound affords the human being to uniquely determine the kind of thing of which it is a characteristic mark, and therefore has the function of a sign:

The human being recognized the sheep by its bleating; this was a grasped sign on the occasion of which the soul distinctly recalled to awareness an idea⁵⁷.

Herder's choice of example is somewhat surprising given that the metaphor of «hovering» is suggestive of visual (or even tactile) rather than audible perception. Although I can focus my attention on one sound amidst a cacophonous manifold of sounds, such as a friend's voice in a noisy room, the sheep's bleating is not attended to in this manner, but rather enters consciousness unexpected and involuntarily rather than the visual and tactile characteristics previously listed. Nevertheless, Herder takes this example to be paradigmatic of the manner in which a certain sensory characteristic of an object serves to signify a concept and to identify this object as falling under the concept. The operations of reflection intrinsic to human perception therefore necessarily involve the use of signs. As such, the end of the latter is not inherently communicative: «The sound of bleating, perceived by human soul as a distinguishing sign of the sheep [became] the name of the sheep, even if the human being's tongue had never tried to stammer it»⁵⁸. Instead, the signifying function of this sound consists in the soul «bleat[ing] internally, when it chose this sound as a sign for re-

⁵² Ivi, p. 84.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 85.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 88.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 89.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

membering, and bleat[ing] again when it recognized the sheep by it»⁵⁹. This allows us to shed light on Herder's claim that in recognizing something as a characteristic mark «the inner sense takes effect»⁶⁰. While outer sense is concerned with the state of things outside us such as the sheep, inner sense pertains to our own states. These include the exercises of memory. The freedom involved in sign use appears to consist in selecting amongst the sensory qualities of a thing a characteristic mark that is to play a mnemonic function with regards to things of this kind. As we will see, a more elaborate conception of inner sense plays a fundamental role in Fichte's account of intuiting objects and using signs.

The first characteristic mark of taking-awareness was a word of the soul!
With it human language is invented⁶¹.

Through his notion of «reflection», Herder takes himself to have demonstrated that the use of reason and the use of language are equally primordial aspects of human nature⁶². Any postulated dependence which privileges one ability over the other, such as in the account of *Süßmilch*, is criticized as making their relation circular and unintelligible⁶³. In asserting a strong dependence between the abilities constitutive of reason and of language, divine origin accounts such as *Süßmilch's* must assume that the prelinguistic human being about to be instructed by a divine being in language already possesses sufficient rational capacities for understanding these instructions. Unless we take the abilities constitutive of language and of reason to be basic, Herder claims that we get entangled in such kinds of rule-following paradoxes.

He also rejects any claim that the basic human ability must undergo substantive development if it is to count as reason, and that the human being thus initially only possesses reason in the form of a nascent tendency or mere potential before learning its proper exercise through cultivating its basic abilities. In postulating such cases, Herder thinks that one fails to understand that the non-rational animal does not differ from the rational being in certain abilities in that the latter possesses some ability the former lacks, but in a fundamentally different orientation of all abilities that must be present from the

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 88.

⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁶² Ivi, p. 90.

⁶³ Ivi, pp. 91-92.

outset, lest we attempt to show how an non-animal could somehow be transformed into a human being:

It is sophistry that the use can transform an ability into force, something merely possible into something actual; if force is not already present, then of course is cannot be used and applied⁶⁴.

Of course the child does not use reason in the same manner as an adult, but the cultivated reasoning capacity of the latter only differs from the former in allowing «an easier, stronger, more diverse use» of the fundamentally same kind of reason⁶⁵.

3. Fichte on language and attention

In this chapter I will investigate Fichte's account of how language comes to develop from a proto-linguistic communicative activity he calls the «*Ursprache*» or «hieroglyphic language». While this kind of communication is pursued by human beings in accordance with the same drives which Fichte takes to lead to the development of properly linguistic communication, it differs from the latter in consisting of the employment of non-arbitrary signs. The basic mental abilities required for the understanding and producing of such communicative acts are identified by Fichte as directed attention and a particular mimetic activity of the imagination accompanying acts of attention. The sign use of the *Ursprache* works by structuring the audience's attention through an extension of this mimetic activity. A crucial role is also afforded to issues relating to attention in his depiction of how signs, from being initially iconic and involving both gesture and sound, came to be increasingly less dependent on resemblance to their object as well as primarily expressed in vocalizations. This explicit focus on «attention» is unusual to Fichte's work and not paralleled in other texts of the Jena period. It is, however, common to philosophical investigations into the origin and nature of language, as we have seen in the cases of Condillac and Herder. The phenomena relevant to communication that he ascribes to attentive acts furthermore mirror his depiction of the productive imagination as it figures in his other works of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. I will therefore first provide a sketch of his conception of sensible intuition as the work of productive imagination. I will then examine how Fichte takes this notion of

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 86.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 85.

attention to work in his account of the development of signs and the capacities required for their use.

