

## Chapter 2

# The origin of the social approach in language and cognitive research exemplified by studies into the origin of language

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### 1. Introduction

During the last years, an increasing interest can be detected in social cognition and the latter's relation to language, as well as the origin of language. In this introductory chapter, we trace the origin of this social approach.

It will be demonstrated that the overall social approach in cognitive and linguistic sciences stems from the shift in philosophy from the "referential approach" to the "social turn". Both paradigms endorse completely different ideas on what cognition is and what role language plays in general cognizing.

This paradigm shift will be exemplified by an analysis of past and current research into the origin of language. Origins of language studies carry in their theoretical assumptions the shift from a transcendental to a secular world view. In the former, it is argued that language is referential for it bears true, factual knowledge of the outer, transcendental or physical world. In the latter, it is argued that language is social, and rather than provide truth about the world, it provides meaning to members of a certain linguistic community.

In the referential approach, language and cognition become intertwined. And with the social turn, social cognition and language become related to one another. How exactly this happened is exemplified by studies into the origin of language.

### 2. The referential approach to language and cognition

That cognition and language are two intertwined capacities is nowadays an unquestioned truism. However, this has not always been the case. Why then, and

1 since when, did the study of cognition become related to the study of language?  
 2 In this section the answer to this question is provided.

3 The term “cognition” is nowadays by and large a container term that is  
 4 used to denote the various (thought) processes of the mind. The mind, in  
 5 turn, is a concept that is used to refer to the workings of the neurons in  
 6 the brain. And “cognizing” has traditionally been a synonym for thinking  
 7 rationally, i.e. for understanding something by making use of human reason  
 8 or the rational intellect. Throughout Western history, the human *ratio* has  
 9 always been interpreted to be of a linguistic nature. For many ages, both  
 10 our thought processes as well as our mental concepts have been assumed  
 11 to be structured linguistically. In fact, neurology (Damasio 1999, Ledoux  
 12 1996) only recently demonstrated that our thinking or cognizing can occur  
 13 silently, and that mental categories cannot straightforwardly be associated  
 14 with lexical categories.

15 Historically, the goal of the *ratio* or of thinking was argued to be the acqui-  
 16 sition of knowledge, more specifically, knowledge of the physical world.

17 Cognition, language and knowledge have thus traditionally formed a tripart-  
 18 ite and this tripartite forms the foundation of the referential approach. The  
 19 referential approach to cognition, language and knowledge is as old as written  
 20 history and can thus be traced to at least 7,000 years ago. The basic tenet of  
 21 this paradigm is that human cognition is understood as a neutral knowledge-  
 22 retrieving device. Human cognition enables the retrieval of factual knowledge  
 23 about the physical world. Moreover, this factual knowledge is assumed to al-  
 24 ways be of a linguistic nature because thoughts are assumed to be structured  
 25 linguistically. Language therefore is understood to objectively refer to the outer  
 26 world.

27 For example, the word “cat”, is argued to be the verbal expression of a mental  
 28 representation of a certain animal in the world. In other words, the word “cat”  
 29 refers to the animal cat, as well as to the mental concept (image or sensation) of  
 30 a cat. All three, the mental concept, the word and the animal are traditionally  
 31 assumed to share some basic properties. Stated differently, in ancient times  
 32 it was assumed that there existed a 1-to-1 correspondence between thoughts,  
 33 words and objects in the world. This position is called realism. Words were  
 34 argued not to be arbitrary signs of mental categories or physical objects, rather,  
 35 it was assumed that words actually provide objective knowledge of the objects  
 36 they refer to. Exactly because of this idea, such an isomorphism between words  
 37 and things could be endorsed.

38 To understand this view more fully, an overview is given on how lan-  
 39 guage, cognition and knowledge became related during the course of human  
 40 history.

2.1. Ancient Eurasian cultures

From at least 7,000 years ago onwards, we can find traces in written history of the existence of cultures that develop explanations for the presence of language. From this time onwards, there is evidence that people believed that spoken and written languages have sacred or divine characteristics because they bring knowledge in and of the life of men, if not the whole of the universe.

A Mesopotamian religion called Zoroastrianism would introduce the idea of a Sun-God. This is a creating god that stands above and outside of the world. And in India, the idea would develop that Sanskrit, the language of the Rig-Veda, is a perfect, sacred and divine language, as well as that it is the “language of the cosmos” (Hewes 1999: 573). The idea of a Sun-God as well as the idea of a sacred language of the cosmos would set the stage for all future theorizing on language in (at least) Indo-European countries up until the present. Descendants of these first scriptural cultures would populate the Middle East, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, Rome and eventually they would colonize all of Europe, and later on also Asia, America, Australia and their original human populations. The cultural intuitions underlying these original cultures would give way to Ancient Egyptian mythology, Milethic (Ionic) and Hellenic philosophical thought, the three Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), Western secularism, humanist ideology and western science.

More specifically, the cultural intuition (Pinxten 1997: 87) developed that the world we live in is an ordered rather than a chaotic one, and that this order is of a linguistic nature.

