Early Modern Views on Language and Languages (ca. 1450–1800)

This is a post-print version (with some minor alterations) of the following on-line publication (last update: 11/04/2020)

Van Hal, Toon. “Early Modern Views on Language and Languages (ca. 1450-1800).” In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Linguistics*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

DOI: [10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.381](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.381).

The Early Modern interest taken in language was intense and versatile. In this period, language education gradually no longer centered solely on Latin. The linguistic scope widened considerably, partly as a result of scholarly curiosity, although religious and missionary zeal, commercial considerations, and political motives were also of decisive significance. Statesmen discovered the political power of standardized vernaculars in the typically Early Modern process of state formation. The widening of the linguistic horizon was, first and foremost, reflected in a steadily increasing production of grammars and dictionaries, along with pocket textbooks, conversational manuals, and spelling treatises. One strategy of coping with the stunning linguistic diversity consisted of first collecting data on as many languages as possible and then tracing elements that were common to all or to certain groups of languages. Language comparison was not limited to historical and genealogical endeavors, as scholars started also to compare a number of languages in terms of their alleged vices and qualities. Another way of dealing with the flood of linguistic data consisted of focusing on what the different languages had in common, which led to the development of general grammars, of which the 17th-century Port-Royal grammar is the most well-known. During the Enlightenment, the nature of language and its cognitive merits or vices became also a central theme in philosophical debates in which major thinkers were actively engaged.

o. Introduction

In the Early Modern period, the interest taken in language was intense and versatile. This article seeks to outline the amazingly wide array of approaches to language and languages adopted by

both Early Modern scholars and non-scholars. In itself, the Early Modern period is far from homogeneous, spanning at least three centuries and encompassing several broader movements, such as the Renaissance, Humanism, the Protestant (and the resultant Catholic) Reformation, as well as the Enlightenment. For reasons of space, however, the attention paid to developments and progress in linguistic thinking within the Early Modern period will remain limited. In addition, it is a doomed and hopeless task to do justice to the very variegated ongoing present-day research lines in an article of this length. Hence, the emphasis is on recent work conducted at the intersection of linguistics and the cultural history of the Early Modern period, with sufficient attention given to illustrative case studies and methodological issues. Finally, this article will not focus only on themes that belong to the traditional heart of the history of linguistics. The majority of the contributions assigned to the history of Early Modern linguistics in Auroux, Koerner, Niederehe, and Versteegh (2000) reveal how historiographers have predominantly concentrated on influential language teaching materials, with a clear preponderance of grammars, besides Early Modern language philosophy and, to a lesser extent, language comparison. However, recent publications show that the field's scope can be significantly widened.

1. The Widening of the Linguistic Horizon in the Early Modern Period

The curiosity cabinet of the Pietist orphanage in Halle (Saxony-Anhalt), founded by August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) in the late 17th century and preserved in its premodern state, allows present-day visitors to admire a wide range of objects collected throughout the years. One half of the room exhibits entities of a natural—both organic and inorganic—origin, including human embryos, minerals, and an impressive stuffed crocodile. The other half of the museum is devoted to human-made artifacts (Müller-Bahlke, 2013). Next to cupboards displaying garments, reliefs, engravings, medals, everyday objects, and the like, one cabinet (XVI Q) is entirely devoted to writing and language specimens from across the world (Link & Müller-Bahlke, 2003). It is thus striking to see how diversity in languages and writing systems was seen as an integral part of the miraculous diversity of God's creation, which Early Modern curiosity cabinets aimed to capture (Jorink, 2010). K. Pomian felicitously stated that “curiosity has ruled ad interim between the reign of theology and the reign of science” (Pomian, 1987, p. 80 [translation mine], see on the significance of curiosity also Considine, 2017). It would be misleading, however, to think of the Early Modern widening of the linguistic scope solely as the result of scholarly inquisitiveness. Religious and missionary zeal, commercial considerations, and political motives have played a more than significant role too.