3.1. Attention and the productive imagination

The Kantian faculty of the «productive imagination» plays a crucial role in Fichte's claim that reason is active even in intuiting sensible objects in perception. While Fichte does not wish to deny that perception, in an important sense, depends on its object in that it must accurately represent the latter, he intends to establish that the affection with which perception begins is a self-affection. In the critique of pure reason, Kant subdivides the imagination (as the faculty to represent perceptually absent objects) into its reproductive function, which depends on empirically given perceptions, and the productive function, which determines appearances according to *a priori* temporal schemata of the understanding⁶⁶. This determination is characterized by Kant as an affection of inner sense by the understanding, and claimed to be manifested in every act of directed attention⁶⁷. Fichte generalizes this role of the imagination in its productive function and attributes to it the determination of sensible objects in intuition as such. As in the first critique, the activity of the productive imagination is claimed to be the drawing of a line in inner sense as the schema of spatial and temporal extension. In Fichte's focus on the explanatory primacy of practical activity, the drawing of a line is interpreted as a schema for activity itself. Space is understood as egocentric, and the schema of empty space (space as infinitely determinable) in inner sense are lines proceeding infinitely in all possible directions in which I can move. Schemas of determinate objects in space are lines which limit space in accordance with how my movement is limited by these objects. In seeing an object, intuition «projects something outward [...] before the hand (which is slower) can copy the outline of the shape»⁶⁸. While we are not immediately constrained in our bodily movements by the object, its shape in visual perception is determined by reference to motor-schemas associated with tactile sensations. The drawing of a line necessary to intuiting visual sensations as presenting a world of spatially extended objects is thus not to be taken as the carving up of a two-dimensional patch of colours by superimposing shapes or outlines on it, but as anticipating the manner

⁶⁶ Kant, B157.

⁶⁷ In a footnote to B157 Kant claims that «every act of attention can give us an instance of» the affection of inner sense by ourselves.

⁶⁸ WLnm, p. 55.

in which elements of the visual manifold would pose resistance to the agent's body were the agent to perform movements. Similarly, all spatial locations are determined relatively to myself, schematized by lines representing the amount of effort it would take me to move to an object or its place⁶⁹. Therefore, Fichte claims that a «schema is a mere acting, namely my necessary acting in intuition»⁷⁰. Such schemata of the imagination guide the activity of intuition in presenting the «necessary relation of representations to our practical capacity»⁷¹. The self-affection required for intuiting an object is a freely chosen determination in inner sense, which after being chosen entails determinate rules by which further decisions are constrained. Fichte frequently employs attentive phenomena when describing the role of self-affection in the intuition of sensible objects, sometimes going as far as making directed attention paradigmatic of human activity as such: «willing is concentration of the whole human with his entire capacity [*Vermögen*] to a single point; the correct image of it is the act of exerted attention»⁷². The «hovering» of the imagination is best to be thought of, as in Herder, as the state prior to the directing and fixing of attention in which we are presented with a manifold of elements that can be selectively attended to. The fixating of intuition in which we move from this mere determinable to a determinate is manifested by the directed attention to one element of this manifold to the exclusion of others.

As we have seen, for Fichte the activity of the imagination is not only concerned with memory, such as the recall of a previous sensation triggered by a present sensation, but extends to the activities of intuition in attentive acts, intuiting objects by a mimetic process which exhibits their features. The next section will show that these connected acts of the imagination play a fundamental role in Fichte's conception of the development of sign-use.

3.2. The development of language

Fichte's only detailed discussions of language in the Jena period are found in the 1795 essay and his 1796 lecture notes on Ernst Platner's philosophical aphorism⁷³. Both texts essentially present the

⁶⁹ Ivi, pp.122-124.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 110.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 122.