In ancient Egyptian mythology, the order in the world is assumed to be the result of the “living creator of the life of the world” (Derrida 1981: 87), namely, the “enlightened” Sun-God Ra. The latter is also called Re or Ammon-Ra, Ammon stands for “hidden”. His firstborn son is the god Theut or Thoth. Thoth is the most powerful god in ancient Egyptian religion for he is acknowledged as “the master of divine words” (Derrida 1981: 91). More specifically, he is associated with the thoughts of his father, Ra. Ra’s thoughts are “hidden”. Thoth is the one who is able to speak his father’s thoughts and thereby bring them into the light (the light in turn is again associated with Ra). He can do this because Thoth is the god of speech, and through speech he can make the hidden truth and wisdom clairvoyant. Because of this, he is also the god of wisdom, and knowledge is understood to be of a linguistic nature. It is thus in ancient Egyptian times that the cultural intuition emerges that speech is both a vehicle for thoughts as well as an instrument to refer to (the truth about) the world. Both thought and knowledge are therefore language-based.

2.2. The origin of the *logos*-theory

Zoroastrianism and ancient Egyptian mythology inspired Milethic (Ionic) and Hellenic philosophical thought.

In Egyptian mythology, the sun shined upon the whole of its creation, thereby emanating a hidden truth or order which was made linguistic and thus literally audible and comprehensible by Thoth. This order, and eventually the capacities associated with the god Thoth, would be called the *logos* by the ancient Greek philosophers.

In the 6th century BC, pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Heraclites and Parmenides who lived in the Ionian city of Milethe (presently in Turkey), would start a philosophical search for this hidden *logos* or world-order (later also interpreted as world-soul). *Logos* is a concept that translates as order, language, reason, thought, doctrine, account, statement, and the laying open of a relation (Held and Kirkland 2002: 83; Hillar 1998: 22). All these concepts are thus assumed to be synonymous (Coseriu 2003: 24–25).

Steadily, the following cultural intuition would grow: since the *logos* is linguistic (*logos* is synonymous for thinking, knowing and speaking), and since humans are linguistic creatures, humans carry a part of the *logos* in themselves. Humans are thus actually part of the *logos*. This is also one of the reasons that humans can get to know the *logos* in the first place, as well as that they can lay open the relation between the words and the things.

The nature of the relation between thinking, speech and knowledge would also remain the main topic of investigation in Hellenistic philosophy of the 4th century BC. Hellenistic philosophers raised the following discussion: since names are given to true and existing things in the world, are the names themselves also true and correct names that connote these things? Associated with this query is whether the names are given with insight into the true nature or essence of these things, and whether it are humans or gods that give the things their proper names.

This discussion can especially be found in Plato's dialogue entitled *Cratylus* (Plato 1921: 383–440) that was written in 360 BC. In the text, Hermogenes, Cratylus and Socrates discuss the origin and nature of words as well as their relation to the things in the world.

The dialogue begins with Hermogenes who summarizes the views defended by Cratylus so that Socrates can join the debate. Cratylus is said to argue that names are “natural” rather than “conventional”, which means that they have an inherent rightness and correctness or truth in them. Moreover, all things have but one true name and these true names are the same for all humans, Hellenes or foreigners.

1 Hermogenes (Plato's *Cratylus* 1921: 384c–5a) on the other hand, argues that  
 2 the correctness of names, or the truth-value of names, lies in their conventional  
 3 use. Rather than a divine entity or a certain class of humans, all humans agree  
 on the words they give to certain things. Therefore, the given name is always  
 5 true and correct, even if one would choose to give the same thing a different  
 name in the future. As such, there is no naturalness of names, for names are the  
 result of human habits and customs.

Having heard the two positions, Socrates (Plato's *Cratylus* 1921: 385b–d)  
 takes over the dialogue. He reasons as follows. Suppose I would give the name  
 10 "human" to a horse and the name "horse" to a human. In this case, in my private  
 language, horses would be called humans and humans would be called horses.  
 However, if one accepts that one can speak the truth as well as that one can lie,  
 then there must exist a true and a false language. The true language says it like  
 15 it is – that horses (the name) are horses (the thing) – and speaks of the things as  
 they are. The false language, on the contrary, does not say things like they are –  
 but argues that a human (the name) is a horse (the thing). Agreeing with this line  
 of reasoning, according to Socrates, equals agreeing that with language one can  
 say what is the case (the truth) as well as what is not the case (falsity).

20 If a language is true, so are the names that make up the language. Therefore,  
 a thing can only have one true name. All the other names that are used to talk  
 about the same thing are false.

That a particular thing can only have one true name is explained by Socrates  
 by arguing that the true name says something about the essence of the thing  
 involved. More specifically, the essence of a thing is fixed, and since the name  
 25 says something about this unchanging essence, the thing can similarly only  
 have one fixed, true name. The word horse, for example, says something about  
 the what-ness or essence of a horse: it defines what a horse is. Moreover, this  
 definition remains equal for all the horses that have ever existed or shall exist  
 in the future.

30 Now the true name of a thing can only be given in agreement with the es-  
 sence of that thing if the name-giver has named the thing with insight and  
 knowledge into its true essence. Who then is this name-giver that can name  
 with insight, and how is he able to do this?

35 Not just any man can name the things by their right name. Only trained hu-  
 mans (especially philosophers) and gods can name the things correctly. They  
 can name the things by their correct names because they are lawgivers who are  
 able to contemplate on, or actually see the true (Platonic) model of both the  
 38 name and the thing. When the name given to a certain thing is the true name,  
 39 the name gives knowledge (*epistème*) of the thing. If the name is not true and  
 40 thus not given in accordance to the essence of a thing, the name is false, or in

1 accordance with the mere opinion (*doxa*) of the human name-giver. Gods are  
 2 assumed to always use the right names because they naturally name with insight  
 3 and knowledge. Humans however, more often than not, name according to their  
 opinion (Plato's *Cratylus* 1921: 400d, 401a–b), without caring for the truth.