In the Early Modern period, language education gradually no longer centered solely on Latin. The linguistic horizon was extended in several respects. First and foremost, statesmen discovered the political power of standardized vernaculars in the typically Early Modern process of state formation (Leezenberg, 2016 even states that this process of grammatization can be regarded as governmentalization). Publishers, on the other hand, developed an interest in the commercial potential. Hence, vernacular languages were detected to be formable and moldable through processes of selection, codification, and standardization. From the 15th century onward, Western European scholars were confronted, within a relatively short time span, with a number of previously hardly known languages. Even before the Fall of Constantinople Greek intellectuals had searched for shelter in Italian cities, especially Venice, bringing with them precious manuscripts of ancient

Greek authors, which found an avid readership in Renaissance Italy (cf. Ciccolella, 2008; Botley, 2010). The 16th century witnessed an exponential increase of interest taken in Hebrew (Kessler-Mesguich, 2013). Besides these “sacred” languages (Greek and Hebrew are the most significant original languages of the Bible), European readers of travelogues were offered tastes of “exotic” languages, such as Nahuatl (consequently designated as *lingua mexicana*) and Farsi, from the New World or from new commercial regions. Finally, a number of “mysterious languages without speakers,” such as Gothic, came to the surface through the discovery of long-hidden manuscripts or epigraphic texts. To complicate matters even further, some reports on exotic languages turned out to be downright hoaxes (Keevak, 2004).

It is interesting to observe the snowballing and cross-fertilizing effects in studying languages during the Early Modern period. On the level of the individual, the mastery of one language could kindle the interest in another. “In order to improve my knowledge of Hebrew,” the Leiden scholar Thomas Erpenius stated in a 1612 letter, “I once started to learn Arabic. And in order to understand Arabic better, I am now learning Turkish” (Hamilton, 1989, p. 581 [translation mine]). Also on a more general level, the study of one language could provide the leverage for exploring another. The humanists’ return to classical Latin made them aware of the significance of Greek, which held a very high status among authoritative Roman writers such as Cicero and Vergil. The humanists’ fascination with classical Latin was sometimes at the expense of their interest in the vernacular languages. But when they discovered how classical authors such as Caesar and Tacitus had glorified the bravery or lucidity of Gaulish and Germanic tribes, certain patriotic feelings were sparked (see, e.g., Krebs, 2011). In addition, the study of Greek and Hebrew has likely helped lubricate the emancipation of the vernacular languages, and the intensive study of Latin and the vernacular languages often went hand in hand (Deneire, 2014).

This Early Modern gradual broadening of the range of languages known is well studied, although a general study is lacking (see, however, Percival, 1992). Two general remarks can be made. First, Western Europe is still the prime center of attention. Through the increased attention for Early Modern descriptions of non-European languages, mainly made by missionaries, in the last three decades or so (Zimmermann, 2004; Zwartjes, 2012), the relative “myopia” for “missionary linguistics” as drawn attention to by Swiggers (1997, p. 150) is gradually remedied. However, the fact remains that these descriptions were made by Europeans. Leezenberg (2016) argues that, outside the realm of European culture, a remarkable number of grammars and didactic works of languages such as Kurdish, Vernacular Greek, and Albanian were produced in the 18th-century Ottoman Empire. This “vernacular revolution” problematizes, in the author’s view, the prevailing opinion that politico-linguistic nationalism was a Romantic movement that originated in Europe and spread from there over the rest of the world during the 19th century (see also Hirschi, 2012 for the significance of language studies in the emergence of proto-nationalism). Second, a number of recent studies also suggest that the clear-cut separation between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period in the field of language studies, as forcefully advocated by humanists active at the dawn of the Renaissance, should be nuanced and refined. Black (2007, p. 52) even describes the grammatical program designed by Italian humanists as “old wine in new bottles” (see also Boulhol, 2014; Luhtala, 2014; Luhtala & Amsler, 2017).

2. Describing Letters, Words, Parts of Speech: Orthography, Lexicography, and Grammar

The widening of the linguistic horizon was, first and foremost, reflected in a steadily increasing production of grammars and dictionaries, along with pocket textbooks and conversational manuals (on which see, e.g., Sumillera, 2013).

There were also many contemporary reflections on pronunciation and orthography. The majority of the languages spoken in Early Modern Europe were written in the Roman alphabet. However, scholars were very well aware that behind this unified alphabet many pronunciation issues were hidden. The versatile scholar Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) stated that it was

a great inconvenience attending the orthography of all modern languages, that the pronunciation doth not correspond with the writing, but that the same letters have different sounds, and the same sounds are often expressed by different letters: some letters also, according to the pronunciation, are superfluous in some words, in others letters are wanting. (Priestley, 1762, pp. 43–44)