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ In his essay «Fichtes Sprachproblem und die Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre» (1981), Manfred Zahn considers Fichte's critical comments in texts of 1798-9 regarding the capacity of signs to express the claims of the *Wissen-*

same picture of language, which is defined as the expression of thought by means of arbitrary signs⁷⁴. Arbitrary signs are those explicitly determined to indicate a concept. The capacity to communicate by means of these signs is not primitive, but acquired through socially mediated exercise and habituation, and presents a developed form of a proto-linguistic communicative ability by means of non-arbitrary signs.

In his rejection of any continuity between involuntary emotive vocalizations and human language, Fichte plays on the ambiguous meaning of the term «*willkürlich*», which can mean either «arbitrary» or «voluntary», and hence respectively characterizes both the sign and the act producing it. His demand that any employment of signs must be explicitly determined to express thought if it is to constitute language is intended to distinguish between behaviour that can be interpreted as expressing thought, and behaviour that can *only* be interpreted in this manner. In the sphere of the former, we find all intentional behaviour, as we understand the actions of others by relating them to their guiding intentions. I know what you think in the sense that I know why you act the way that you do. What distinguishes such actions from those of the second sphere is that it is merely accidental that they should be interpreted as expressing thought by another person. Their success does not depend on whether they express the intention guiding them, but only on whether this intention is achieved. Properly linguistic acts, on the other hand, are successful only if another agent understands the thought I intend to express by employing some sign, and such types of acts are consequently only intelligible if it is their end to communicate thought.

An a priori investigation of language has the task to show why language must have been developed by human beings, and how this development must have taken place. The explanatory basis for both

schaftslehre. Zahn claims that Fichte is sceptical of language insofar as signs sensualize their referents and are hence incapable of capturing the I as non-sensual activity. While I do not have space to consider this issue here, it is noteworthy that the *Sprachfähigkeit* contains a section in which Fichte addresses the linguistic expression of spiritual concepts, arguing that while an initial sensualisation of these concepts (through signs deriving their intelligibility from spatial schemata) is necessary, it is overcome in the ongoing parallel development of signs and rationality. Zahn considers such a possible hierarchy of signs at p. 160. For another discussion of the development of spiritual concepts in the *Sprachfähigkeit* see K. Kahnert, *Entmachtung Der Zeichen: Augustin Über Sprache*. Grüner, 2000, pp. 212-214.

⁷⁴ See J.P. Surber, *Language and German Idealism* op.cit. for an extended discussion of Fichte's monograph from a semiotic point of view.

these questions is the highest principle of reason, which Fichte here expresses as the demand that the I should always be in harmony with itself. The end of self-harmony, for Fichte, consists in reason's independence from any external condition or constraint, which is manifested by empirical agents as an infinite striving for free self-determination. It is an important part of Fichte's approach that human beings are in possession of drives, that is, that they act in accordance with certain tendencies characteristic to their nature. Whereas Herder sees an absolute contrast between innate drives and reason, taking the possession of the former to preclude that of the latter, Fichte asserts that there are drives impelling us to act in accordance with reason, even though they are not consciously represented as such:

Man thus seeks – not directly from a clearly conceived determining principle, but from one interwoven through his entire being and without any contribution of his free will – to subjugate irrational nature so that everything will harmonize with reason⁷⁵.

The highest principle is therefore always manifested, however implicitly, where human beings strive to not be determined by factors outside their control. The highest principle and its more determinate manifestations in particular drives provide a standard for whether a communicative activity is sufficient or in some sense defective. The manner in which Fichte depicts this process of assessment and refinement of communication can be elucidated by a distinction Fichte makes in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, where he defines whether an activity is free or constrained by reference to its form and its content. These terms seem to indicate to him two types of condition. Those related to form concern «that the activity occurs» at all, whereas those related to its content «concern that the activity, once it occurs in a particular case, proceeds in a certain way»⁷⁶. We have already seen an example of this in acts of intuition, which are free with respect to its form as I must decide to attend to some aspect of a manifold in order to intuit it, but constrained with respect to content, as «we must represent the objects as we take them to be apart from any contribution to us»⁷⁷. We will see further varieties of constraint with respect to content in the history of the development of signs, and ultimately show

⁷⁵ Fichte 1795, p. 122.

⁷⁶ FNR, 19.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

communication by means of arbitrary signs to be in accord with Fichte's definition of the Summons as free with respect to content.