5 Thus, Socrates argues that the name can differ from the thing it names,  
 because humans often have false opinions on the essence of things. The true  
 name is that name that resembles the thing, in the same sense as a painting of a  
 man, for example, resembles that man, although the painting is not the same as  
 the man. An untrue, false name is that name that does not resemble the thing,  
 10 in the same sense that one would argue that the portrait of a female is the por-  
 trait of the man. As such, names can be untrue and the result of mere opinions,  
 rather than that names are always true (*Cratylus'* idea). Socrates (Plato's *Cratylus*  
 1921: 430d): "I call that kind of assignment in the case of both imitations  
 paintings and names – correct, and in the case of names not only correct, but  
 15 true; and the other kind, which gives and applies the unlike imitation, I call  
 incorrect and, in the case of names, false."

Socrates concludes that there is still room for convention, since the name  
 and the thing do not immediately coincide and false opinions can blur the true  
 essence of a thing that is normally part of its name.

20 In sum, it is in Plato's dialogue that one can find the origin of realism as well  
 as nominalism. Within a realistic doctrine one argues that language can pro-  
 vide knowledge about the world because words form a one-to-one correspond-  
 ence with the essence of the things. In an ultra-realistic position, the study of  
 language therefore suffices to study the world. Within a nominalist doctrine  
 25 one argues that names do not provide insight into the nature of the world or  
 the essence of things. Rather things receive their names by convention. This  
 position does not exclude the possibility that knowledge about the world is  
 nonetheless expressed linguistically. Rather, words arbitrarily refer to certain  
 things of the world rather than that the words coincide with these things in the  
 world and their essence.  
 30

### 2.3. The Word in Judeo-Christian traditions

35 From at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> if not the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, the polytheistic religions  
 of Egypt, Greece and Rome were countered by Middle Eastern, monotheistic be-  
 lief systems such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In all three traditions, God  
 created the universe as well as mankind and language becomes a gift from God.

38 The first book of the Torah, *Genesis*, describes YHWH's creation of the  
 39 world. Out of nothing, this eternal entity creates through speaking. The first  
 40

1 thing he says is “Let there be light” (*Genesis*, I, 1–3). This verse shows that  
 2 in this monotheistic religion also the sun (Ra) becomes subjected to God’s  
 3 powers, because now the light is created as well. But most of all, this passage  
 demonstrates that creation becomes understood as a speech act.

5 Moreover, *Genesis* describes how God creates man out of clay (in parallel  
 with Plato’s *Demiurge*), according to his image. He blows Adam’s soul into his  
 nose (*Genesis* 1–2) and this is what brings him to live. Besides God’s speech,  
 God’s breath can therefore also create.

10 Having been moulded out of clay in God’s image, man becomes physically  
 similar to God and man too can speak, name and thus rule over creation. This  
 ruling over creation involves subordinating and naming it. “Naming is know-  
 ing and subjecting” (Pombo 1987: 39). In *Genesis*, II: 19–20, it is told how God  
 brought all the animals and birds that he had created to Adam to see how the  
 latter would name them. In this regard Adam is similar to Plato’s *onomatourgou*  
 15 or name-giver (see also Ecco 1995: 7–8 and Pombo 1987: 34–40). “Adam comes  
 close, then, to the wise legislator and *onomaturge* of Plato’s *Cratylus*, who like-  
 wise [...] determines the name on the basis of his knowledge of the essential  
 nature of the object.” (Pombo 1987: 39). In fact, Adam becomes as God in this  
 respect.

20 As shall become obvious in what follows, this part of *Genesis* would be-  
 come one of the most important texts in Western thinking, including the  
 Western study of language. In general, it would become interpreted as fol-  
 lows: man received his language, which is a part of the soul, from God when  
 he breathed life into Adam. The language spoken by Adam is the language  
 25 that God speaks. This is why Adam (and all subsequent humans such as  
 Moses, Job, etc.) can have actual conversations with God to begin with. In  
 later writings, this language would be called the Adamic language. Jewish  
 scholars as well as Christians would, in agreement with the story of *Gen-  
 esis*, argue that at least until the flood (the story of *Noah’s ark*), the language  
 30 shared by God and his creatures was one. Moreover, it was assessed that  
 this language was invariant until the confusion of tongues that occurred at  
 Babel.

35 Regarding the Christian *New Testament*, especially the *Gospel of John* (1,2–  
 1,5) is interesting to place cultural intuitions about language (origin studies),  
 for it begins with the verses:

38 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was  
 39 God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and  
 40 without him was not anything made that hath been made. In him was life; and the  
 life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness  
 apprehended it not. (King James Version 1997)

1 In this passage, the “Word” is to be interpreted as Jesus, the son of God (see  
 2 also *Apocalypse* 19,13 where Jesus is again called the word of God). In the  
 3 *Gospel of John*, Jesus thus bears striking resemblances with Thoth who is both  
 the word of Ra as well as Ra’s substitute. Moreover, in the early Greek versions,  
 5 this Word and thus also Jesus, is called the *logos*. John can therefore also be  
 read as follows: “In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God  
 and the *logos* was God.” As the speaking representative of God, Jesus has an  
 important linguistic message for God’s creation: namely that they are freed  
 from their sins if they believe in God’s name (John, 1, 12). Believing in God’s  
 10 name needs to be interpreted from within Platonic tradition: if they believe in  
 the truth and correctness of his name, then they believe that God exists (and  
 this name also says something about God’s essence). Moreover, the freeing of  
 the sins is, just as creation was, a speech act or a linguistic event. Speaking  
 therefore equals enacting and creating.