In his essay on the origin of languages (1781), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) even stated that, “in order to know English, one has to learn it twice, first for reading and then for speaking” (cf. Haßler & Neis, 2009, p. 1573 [translation mine]). From the earliest stages of Humanism onward, several scholars have championed orthographical systems approaching the ideal of a one-to-one relationship between sounds and letters. The present-day phonologically based orthography of Spanish, for instance, was highly promoted by Elio Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522), Spain’s most significant Renaissance linguist. Alternative systems were based on either etymology or convention (Haßler & Neis, 2009, p. 69). The differing pronunciation of the letters of the Roman alphabet across the European languages led some grammarians and lexicographers, when transliterating non-European languages, to explain which pronunciation had to be realized, for example, the German, Italian, or French pronunciation. Hiob Ludolf (1624–1704), the renowned 17th-century specialist of Amharic (Ethiopian), had announced plans to develop a “universal alphabet,” an extended set of modified Latin letters that would allow scholars to accurately indicate how foreign words are to be pronounced—thus somehow foreshadowing the International Phonetic Alphabet. Despite the persistent interest in this initiative of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), the project ultimately failed to materialize, partly because of the excessively high costs required for printing it (Waterman, 1978, pp. 30, 37, 51–52). The increased significance attached to phonetics during the 18th century led to elaborated structural mappings of human phonemes (see, e.g., Hirschey & Klyve, 2015) and even to the development of a machine that was able to produce human-like speech. An anonymous attendant of the late-18th-century demonstration of this novel instrument reported enthusiastically that

the first thing we heard was: ‘Mama, Papa, à ma chère Mama on m’a fait du mal.’ Thereupon the audience could propose a word, all of which the machine pronounced with the greatest clarity. The double vowels and consonants were realized very purely and correctly. The sound is similar to that of a three-year old child. (cf. Trouvain & Brackhane, 2010, pp. 1–2)

This machine, developed by the versatile inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734–1804), continues to fascinate present-day phoneticians, to the point that in recent years several replicas were built (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Replica of Van Kempelen's machine, built by Fabian Brackhane and Dominik Bauer (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fWYCTkWRoE&t=68s>).

The Early Modern period also witnessed the birth of the dictionary in the format that was so familiar to users up to the start of the 21st century. Having their roots in the medieval tradition of Latin glossography, “vocabulary lists gradually developed into context-independent compilations, laying the foundations for lexicography, monolingual as well as bilingual and multilingual, alphabetic as well as thematic, lexical as well as encyclopedic” (Hartmann & James, 2002, p. 63). For early Renaissance publishers, producing a dictionary was often a significant commercial and prestigious project, with a far-reaching impact on the speakers of a language community, both in terms of standardization and of heritage preservation (Considine, 2008, 2014). Needless to say, the making of dictionaries led to a number of methodological questions and choices (Haßler & Neis, 2009, p. 73). What criteria does a good definition have to meet? Should a dictionary also offer encyclopedic information or not? To what extent are loans, vulgar expressions and proverbs to be included? How can typography contribute to the elegance and “consultability” of a lexicon (see, e.g., Delsaerdt, 2013)?

Traditionally, the historiography of Early Modern linguistics has its primary emphasis on the productions of grammars. In the medieval Western tradition, the *ars grammatica* belonged together with the *ars dialectica* and the *ars rhetorica* to the so-called *trivium* studies (which formed, in combination with the *quadrivium* studies, the so-called *artes liberales*): “Grammar is concerned with the thing as-it-is-symbolized. Logic is concerned with the thing as-it-is-known. Rhetoric is concerned with the thing as-it-is-communicated” (Joseph, 2002, p. 9). It is interesting to see how grammars underwent influence from both neighboring disciplines over time, with varying emphases. In the

Middle Ages, teaching grammar implied teaching Latin through Latin. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was still convinced that vernacular languages, such as his own Tuscan dialect, were “too natural” to be endowed with a rule-based grammar, in sharp contrast with Latin, which was alongside with Greek and Hebrew seen as shaped by art (Law, 2003, pp. 229–232). From the Early Modern period onward, there was increasingly more room for both target languages and meta-languages other than Latin. Missionaries produced a huge amount of Spanish and Portuguese grammars of non-European languages in order to foster the evangelization of indigenous American and Asian peoples (see, e.g., Zwartjes, 2011). Hence, at the end of the 18th century, only a limited number of grammars were still written in Latin. All the same, the very majority was still greatly in line with the ancient Greco-Latin grammatical tradition, which centered on the so-called parts of speech (article, noun, pronoun, adverb, verb, participle, conjunction, interjection). This implies that words were considered to constitute the basic units of a grammar, and that far less significance was attached to the sentence: also the (mostly brief) concluding chapter devoted to syntax that was present in many grammars was often word-based.