The question why language constitutes a necessity for the human being must refer the linguistic capacity to the highest principle as one of its essential manifestations. As Formigari points out, «Fichte's point of view is the description of the means with which man has realized an idea of a language»⁷⁸, a reconstruction of an ideal history which Formigari classifies as «linguistic idealism»⁷⁹. This is done by Fichte by presenting the overall vocation of mankind, expressed generally by infinite striving, as containing a nested structure of more particular drives. Human agents manifest the highest principle in its most primitive form when they confront the non-rational natural world under a drive to subordination, as nature must be subjected to human ends if it is to conform with reason, whereas they confront other human beings (who already exhibit rationality) under a drive to coordination⁸⁰. As soon as another being has thus recognized as rational, «the drive toward self-harmonization» produces in us the desire to communicate our intention to the other, as well as understanding hers, as misunderstanding «would be in direct conflict» with our «quest for rational being»⁸¹. Our striving to realize reason necessarily contains the social drive, to expect rational beings outside of ourselves, which, in turn, entails the drive to communication. This drive will be the engine of the development of signs, as inadequate means of communication are disregarded in favour of superior ones wherever human agents find their communicative acts to be systematically lacking in achieving mutual understanding and are at the same time aware of possible alternatives. In his lecture notes on Platner, Fichte further identifies language, conceived of as communication of thought by means of arbitrary signs, as a condition for self-consciousness entailed by the social character of reason. After telling us that our self-consciousness depends on interaction with other rational beings, Fichte states that «I can infer that there is a free being outside of me only through the communication of some knowledge»⁸². As «no immediate influence is possible»⁸³, and

⁷⁸ L. Formigari. «The Birth of Idealism in Linguistics», op. cit., p. 239.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 231.

⁸⁰ Fichte 1795, p. 123.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ivi, p. 156.

⁸³ Ibidem.

«something can only be communicated by a sign»⁸⁴, rational beings come to recognize one another by means of employing signs.

Before agents are competent in the communication with arbitrary signs, they must first develop these signs and the capacities required for their employment. The first kind of sign-use constitutes a proto-linguistic kind of communicative activity Fichte calls the «*Ursprache*» or «hieroglyphic language». Fichte states a basic principle of the *Ursprache*: «Just as nature signified something to human beings, exactly thus did they have to signify it to one another through freedom» (267). Similarly, in his lectures on Ernst Platner's aphorisms on language, Fichte claims that «the whole of our early system of signs is oriented towards the presence of the object which is supposed to be known and conceived» (PlatN. „Surber, 161). We can elucidate this principle by reference to what Fichte takes to be the most primitive communicative act, ostension by pointing, and what he takes to be the basis for the most primitive sign-system, namely sensible resemblance between sign and signified. In ostension, we must make objects present to the others by directing their attention to these objects. That we can direct the other's attention is made manifest by the most primitive sign, that of pointing at an object. In this case the object is present both to the user of the sign, the addresser, and the addressee whose attention is directed to it by the pointing. This act, although not yet employing iconic signs, reveals a formal condition of such signs – that the attention of the audience can be influenced by gestures. Fichte hence identifies pointing as the most primitive communicative act⁸⁵. In the *Ursprache*, we must signify them by drawing on those perceptual capacities through which objects become present to us. The capacities in question are of course those of the productive imagination figuring as the activity of reason in intuition, and which Fichte appears to identify in this context with attention. The productive imagination produces spatial schemata of objects by reference to schemata of those possible acts that would exhibit the resistance this object poses on our practical activity. Just like the lines drawn by the productive imagination thus explicitly represent actual objects by means of implicitly representing possible movements, the movements of gestural language signify by sketching a spatial outline of the object that guides the attention of the other similarly to the lines drawn by the productive imagination in intuiting this object. In communicating by means of this *Ursprache*, one therefore uses the body to make the

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 161.

mimetic process involved in intuition of a sensible object visible to another agent. An agent employing a gestural sign «does externally and perceptibly for the other what he himself must do internally in order to grasp the object. – One conceives in front of another, as it were»⁸⁶. Fichte claims that the «communication of thought itself» by means of these signs is «*willkürlich*», but not the «manner of this communication»⁸⁷. We freely choose to communicate, but we are restricted in our exercise of this choice by having to make use of signs that bear resemblance to what they signify. In this way early linguistic activity lacks the independence from nature that the Fichtean subject must strive for with respect to its content – the conditions of how the act must occur. The success of my communicative act hinges on whether the addressee attended to the same features of the signified object as those I am mimicking. Visual signs, for example, depend on imitating the shape of the object, but as each attends to a different aspect of the shape, communication fails if «the other has not noticed exactly the same thing»⁸⁸. The determinable sphere that serves as the background against which my acts of producing iconic signs have determinacy is therefore a system of attentional states that are determined by sensible effects in some determinate way, and hence my acts are successful or fail depending on whether the addressee attends to these effects, and whether they attend to them as I intended.