15 God as well as his (linguistic) thinking are placed outside this earthly world,  
 in analogy to the sun. Human beings, created in the image of God, are able  
 to transcend their earthly body (language is considered to be part of the soul)  
 as well as the world. They are able to see the whole and name and thereby  
 structure its parts in an orderly fashion from a “God’s eye view”. Men can, in  
 20 other words, become as God. With language, humans can be “objective” about  
 the world which means that they can obtain and possess true knowledge of the  
 world, as well as “objectify” the world, i.e. take an outsider position and look  
 at the world as a whole that can be divided and ordered into different parts.  
 This line of thought would found the correspondence idea that is typical of  
 25 realism.

More than anything, language would therefore become understood as a  
 knowledge device, an objective instrument that orders our thoughts and refers  
 to the outer world as well as structures this world. That language is a commu-  
 nicative device amongst human beings was secondary and at best understood  
 30 as an act of charity by God. Language is understood to be primarily referential  
 rather than social or cultural.

A result of this intuition was the Medieval *universalia* debate. This is a de-  
 bate wherein the ontological status of particular and universal (general) names  
 is investigated (Coseriu 2003: 148–169; De Libera 1995: 319–339). Besides re-  
 35 alistic positions, also nominalist positions would be endorsed.

Realists would argue that universal terms, e.g. general terms such as ‘hu-  
 38 man’, ‘cat’, etc., are truly existing entities. They exist in a transcendental, idea-  
 tional world and bring forward the particular, e.g. the ‘specific human’ named  
 39 ‘Socrates’. Moreover, that Socrates is human says something about his essence.  
 40 Universal terms are a precondition for particular terms and for the objects and



1 subjects that correspond to them. In this line of thought, the word creates once  
 2 more. Realists therefore assume that there is a direct isomorphism between  
 3 *universalia*, particulars and the things they *connote*.

5 Nominalists on the contrary would argue that only particular things truly  
 exist and that these things exist independently of the words that *denote* them.  
 Both particular (e.g. ‘Socrates’) as well as universal names (e.g. ‘human’) are  
 abstractions of the mind. The shared essence that is presumed to be common  
 to all human beings is again an abstraction of the mind. *Universalia* therefore  
 do not have an existence beyond the human intellect.

10 Besides an objective instrument, language would also become an occult in-  
 strument whereby one can, through language, invoke or call on God (e.g. by  
 saying a prayer) or become God (by saying magical spells such as *Abraca-  
 dabra* which literally means “I create as I speak”).

15  
 2.4. The Renaissance and the shift in cultural intuitions concerning the  
 nature of language

20 By the onset of the Renaissance it had become a given that God and Adam  
 spoke the same, *divine* language during their communications. This “Adamic  
 language” was regarded as transparent, perfect, unique and also as universal  
 (Pombo 1987: 38–9). That is, the Adamic language was understood to be a per-  
 fect instrument of knowledge as well as a universal means of communication.  
 It was also endorsed that this language got lost after Babel.

25 The encounter of different cultures and different knowledge systems through  
 trade and colonization would make Christian scholars realize that, contrary to  
 the Adamic language, their many *natural* languages are all but perfect instru-  
 ments to either obtain objective knowledge or to communicate fluently. This  
 situation would become an impulse for the utopian thinkers of the late Medi-  
 30 eeval and Renaissance times to create a sense of *nostalgia* towards the period  
 that existed prior to Babel, namely paradise where all men were united into one  
 folk with one language.

35 In this regard, the search for the Adamic language would eventually become  
 redefined into two distinct problems: (1) the search for a universal language of  
 knowledge understood to be of the highest cultural value; and (2) the search for  
 the original mother tongue as well as the natural, primordial condition of man.

38 A rupture would thus emerge between the scholars involved in the search for  
 39 the original language. On the one hand, philosophers emphasized the heuristic  
 value of the Adamic language. The Adamic language provides insight into the  
 40 true nature of things. Language, in their account, can be defined primarily as

1 an a-historic, a-social, objective instrument of knowledge. Its communicative  
 2 value is only secondary. In so far as the Adamic language was lost, rationalist  
 3 philosophers would engage in three things: they would search for natural lan-  
 4 guages that could take on the role of the Adamic language (e.g. Greek or Latin);  
 5 they would try and “purify” natural languages (especially German) so that  
 6 these languages could function as universal languages of knowledge; and they  
 7 would construct artificial, logical languages that would enable to gain objective  
 8 knowledge (Pombo 1987: 23). Especially the latter two rationalist endeavours  
 9 would result in the onset of research into the grammatical structure of language  
 10 as well as mental (equalled with lexical) categories of the mind.

11 On the other hand, philosophers of law, philosophers of economics and  
 12 eventually also philologists would understand the Adamic language to be a  
 13 means to establish a social bond between all of mankind. They therefore de-  
 14 fined language as a social, historical means of communication between men.  
 15 This would eventually give rise to the social turn.

### 3. The social turn

16 During the past 200 years, the validity of the referential approach to knowl-  
 17 edge and cognition has been called into question by “the social turn”. Within  
 18 the social turn, human cognition is not understood to be a neutral, linguistic  
 19 device that is fine-tuned to retrieve factual knowledge of the physical world.  
 20 Rather, both language and human cognition are understood to be an outcome  
 21 of biological and social enculturation processes. Biologically, many aspects of  
 22 cognition are currently recognized as “silent” or non-linguistically structured,  
 23 and thus cognizing does not always make use of the linguistic medium. Socio-  
 24 culturally, a large part of cognition is currently recognized as the outcome of  
 25 social enculturation. Moreover, it is endorsed that linguistic signs are arbitrary  
 26 and that they find their origin in society through human convention.