Judging by earlier historiographical work, Early Modern grammarians seem to have approached non-European languages in ways that recall how the mythical Procrustes welcomed his guests. The restrictive straitjacket of the Greco-Latin model, so the criticism goes, would have made Early Modern authors insensitive to categories that were present in the target languages but were absent from Greek and Latin, or—even worse still—it would have inspired them to come up with invented categories and forms (such as ablative or conjunctive) so as to neatly respond to all grammatical categories present in Latin, even if these would have no sense whatsoever in the target language. Although a number of scholars and missionaries appear to have fallen into such pitfalls, present-day historiographers tend to rather emphasize the virtues of the Greco-Latin model, that in many cases served as a stable and inspiring reference point in the first place, rather than as a paralyzing straitjacket (Auroux, 1994, pp. 129–130; Klein, 2001, pp. 39–40; Winkler, 2007).

The production and publication of grammars and dictionaries was a massive operation, entailing highly profound and wide-ranging consequences, as most powerfully pointed out by Auroux (1994). This, however, certainly does not imply that all descriptions of all languages were made readily available to the scholarly community and the interested public (Thomas, 2004, p. 84). Some of his letters testify how Josephus Justus Scaliger (1540–1609), for instance, desperately tried to obtain certain linguistic materials (Scaliger, 1627, pp. 203–204, 510). At the end of the Early Modern period, the German language compiler Christian Wilhelm Büttner (1716–1801) struggled with similar problems (on large-scale language compilations, see Haarmann, 2000). The following letter, sent to Büttner in 1785, reveals how some printed dictionaries and grammars were so rare that they had to be manually copied (Weimar, Archivdatenbank des Goethe- und Schiller-Archivs, 105/18):

London 1. April 1785 By Jon Dryander

Sir Joseph Banks, has the two Dictionaries Hofrath Büttner enquires for: Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala, printed at Manila 1754, in small folio, is 843 pages : Bocabulario de Pampango en Romance, y Diccionario de Romance en Pampango, por Diego Bergaño, printed at Manila 1732 in small folio, is 487 pages. This last Dictionary Sir Joseph Banks offers to lend Hofrath Büttner for a year or two, if he will give commission to any body in London to receive it, and send it to them; But the Tagala

dictionary being, as far as I know, the only copy of it in England, Sir Joseph does not think it right to lend it to any body out of England; But if Hof. Büttner can get any body in England to copy it, Sir Joseph will lend it for that purpose.

Nevertheless, the limited availability of many of those printed grammars and dictionaries did not alter the fact that general awareness of the drastic diversity of languages increased over time, if only because the European audience were keen readers of travelogues. Vivien Law notes that “between roughly 1550 and the early years of the 17th century some 140 pictures of the Tower of Babel were printed, bringing home visually the new awareness of linguistic separateness and dispersal” (Law, 2003, p. 262). Broadly speaking, scholars applied two strategies to cope with this “centrifugal” diversity, which was—at least in the eyes of some of them—disturbing and troublesome. On the one hand, attempts were undertaken to map all known languages by assigning them to groups and subgroups, so as to reach, in Sylvain Auroux’s terms, “additive totality” (see section 3). Other researchers developed an active interest in what was common to all these languages, which led them to investigate the reason of language. They were original in that they were interested in the “distributive totality” of languages, namely, “the elements present in every language, rather than in all elements of all languages” (Auroux, 2000, p. 1022) (see section 4). The opposition between universals-centered ‘language’ (Fr. *langage*) on the one hand and specifics-centered ‘languages’ (Fr. *langues*) on the other hand is thematized in a number of recent publications (see Colombat, Fournier, & Puech, 2010; Trabant, 2003 as well as the new Droz book series *De lingua et linguis*).

3. Establishing Linguistic Kinship

One strategy of coping with the stunning linguistic diversity consisted of first collecting data on as many different languages as possible and then tracing elements that were common to all or to certain groups of languages. It should be highlighted that grammarians and lexicographers were in general not involved in such endeavors (Rowe, 1974). Early Modern scholars interested in linguistic kinship were usually active as historians or antiquarians, as they regarded linguistic remains as an invaluable resource for reconstructing the oldest stages of history (Vermeulen, 2015; Vine, 2010). The earliest inquiries into large-scale linguistic kinship were both fostered and hampered by theological motives. The Bible only indirectly suggests that Hebrew was the primeval language of Adam, and the short Genesis chapter outlining the construction of Babel’s Tower—which was believed to elicit the emergence of linguistic diversity—could be and has been explained in multiple ways. In this connection, Lia Formigari (2004, p. 87) argues that

for centuries, Babel was invoked to explain the anthropological mystery of human unity-in-diversity, whether in race, language, religion, or customs. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Babel was more than a rhetorical commonplace or a convenient empirical explicative principle; rather, it was the founding event of secular history, marking the border with sacred history, the event after which the empirical explanation of human happenings becomes legitimate and plausible. (See also Cram, 2013, p. 48.)