Fichte's text portrays the *Ursprache* as a multimodal affair in which neither visual nor audible signs are initially privileged, although the latter eventually attain dominance for reasons related to this manipulation of attentional states. The use of gestural signs is found to be defective, as communication requires the attention of the addressee, which is presupposed rather than established by the use of gestures⁸⁹. Consequently, if the addressee is not already attending to the speaker, the communicative act will fail unless the speaker attracts the addressee's attention by means of further acts. The use of audible signs constitutes thus an advance over gestures, as they can be successfully communicated to an addressee from a distance or in the dark, as well as serving to attract their attention. Using Fichte's classification, we can recognize the criterion according to which signs are here judged to be defective and altered as being related to the form of the act – the addressee attending to the sign at all – as distinguished from a cri-

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 267.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 162.

⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 126.

terion related to its content of the act – how the attendee determinately attends to it. Accordingly, Fichte claims that repeated experience of this failure to communicate must lead to the drive to develop an entirely audible language⁹⁰. A problem with a system of audible signs is encountered when trying to designate an object that does not produce any sound. Such things can be associated, and thereby signified, with a sound «in coincidental ways, in special circumstances»⁹¹. These range from common conjunctions, such as the sound hoarfrost makes when one walks on it, to less common ones, such as the sound made by an insect upon entering a flower. The connection between sign and signified is not anymore based on resemblance, but in a factual connection in experience. In utilizing such connections to establish signs, human beings exercise greater control over the mental faculties than in the case of employing iconic signs, but are still essentially constrained by circumstances. Nevertheless, Fichte this as an important step towards the development of arbitrary signs.

While I lack the space to go into the various possible ways in which Fichte imagines the shift to arbitrary signs to occur, his examples all assume that the task of creating an arbitrary sign-system falls to authority figures within the community or the household⁹². For example, a communal leader might unwittingly replace iconic with arbitrary signs through his idiosyncratic pronunciation habits that come to be adapted by the community at large, or a parents may introduce such signs intentionally through ostension or by employing them in a joint practice⁹³. In any case, Fichte draws on contexts of joint attention or joint practice involving authority figures to explain how arbitrary signs come to enter the language and eventually dominate it. Once this is achieved, the linguistic medium is within the control of rational agents, and the subject thus finds itself unconstrained by nature when employing and grasping arbitrary signs.

4. Conclusion

Fichte's account of the linguistic capacity and its origin retains features familiar from both Herder's and Condillac's account, but manages to preserve both SGT and CCT by conceiving of attention and signification in novel ways informed by his social reinterpretation of Kant's apperception. Since he takes rationality to require socially-

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 289.

⁹² Ivi, pp. 166-169.

⁹³ Ivi, pp. 163-164.