27 Why then, and since when, did the study of cognition and language become  
 28 related to the study of social life? In this section the answer to this question is  
 29 provided.

30 Ideas on the arbitrariness of the sign can be traced back as early as the 5th cen-  
 31 tury BC, especially in the works of Aristotle. These ideas would mainly be re-  
 32 introduced in Humanist circles by (crypto-)Jewish scholars. But it is especially  
 33 during the Enlightenment that one can find the foundations of the social turn  
 34 that would characterize the theorizing on language in the 19th and 20th century.

35 We now turn to these positions one by one and investigate how language  
 36 became associated with social cognition.  
 37  
 38  
 39  
 40

3.1. The arbitrariness of the sign

The idea that the words or verbs are signs that arbitrarily denote different things or events, and that these signs are invented by men and agreed upon by convention is not merely a modern, Saussurian discovery. Earlier versions of this idea can already be found in ancient philosophical texts. As explained above, this idea was already partly discussed by Hermogenes in Plato’s *Cratylus*. But especially Aristotle, a student of Plato, elaborated more fully upon the idea. In his *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle (1995: 16a) writes that the alphabet consists of written symbols of spoken sounds, i.e. letters, while the spoken sounds are symbols of affections of the soul. They do not correspond to the affections, rather, they symbolize them. Both the written as well as the spoken symbols can differ in mankind, but the affections of the soul are the same.

The idea that the affections of the soul are similar to all humans is essential to empiricist ideas as well as the idea of a psychic unity. The latter doctrine says that all men are equipped with the same sense apparatus, and when they are put in the same environment and stimulated by the same things, they will feel the same sensations. Taken on their own, these sensations are neither true nor false, they just are.

Subsequently, these sensations and mental images are labelled verbally by convention (which explains why symbolic signs differ within different communities). “A name is a spoken sound significant by convention, without time, none of whose parts is significant in separation” (Aristotle 1995: 16a).

Verbs are conventional signs that, additionally to words, also signify time. Similar to sensations, both words and verbs are, taken on their own, neither true nor false. They are a communal given. Words and verbs are only true or false in combination, for example in sentences such as “All cats are Persian” which is false and “Not all cats are Persian”, which is true. The endorsement that signs are arbitrary therefore does not necessarily question the possibility to obtain true and objective knowledge of the world. Rather, truth claims result from the combination of words and verbs into sentences.

During the Christian Middle Ages many ideas of Aristotle were condemned by the Catholic Church in favour of Plato’s teachings. As a consequence, realism gained more foothold than nominalism. In Jewish traditions as well as in Arabic milieus, on the contrary, Aristotle’s work remained influential. Eventually, it were mainly Jewish scholars that reintroduced Aristotle’s ideas into Humanist, Protestant and eventually Catholic environments.

An interested figure in this regard is Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540). Vives (Coseriu, 2003: 170–171) is famous for countering scholastic (Platonic) thoughts and (re)introducing Aristotelian ideas on language. Vives was one of the pio-

neering scholars in semiotics and grammar. But most importantly, he argued against universalism in favour of historic particularism, and against language as an objective tool in favour of it being of an inter-subjective nature (Coseriu, 2003: 174–176).

Vives endorsed the view that every language follows its own grammatical rules and that words receive their content by convention rather than in accordance with the essence of a thing. Moreover, he primarily understood language to be a means to establish or deter social cohesion. In fact, it was language that turned humans into social and cultivated beings, and in this respect they also differ from other animals (Coseriu 2003: 175). Language enables reason and since animals lack language, they are argued to lack reason as well.

Although language is still an instrument *for* knowledge, it is not exclusively understood to be an instrument *of* knowledge. Rather, in humanist thought language becomes associated with the highest form of culture. It is a tool that enables general cultivation. According to humanists, language is what makes humans educated and therefore civilized creatures rather than beasts (Coseriu 2003: 292).

### 3.2. The rise of philology

As already described, during the Renaissance, trade and colonisation resulted in the encounter of different unchristian cultures. These cultures as well as their languages often outdated the European Christian culture.

A first consequence was that other cultures became understood as pre-Adamic or, in other words, as “primitive” or even “primordial”. As such, they differed from the Europeans who had become “civilized” by the word of God, written down in *The Bible*. Other cultures and their members therefore became understood as “uneducated” “children”, “barbaric” “uncivilized” creatures, or plain “beasts” that lacked reason altogether. In sum, they were considered to live in a “natural” state rather than a “cultural” one.

Secondly, the encounter of other cultures made utopian scholars wonder about a “natural” condition of man and how it differed from a “cultural” state. Is a “savage” man in a “natural”, “uncivilized” condition, and thus without the word of God, capable of distinguishing between good and evil? Is such a man capable of reason? Can his knowledge be used to gain truths about the world? And is the “cultural” state that “civilized” men find themselves in the best state to live in? Are there cultural alternatives? Can one reach a “higher” “civilized” form?

Thirdly, many Protestant as well as utopian scholars would argue that paradise does not lie at the beginning of time, but at the end. Man can “perfect”

1 himself through education. This first of all entailed learning to read and write  
2 so one can learn (about) the word of God.