At the beginning of the Early Modern period, the Bible thus gave way to a debate on the nature and causes of linguistic diversity. It is safe to state that at the end of the 18th century the literal reading of the Bible prevented many scholars from exploring the hypothesis that language was much older than 5,000 years. Besides the impact of orthodox theology, the majority of the premodern

ethnolinguistic undertakings were also characterized by a certain patriotic bias, which stimulated scholars to proclaim their own native language as the oldest language of the world (see, e.g., Olender, 1989). Nevertheless, the Early Modern cross-linguistic comparisons led, at least from a 21st-century vantage point, to a number of significant breakthroughs (Droixhe, 2007, p. 200; Lindner, 2016, pp. 22–41; Swiggers & Desmet, 1996). One of these breakthroughs is to be situated in Leiden around the 1640s, and is often styled the “Scythian hypothesis.” Launched by Johannes Elichmann (1601/1602–1639), whose *Archaeologia harmonica* failed to materialize due to his untimely death (Van Hal, 2010), the rival professors Claude de Saumaise (1588–1653) and Marcus Zuerius Boxhornius (1612–1653) elaborated on this idea that languages such as Latin, Greek, Persian and Germanic stemmed from one common source, which was called Scythian. Until recently, almost all general introductions to comparative and historical linguistics started their initial chapters on the history of the discipline with the famous quote by William Jones that Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit must have “sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists” (Jones, 1788, p. 423). But because the much earlier Scythian hypothesis also recalls the later notion of reconstructed Proto-Indo-European, one can notice how in a growing number of recent introductions Jones’s quote is no longer the starting point (see, e.g., Beekes, 2011, p. 12; Lass, 2015, pp. 46–47). What is more, Jones has even fallen victim to a number of studies entirely deconstructing his contribution to linguistics (see, e.g., Campbell, 2006; Rietbergen, 2007, p. 140 eqs.). It is certainly true that a number of key principles and methods have been formulated well before the 19th century, as Hoenigswald (1990) has argued. It remains, however, to be investigated to what extent these early formulations have impacted the further development of comparative linguistics. So, for instance, the insight that genealogical comparison calls for searching parallels in grammatical structures (alongside a high matching rate in basic vocabulary) is usually connected with Bopp’s 1816 *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache*. Collinge (1995, p. 30), however, has credited Hiob Ludolf with having expressed this principle for the first time, by naming a law after him—an attribution that is based on the following observation:

In order to say that one language is related to another, it is necessary not only that it have some words in common with the other, but also that the grammatical structure for the greater part be the same, as one finds it in the Oriental languages, the Hebrew, Syrian, Arabic, and Ethiopian. The same holds for the Western languages Italian, Spanish and French, which are rightly said to be related to another. (Translation based on Diderichsen, 1974, p. 283; the original Latin is in Ludolf, 1691, pp. 442–443.)

Despite its very clear wording, Ludolf does not appear to have revisited this principle. And although at least one of his contemporaries considered Ludolf’s observation a principle “that should be written in letters of gold” (Wincklerus, 1750, p. 300 [translation mine]), it is not easy to assess Ludolf’s impact on later scholars. There were, however, later scholars emphasizing the same tenet. Surprisingly unknown among historians of linguistics is Vorrede von der historischen Benutzung der Sprachen by Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727–1799), published in 1770. In it, this pioneering representative of the Universal History School formulated the following rule:

Bey einer Sprache, und so auch bey Vergleichung mehrerer Sprachen hat man auf die beyden wesentlichen Stücke, woraus jede Sprache besteht, zu sehen: auf die Materie, das ist, auf die Wörter,

in so fern sie blos Zeichen der Gedanken sind, und auf die Form, oder auf ihre innerliche Einrichtung, das ist, auf die Art der Flexion, der Ableitung und der Zusammensetzung der Wörter. Die Materie ist in Glossarien und Lexiken enthalten, und die Form in der Grammatik. (Gatterer, 1770, p. 5)

When one is studying a language, and hence also when one is comparing several languages, attention is to be paid to the two essential parts of which each language consists. First, its substance, viz. the words insofar as they are merely signs of thought. Second, the form, or the internal organization, viz. the ways in which words are inflected, derived and composed. The substance is comprised in glossaries and lexicons, and the form in grammar.