mediated development, he postulates that properly linguistic capacities must be derived by a rationally required process from primitive presocial capacities. The non-arbitrary signs of this *Ursprache* are not natural signs in the sense of Condillac's involuntary cries and Herder's language of sensations, but play a role akin to these natural signs in being the product of a set of capacities that are claimed to be basic to human reason. The «hieroglyphic language» further resembles the proto-language imagined by Condillac in that it combines vocalizations with a gestural «language of action». For Fichte however, these signs signify by means of resemblance to their object rather than through a sympathetic mechanism by which the listener is involuntarily moved in the same way as the utterer. The capacities shared by speaker and listener which allow for communication by means of these signs are cognitive rather than emotive, relating their perception of objects and their properties rather than sentiments and subjective states of the subject. Like Herder's account of original sign-use, the *Ursprache* is the manifestation of reason, drawing on the capacity to voluntarily direct one's attention both claim to be necessary to human perception. But whereas Herder takes these capacities to be essentially private as well as sufficient for reflection in the sense of apperceptive awareness, Fichte's conception of self-conscious as intersubjectively mediated leads him to depict any capacity of sign-use to be essentially communicative, and to only ascribe reflective self-consciousness to agents competent in the use of arbitrary signs. The *Ursprache*, and the capacities required for it, must therefore undergo a process of development by which our rational capacities. As for Condillac, the cultivated rational agent becomes master of her attention, but this mastery is intimately connected with the ability to influence, and be influenced, by the attention of other agents. It is by entering into contexts of joint attention that agents learn how to employ signs, and it is through the deficiencies of the original kinds of signs (which depend their for efficacy on the manner in which agents are affected by objects) leading to affect the other's attention in the intended way that they come to further develop these signs. If they are to achieve competency in properly linguistic communication, they must interact with and be guided by other agents and thereby come to express their thoughts by means of arbitrary signs. Language thus manifests the self-sufficient of reason in the sense that the efficacy of arbitrary signs does not draw on the cognitive capacities which relate a subject to a sensible object, but on those in which a subject finds herself related to another subject in a distinctly rational manner.

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Questo articolo esamina come Fichte, attraverso una concezione sociale della ragione e dell'autocoscienza arrivi a proporre una nuova teoria della natura e dell'origine della capacità linguistica. Vengono messi a confronto il saggio del 1795 *Sulla capacità scientifica e sull'origine del linguaggio* e alcuni precedenti trattati di Condillac e Herder sullo stesso tema. Attraverso questo confronto, vengono isolate due tesi in Herder e Condillac: (i) la natura *sui generis* del linguaggio e della ragione (che implica una radicale discontinuità rispetto alle capacità animali) e (ii) il requisito che ragione e linguaggio vengano sviluppati appropriatamente all'interno di contesti sociali e di comunicazione. Ciascuno di questi autori mantiene una delle due tesi a scapito dell'altra. Condillac concepisce la lingua come radicata nei versi involontari degli animali, richiedendo uno sviluppo socialmente mediato per poter diventare una capacità razionale di impiegare liberamente segni arbitrari. Herder rifiuta la continuità fra le grida animali e la lingua umana, e concepisce la capacità linguistica come un modo essenzialmente privato di usare segni identificabili mediante l'attenzione appercettiva. Questa lingua privata riposa soltanto alla capacità basilare della ragione e non esige nessun ulteriore sviluppo. Fichte è interessato a conservare gli aspetti *sui generis* delle capacità razionali che includono il linguaggio ma crede che anche il linguaggio debba essere sviluppato attraverso l'interazione tra gli attori in contesti comunicativi. Io sostengo che Fichte sposi entrambe le tesi e presenti una teoria della competenza linguistica basata su un modello indefinito ma altamente suggestivo di attenzione condivisa che si sviluppa in accordo con gli impulsi sociali.

Parole chiave: Fichte, Herder, Condillac, linguaggio, razionalità

*This essay is an examination of how Fichte's distinctively social conception of reason and self-consciousness lead him to propose a novel theory of the nature and origin of the linguistic capacity. In order to do so, I contrast some of the main aspects of his 1795 essay «On the linguistic capacity and the origin of language» with earlier treatises on the same subject by Condillac and Herder. Through this comparison I will isolate two theses found in Herder and Condillac, which respectively concern (I) the *sui generis* nature of language and reason (which entails their radical discontinuity from animal capacities), and (ii) the requirement of language and reason to be properly developed within social, communicative contexts. Each of the two authors maintains one of these theses to the detriment of the other. Condillac conceives of language as being rooted in involuntary animal cries, and as necessarily requiring socially mediated development in order to become the fully rational capacity to freely employ arbitrary signs. Herder rejects the continuity between animal cries and human language, and takes the linguistic capacity to be an essentially private mode of sign-use identifiable with apperceptive attention. This private language only draws on the basic capacities of reason and does not require any substantive development. Fichte is strongly concerned to preserve the *sui generis* status of Fichte is strongly concerned to preserve the *sui generis* status of rational capacities including language, but in line with his social model of self-consciousness, he believes that language too must be developed through the interaction of agents in communicative contexts. I argue that he is committed to both of the above listed theses, and presents an account of the nature of linguistic competence which is grounded in an inchoate but highly suggestive model of joint attention developing in accordance with social drives.*

Keywords: Fichte, Herder, Condillac, Language, Rationality