3 These changes in cultural intuitions would set the following cascade of  
events in motion.

5 First, Europeans started to wonder whether all these creatures are the chil-  
dren of God and thus whether all the world's languages can be united into one  
single mother tongue that was lost at Babel. Those in favour of a unity of man-  
kind would argue that there is a universal reason (the rationalists) or a common  
sense (the empiricists) that unites all men. They would therefore also endorse  
10 single origin theories of language. Those against such a unity would pave the  
way for racism and multiple origin theories of language.

15 Secondly, the thought-experiments laid open by the utopian scholars con-  
cerning "natural" and "civilized" conditions, as well as the Christian ideas  
of the existence of "primordial", "savage" people would introduce the nature/  
culture divide. The mind/body divide had already been a cultural intuition of  
many ages. The mind was rational and the body passionate. The extension of  
this dichotomy to the whole of nature and the whole of human culture only  
20 emerged from the Renaissance onwards. Not just language and reason, but the  
whole of culture (religion, rituals, customs, law, economics, education, etc.)  
were interpreted as completely different from nature. Culture was argued to  
separate white European men from "beasts" (to be interpreted as animals as  
well as members of different cultures).

25 Finally, Protestant theologians would argue that the Adamic language is lost.  
It is the God-given human condition if not plain punishment that there exists  
a confusion of tongues. Thus, it is contra God's will to search for the unifying  
Adamic language. In this regard, the translation of the Bible into many differ-  
ent languages by Protestant theologians such as Martin Luther (1483–1546)  
and Jean Cauvin (1509–1564) is to be considered as a pure act of charity (Pom-  
bo 1987: 36–37). The many languages became considered as the main obstacle  
30 that prevented an individual's salvation. The Biblical translations enabled to  
evangelize all humans and their belief in God might allow the latter to have  
mercy on their souls.

35 Evidently, to adequately translate the Bible into many tongues one must  
speak several of them fluently, as well as have sufficient knowledge of the  
Biblical textures. It were therefore mostly Protestant theologians that would  
engage in the effort to understand other languages as well as to translate the  
Bible into many tongues. It is in this tradition that textual philology would  
originate (textual analyses of different versions of the Biblical text in order  
38 to reconstruct the original version) as well as comparative philology (the  
39 study of the structure and relation of different languages). Especially the lat-  
40

1 ter would emancipate from Protestant beliefs and evolve into comparative  
2 linguistics.

3 Moreover, Protestant scholars, again inspired by utopian thinkers (in turn  
inspired by the Bible its eschatological texts), endorsed that perfection did not  
lie at the beginning of time but at the end of time. And this perfection was  
5 argued to be reachable through civilization. This intuition would eventually  
enable historicist progressive ideas and evolutionary thought altogether.

Regarding language, the Bible says that God brought the animals to Adam to  
see how Adam named them. According to Richard Simon and Grotius (both of  
10 the 17th century) language was thus an imperfect, autonomous human inven-  
tion (Ecco 1995: 86). In the 18th century, Court de Gébelin would therefore ar-  
gue that God, when speaking to his creatures, adapted himself to the imperfect  
language that this creature spoke.

15 If perfection of mankind lies at the end of time, it follows that the beginning  
of time can be characterized as imperfect. How then can one reach perfection?  
It would especially be philosophers of law and economics that would tackle  
this question.

20 These intuitions would eventually give rise to the many different academic  
fields that exist today: politics, economics, biology, psychology, anthropology,  
sociology, and linguistics. It would be these, at first philosophical scholars, that  
would introduce the idea that language first and foremost is an instrument of  
social life, rather than that it is an instrument of knowledge.

### 25 3.3. The search for the social origin of language

Currently, scholars are inclined to understand language as an instrument that  
facilitates social cohesion. This modern notion on language first arises in the  
works of social contract theoreticians such as Hobbes, Locke, de Condillac,  
30 Rousseau, Smith and Herder. These philosophers are famous for their political  
and moral theories wherein they distinguish between a natural condition of  
man and an artificial, cultural one. This distinction related to the onset of the  
nature/culture divide.

35 In the natural condition, human beings are considered to be a-moral: they  
are neither immoral nor moral, rather they live according to their natural in-  
stincts. The main point of discussion was whether humans are good or bad  
natured. Hobbes, for example, would argue that in a natural condition men do  
not socially enjoy each others company. Rather, they “[...] are in that condition  
38 which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man”  
39 (Hobbes 1902: 96, p. 63 in the original).  
40

1 It is only when humans are united into an artificial society wherein they  
 2 give up part of their natural freedom in order to live according to the law of  
 3 the Common Wealth that they become moral and civilized. The origin of such  
 a society wherein man becomes civilized and moral is characterized by Rous-  
 5 seau (1972) as a situation wherein men engage in a social contract.

What is interesting, but unfortunately for a large part neglected by current  
 evolutionary linguists, is that all these political and moral philosophers also de-  
 veloped theories on the origin of language that were associated with their ideas  
 on the rise of a political society. In the same fashion as they emancipated laws  
 10 and ethics from religious thought, they emancipated the origin of language.  
 That is, no longer was language understood to be a present from God, rather,  
 language became characterized as a human and social (rather than natural)  
 invention as well as convention.

15 In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes (1902) would write that language is a human in-  
 vention rather than a divine gift. Language enables social life. Without lan-  
 guage “[...]there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society,  
 nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves.”  
 (Hobbes 1902: 24, p. 12 in the original). The cultural intuition of this era is  
 20 that, more than anything, language enables and facilitates culture. As a con-  
 sequence, language is not understood as part of the domain of nature. Rather,  
 language is what enables social cohesion within the common wealth. In other  
 words, language is something whereby the common wealth can “[...] signifie  
 to another, what he thinks expedient for the common benefit” (Hobbes 1902:  
 130, p. 88 in the original).