Although it is beyond doubt that Gatterer's recommendations, which he elaborated upon in great detail in the remainder of his work, recall Franz Bopp's later way of proceeding, it is not sure to what extent the latter was inspired by the former in any way (influence of Ludolf is even less plausible). Moreover, one must not forget that those 18th-century genealogical models and methodological insights that seem from a 21st-century perspective particularly novel and promising, such as the Scythian hypothesis and grammar-based comparison, occupied among contemporaries only a relatively marginal position. A majority of scholars continued adhering to the idea of Hebrew as the original language of mankind, while underpinning their views exclusively with lexical arguments, whereas others explored alternative and highly original trails, which, however, turned out to be less fruitful from a modern point of view. By the end of the 18th century, there was much awareness of, and hence consensus on, the genealogical or dialectological cohesion of some specific sets of languages, such as the so-called Germanic, Romance, or Semitic ('linguae orientales') language groups, just like the relatedness of the Ancient Greek dialects (Dekker, 1999; Eskhult, 2015; Swiggers, 2005; Van Rooy, 2016). In addition, scholars had become deeply aware of the gradual processes of change each language was bound to undergo (Cram, 2013, p. 47). Finally, there was a growing understanding that loans had to be separated from inherited words, when conducting etymological research.

Language comparison in the premodern period was not limited to historical and genealogical endeavors. From the earliest stages of the Renaissance onward, scholars started comparing a number of languages in terms of their alleged vices and qualities. In most cases, one attempted to demonstrate that one's own language excelled over those of the neighboring countries in terms of euphony, elegance, lightness, transparency, copiousness, or structure (Hüllen, 2001; Lauzon, 2010; van der Wal, 1995). In combination with the many almost unsurmountable difficulties translators had been facing, such comparative undertakings contributed to the wide circulation of the idea that every language had its own character and its untranslatable features, mostly styled as its "génie" (Gambarota, 2011; Schlaps, 2004; Siouffi, 2010). This notion can be related somehow to the highly debated insight that the language one speaks might to some extent determine the way one experiences the world (better known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, formulated at the beginning of the 20th century). An early articulation of this linguistic relativism can be found in *Réflexions philosophiques sur l'origine des langues et la signification des mots* by Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698–1759) (the first edition of which appeared in 1748):

Mais on trouve des Langues, sur tout chés les peuples fort éloignés qui semblent avoir été formées sur des plans d'idées si différents des nôtres, qu'on ne peut presque pas traduire dans nos Langues ce qui a été une fois exprimé dans celles là. Ce seroit de la comparaison de ces Langues avec les autres, qu'un Esprit philosophique pourroit tirer beaucoup d'utilité. (de Maupertuis, 1752, p. 356)

But in particular among very remote peoples, one can find languages that seem to have been formed by relying on ideas so different from ours, so that what was once expressed in those languages can hardly be translated into our languages. A philosophical mind could benefit considerably from comparing these languages with other languages.

4. General Grammar: Port-Royal and Other Initiatives

The publication of a flood of linguistic data elicited a counter reaction of grammarians who “diverted attention from the particulars of specific languages toward renewed reoccupation with universals” (Thomas, 2004, p. 87). Sixteenth-century grammars composed by Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558), Petrus Ramus (1515–1572), and Franciscus Sanctius (1523–1601) to some extent herald the rise of the 17th-century vogue of general grammar, because they developed theories about phenomena such as ellipsis, implying an active interest in the underlying structure of language. In the wake of the path-breaking 1637 *Discours de la méthode* by René Descartes (1596–1650) (in which hardly any attention is given to language), an impressive number of grammars appeared with the word “method” featured prominently in their titles (Swiggers, 1997, pp. 182–184). This was another sign that the center of attention shifted from the particular to the universal.

Published anonymously in 1660, the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* made a groundbreaking contribution to the development of grammatical reflection. Recent research has demonstrated that the share of Claude Lancelot (1615–1695) in writing this book surpassed that of Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) (Colombat, 2014). Both were so-called Jansenists, a new faction within Catholicism for which Augustine's writings were the most significant source of inspiration. Having their “headquarters” in an abbey at Port-Royal (close to Paris), they established a novel educational program with anti-Jesuitical overtones. It is against this backdrop that the emergence of the *Grammaire* and of the accompanying *Nouvelle méthode pour facilement et en peu temps comprendre la langue latine* (1644, ‘New method for easily and quickly grasping the Latin language’), must be seen. Although its organization did not depart very much from the traditional parts-of-speech-centered hierarchy, the Port-Royal grammar attaches more importance to the sentence level and to syntax in general. The work's title evokes the question of to what extent there is a difference between a rational and general grammar. Margaret Thomas makes the following helpful distinction:

A ‘general grammar’ is one that identifies properties common to all languages, in contrast with a ‘particular grammar’, which identifies the distinguishing characteristics of specific languages. A ‘rational grammar’ attributes a key role to the mind, by viewing language in its relationship to thought. Because the properties of thought were taken to be universal, an obvious nexus exists between rational and general grammars. Some grammatical work incorporated that connection, as the title of the *Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée* reveals. But general grammars were not exactly rational grammars, nor vice-versa. (Thomas, 2004, p. 104)

In this respect, it might come as a surprise that the Port-Royal grammar so clearly concentrates on French, despite the presence of some cross-linguistic comparisons. Thomas (2004, p. 107) argues that

the authors “projected their version of universal grammar from the features of a particular language they knew well. But by the mid-17th century, it was the grammarians’ vernacular French that controlled their perspective of the shared properties of language, not Latin.” The Port-Royal method owes its present-day celebrity largely to Noam Chomsky’s influential Cartesian Linguistics, in which a number of forerunners to Chomsky’s theories of the “innateness” and the deep structure of language were traced. Although its author was very well aware of the possible flaws of his essay (Chomsky, 1966, p. 73), the book was severely criticized. At the same time, the publication engendered a significant impetus to the study of ideas on language predating the 19th century, although not among generativists.

Despite the focus on the Port-Royal tradition of general grammar among historiographers of linguistics, there have been many scholars from other traditions who have been working on syntactic problems and on the nature of language in general (Kaltz, 1996; Weiss, 1992). Rinas (2014) is right in highlighting the fruitfulness of a future collaborative research project tracing how word-centered approaches gradually shifted to sentence-centered ones throughout the Early Modern period. The nature of language was, however, not only of interest to grammar-makers, but became also, as will be explained in section 5, a highly debated topic among 17th-century philosophers.

5. The Uniqueness of Language and Its Connection With Both World and Mind

Are only humans capable of producing and processing language? Does language play a role in acquiring knowledge, and if so, is this a positive or a negative role? During the Enlightenment, the nature of language and its cognitive merits or vices became a central theme in philosophical debates in which major thinkers such as Leibniz, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), and Adam Smith (1723–1790) were actively engaged.

In these discussions, the difference between the rationalist and the empiricist philosophical strands, which was in most cases scalar rather binary, is of special significance. The prominence of language in the rationalist tradition should be understood against the backdrop of the age-old dichotomy between the immaterial soul and the material body, which could be applied to thought and linguistic sign, respectively. Although positing that humans basically think without relying on language, rationalist thinkers do acknowledge that verbal communication could nevertheless lead to confusion in the process of thinking (Haßler & Neis, 2009, pp. 18–19). The negative effects of language on knowledge acquisition would become a major philosophical issue in the primarily English empiricist tradition. John Locke’s epistemological *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1690), the third book of which was entirely devoted to language (“Of Words”), ranks as one of the most influential language philosophical landmarks in history. Locke’s empiricist stance can be inferred from his finding that the mind initially resembles a “white paper, void of all characters” (Locke, 1690, p. 37)—this is the idea of *tabula rasa* or “blank slate.” Much to his own surprise (earlier drafts of his *Essay* do not pay much attention to language), Locke comes to the conclusion that language tends to play an important role in acquiring knowledge, although both human deliberate abuse of language and the imperfections inherent in language bring about unwelcome confusion (Losonsky, 2006, pp. 1–21). Inspired by Locke, Etienne Bonnot, the Abbé of Condillac (1715–1780) recognized that languages could impact negatively on thinking, but argued that people should attach importance to

a proper use of language, which would minimize these negative effects (Haßler & Neis, 2009, pp. 24–25).

In these debates, the complex notion of linguistic arbitrariness, a concept harking back to Plato's dialogue entitled *Cratylus*, was of prime importance (see Demonet, 1992 for a very detailed survey of ideas on the arbitrariness of signs during the 16th century). Recently, Avi Lifschitz has argued that the idea of the arbitrariness of the sign underwent a major shift between the early and the later Enlightenment (Lifschitz, 2012a). Locke was still convinced that humans enjoyed a basically unconstrained freedom to impose names on things, but later empiricist scholars like Condillac acknowledged, in line with Leibniz's critique on Locke (the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, authored about 1705 but published posthumously in 1765), that complete arbitrariness was untenable. As a motor behind this shift, Lifschitz sees the increasing impact of ideas expressed by the ancient philosopher Epicurus.