25 This theme would also be repeated by Locke and Rousseau. In his *An Essay*  
*concerning Human Understanding*, the empiricist Locke (1942: 201) would  
 argue that “GOD, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not  
 only with an inclination and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of  
 his own kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great  
 30 instrument and common tie of society.” And in his posthumously published *Es-  
 sai sur l'origine des Langues*, Rousseau would declare that “[...] la parole étant  
 la première institution sociale [...] [Language was the first social institution].”  
 (Rousseau 1970: 27, p. 1 in the original).

35 Language thus becomes a social and political instrument. It is a communica-  
 tive device that bonds humans in social life, rather than that it provides true and  
 objective knowledge of the physical world.

38 Language also remained associated with thoughts, especially moral thoughts  
 39 that distinguish man from other animals. That is also the reason why language  
 cultivates and civilizes. It brings humans outside of the natural domain and into  
 40 the cultural realm. Although languages originate as natural human inventions,

the subsequent development of languages is first and foremost interpreted as a social and cultural event rather than a biological one.

De Condillac, for example, would argue that language originated in a natural condition as well as from a natural condition. More specifically, language originated with the beginning of our species. In the natural condition, all men would share a same “language of actions”. This is a communication system that is based upon emotional states such as “cries of passion” as Condillac (1746: part II, 5–6) calls them. The more language “progresses” and “cultivates”, the more such cries are replaced by arbitrary spoken signs. Because of this, language is argued to become more abstract and artificial and as such, it becomes a representative of culture. In other words, it becomes an instrument to measure the “level of civilization” one is in.

And also Rousseau (1970: 29 p. 3 in the original) would argue that language “progressed” (the word *evolution* was only introduced later in time) from a more natural and “simple, unlearned” state to a more artificial and “complex, educated” state. The original, natural languages were therefore assumed to be gestural and iconic, while the later emerging, social languages were vocal and abstract.

Rousseau argued that in a natural condition, this unlearned pantomimic language would suffice for the whole of mankind. In a natural condition, all humans express their physical needs in the same, universal gestural language. It is our social (second) nature that requires the origin of vocal languages. Moreover, it is this social nature of human beings that makes vocal languages differ in the first place (because of the convention of the sign), rather than that vocal languages too are spoken universally.

### 3.4. Language and historicism, evolutionism, anthropology and linguistics

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a truism that vocal languages are learned through enculturation in a social community. This idea had two consequences. To begin with, it became custom to assume that languages can be used as instruments to measure the level of cultivation the nation finds itself in. Secondly, it would be argued that the state of the nation can be changed by the apprenticeship of a different language and its accompanying governmental organization. Here lies the beginning of the cultural intuitions that there exists a close interrelation between nations (*ethnie*), languages and a governmental style of organization. This tripartite would be poured into a developmental, historicist and evolutionist “scale of progress”. The latter would ground nationalism and racism, imperialism and western hegemony, but also linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism.



1 Within historicism and evolutionism, human history was presumed to run  
2 through certain qualitatively distinct phases and to “develop” according to  
3 well-defined historical and evolutionist laws. In practice, this meant that cer-  
4 tain languages or cultural groups were falsely classified as “degenerated”, “less  
5 evolved”, or “underdeveloped” in comparison to “enlightened” and “civilized”  
westerners. In other words, these historicist and evolutionist scholars used cul-  
ture and biology to argue against a psychic unity of mankind, and in favour of  
a division of mankind into different “races”.

10 Anthropologists, on the other hand, would argue in favour of a psychic unity.  
Beginning with Herder, it was argued that language is a universally shared  
human trait that distinguishes us from other animals, while on the other hand,  
language also allows for cultural particularism and as such causes for differen-  
tiation amongst human beings.

15 As Pan (2004: 14) points out, Herder’s ideas imply that different languages  
will result in different forms of reasoning. Eventually, this idea also allows for  
the assumption that language actually creates a world. Although the idea of  
linguistic determinism (the view that language creates a worldview) is gener-  
ally subscribed to Wilhelm von Humboldt, it was actually formulated 50 years  
earlier in time by Herder.

20 Anthropologists such as Boas would combine the social approach to lan-  
guage with non-racial evolutionary biology. Boas distinguished between habits  
that are learned and that become automated, and instincts that are innate (and  
therefore part of the organic). According to Boas (1962: 139), a particular lan-  
guage is learned as a habit, while the faculty of language is innate (instinctive)  
25 and thus the result of our biological endowment. Namely, a habit (or faculty,  
e.g. the language faculty) is biologically (organically, instinctively) determined,  
but the specific content of the habit (or faculty) is acquired. More specifically,  
the content is acquired from society. The habitual use of a particular language  
subsequently becomes automated.

30 In sum, Boas assesses that a distinction needs to be made between, on the  
one hand, the faculty of language that is innate and biologically determined,  
and on the other hand, a particular language, that is learned in society and that  
subsequently becomes habitually used and automated.

35 This would inspire Kroeber (1963: 3 – § 2), who argued that culture and  
language need to be interpreted as extra-individual entities that take on the  
form of “more-than-organic phenomena”. The latter is alternatively called a  
superorganic structure. The existence of a superorganic structure would again  
be countered by Sapir (1917). Nonetheless, the latter, together with one of his  
38 students, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), would argue that language is influenced  
39 by culture and vice versa, culture by language, in such a manner that language  
40

determines an individual's and a society's thinking. Both cognition and language are therefore immediately social.

Moreover, the distinction between a universal biological faculty of language on the one hand, and on the other hand, the existence of particular languages that are interpreted as social institutions would remain a recurrent theme in linguistics, from de Saussure (1972) to Chomsky (1965) to the present.

Eventually, the social turn would also enter the philosophical realm (Gontier 2006). Wittgenstein (1989) would argue that one cannot demonstrate that language refers to an outer world. Rather, language originates in the social realm. Similar to the case of language, knowledge is subsequently first and foremost interpreted as a social endeavour, and scientific theories become "languages" of society. In the same manner as language is the result of a social contract, so scientists endorse in a social contract that determines the rules and politics of science. In this post-modern account, convention rather than truth unites scientific scholars.

### 3.5. Evolutionary linguistics

The shift from the referential to the social turn eventually also entered evolutionary linguistics. Not only is it customary to explain language as a social phenomenon, nowadays also its evolutionary biological origin is explained from within social selection pressures. That language arose for social reasons is subscribed to by scholars working within artificial intelligence, primatology, psychology, anthropology, neurology, palaeo-anthropology and archaeology (see Gontier, 2007 for an overview). Hurford, Studdert-Kennedy and Knight (1998), for example, note on the back cover of their 1998 volume:

For the past two centuries, scientists, as children of societies preoccupied with technology, have tended to see language function as largely concerned with the exchange of practical information about the mechanisms of the physical world: tool making, hunting, and so forth. By contrast, this volume (a product of the age of mass democracies) takes as its starting point the view of human intelligence as social, concerned with one's own and others' desires and motives, and of language as a device for forming alliances, making friends, and thus achieving successful feeding and mating through a complex social network.

Evolutionary linguists however are scarcely aware that a 7–8,000 year old history precedes their current theorizing on the origin and evolution of language. This history nonetheless needs to be taken into account because it explains why questions are framed the way they are and why we examine the evolution of language the way we do today. Put negatively, because scholars are largely

1 unaware that the social approach emerged to counter the referential approach,  
2 potential biases or cultural intuitions such as the nature/culture divide remain  
3 largely undetected. Moreover, certain intuitions, although they have led to  
4 new avenues of research, currently remain ungrounded. That words for example  
5 arise as a result of social convention rather than that they are the outcome  
of private thought, is an intuition that has become such a truism that scholars  
mostly do not focus on grounding this intuition scientifically.

With this article some of these historical biases have been exposed and the  
hope is cherished that in the future, the social approach will become the subject  
10 of reflexivity as well as firmer scientific grounding.

#### 4. Conclusion

15 As far as we can trace written history of certain cultural ideas back in time,  
language has been the subject of investigation from at least 7,000 BP onwards.  
Language has traditionally been understood as a trait of a divine entity, a divine  
entity tout court (e.g. in the idea that the word has become flesh), or a gift from  
God to humans. It is a shared device that allows God and men to abstract hid-  
20 den knowledge (i.e. the underlying structure of the physical or transcendental  
world) and as such create order.

Since language leads to the eternal truth, and truth is one, there can only be  
one true language that says it like it is. It follows that all other languages are  
false derivatives of the first, true language. The origin of ideas on purification  
of existing languages, the search for the Adamic language, or the creation of  
25 universal languages is not that hard to understand from within this cultural  
background.

It additionally explains why thoughts are associated with language, why lan-  
30 guage is reduced to the study of the word, why words and thoughts are argued  
to be re-presentations of things, and why language is only secondarily a com-  
municative device. If it is the goal to reach individual salvation or happiness, it  
is merely an act of charity to instruct others in the true word.

The search for the universal divine language actually triggered the idea that  
35 there was a primordial, natural condition. The latter, so it is argued, is distinct  
from the current, cultural “perverted” condition. Beginning from the Renais-  
sance onwards, language becomes primarily understood as a communicative  
device. Rather than transmit knowledge, language enables the transmission  
of social information between members of the same community. Language  
38 enables the creation of a political community because it facilitates social co-  
39 herence.  
40

In this regard, language becomes a representative of all that is cultural which in turn becomes opposed to all that is natural. Language becomes a measure as well as a representative, not of truth (as e.g. Thoth or Jesus are), but of social life, political coherence, and culture altogether. Besides being a measurement of the degree of civilization one is in, it enables education and language can therefore lead to patriotism or nationalism. Language enables cultivation into social, political and cultural life. Rather than being a device of knowledge, it becomes a device for the transmission of culture.

It is in this climate that the emphasis on the word is loosened to include the study of syntax, and that the question on the biological origin of language is first posed. Originally, language is argued to have originated out of moral needs, a characteristic that enables men to be lifted up from the condition of animals. Passionate cries and gestures are argued to become combined into a pantomimic language and eventually spoken language emerged.

Language, in this view, not only enables social cohesion and the possibility to transcend a natural state, language actually influences the type of cultural environment one creates and vice versa, the cultural environment influences the language that is spoken.

These ideas paved the way for the doctrine that language creates an idiosyncratic worldview rather than that it objectively lends insight into the outer world that exists independently of human beings. Moreover, in post-modern times, politics, science, culture etc. become nothing more than languages or regimes that determine from within, the rules according to which one has to play to be political, scientific, etc.

And within Post-Neodarwinian traditions, it is argued that language evolved because of this social aspect that language enacts. Given the long historical background, the latter however should become the main topic of scientific investigation rather than that it is taken as a truism that guides current theorizing.

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