After 16th- through 17th-century humanists had advanced several theories on the origins and development of language(s) (Nauta, 2015, pp. 327–330), 18th-century scholars even became obsessed with the birth of speech as a typically human faculty (Auroux, 2013). The speculative character of many of these discussions finally gave way to the 1866 prohibition, imposed by the Linguistic Society of Paris, of further discussing this subject. The uniqueness of human language was at times attacked by Early Modern thinkers. It is well-known how Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) claimed that the communication possibilities of animals were basically comparable to those of humans. Early Modern scholars were also fascinated with the question of to what extent deaf people could make use of language, and what kind of language the devil and angels employed. Cram and Maat (2017) focus on a notebook that casts new light on a famous 17th-century discussion between John Wallis (1616–1703) and William Holder (1616–1698) as to the best method of teaching language to the deaf. Another method designed for deaf-mute students, developed by Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard (1742–1822) in the aftermath of the French Revolution, aimed at “offering the basics of a sort of universal logical-grammatical calculus” (Raby, 2011, p. 283 [translation mine]), which thus reveals how projects tailored to the needs of deaf people could interlock with artificial language outlines. Not only in the Middle Ages, but also in the Early Modern period have scholars widely discussed the nature of the speech of angels (*locutio angelica*) and the devil (Röling, 2008; Wakulenko, 2013). As distant from present-day linguistics as such mystical topics may seem, historiographers have pointed out their significant philosophical implications, and Bernd Röling has even shown how theories on the angels' speech recall the 20th-century notion of speech-act.

Given that a number of prominent authors went so far as to see the existence of divergent human languages as the prime motor behind political turmoil and upheaval, many a scholar attempted to design new and artificial languages from the 17th century onward. Not only would such systems try to fill the lacuna left by the decreasing knowledge of Latin as the *de facto* universal language, but they would also allow men to have more transparent philosophical and political discussions by reducing the communicative “noise” that was inherent in the use of natural languages (see, e.g., Lewis, 2007; Maat, 2004). Although the majority of the many ambitious projects that aimed at designing universal language schemes failed to materialize—partly through the diffusion of Locke's

ideas on the unfeasibility of establishing a stable conceptual apparatus—they have impacted other taxonomy-based branches of learning (Formigari, 2004, p. 94).

6. Outlook: Language Study as a Research Area in Its Own Right, Past and Present

This survey has shown how the versatility of Early Modern language studies might remind us of the broad array of activities 21st-century linguists are involved in. Many orientations and specializations that are nowadays for the most part associated with institutionalized academic linguistics have their roots in periods predating the 19th century. What was, however, lacking in the Early Modern period, was the institutional infrastructure bringing all language-related research strands together. It is important to underline that before the 19th century, linguistics was not taught as an independent subject at universities, nor did scholars contributing to language-related learning tend to see themselves as linguists. They were primarily active as, to mention only some examples, pedagogues, philosophers, natural scientists, or historians. Although the boundaries between the several disciplines were at that time not very strict (scholars were often active in several fields), for a 17th-century scholar, it was far from obvious how to acquire a general overview of the evolving views on language and languages. Especially from the 18th century onward, however, a more systematic approach to language-related scholarship could be adopted through the gradual emergence of specialized bibliographies, academic dissertations and encyclopedic entries that covered evolutions in general linguistics *ante litteram* (Van Hal, 2012). It should also be borne in mind that, before the 19th century, the majority of significant and influential books on language and languages were written by “freelancers,” who did not occupy any chair at a university at all. The beginnings of the Renaissance and Humanism movement can even be understood as the outsiders’ reaction against the scholastic rigidity that was paralyzing the late medieval universities. In the 18th century, thus at the other end of the period under review, academies were the prime centers of intellectual activity (Lifschitz, 2012b). Only from the 19th century onward, would universities stage a strong recovery as foci of innovation and inventions, and the institutionalization of (historical-comparative) linguistics was one of the major breakthroughs (Morpurgo Davies, 1998).

It comes as no surprise that present-day linguists take for granted that their discipline deserves to be an independent academic discipline. As most historiographers of linguistics are linguists by training, they tend to study their field’s history, including its premodern stages, through a 19th-century lens that acknowledges the inherent unity of linguistics. Especially when studying the history of premodern linguistics, some pitfalls are to be avoided. Examining the earliest stages of, for example, linguistic comparativism and typology, is rewarding only if such research goes beyond a mere “hunt for forerunners.” Kelly (2015, p. 1227) is right in positing that “the false premises and failed theories that litter Europe’s fitful progress in Oriental studies reveal as much about the intellectual milieu that engendered them as the correct discoveries.” Hence, it is crucial to assess Early Modern realizations and theories according to the standards of their own day as well as in their own scholarly context. Therefore, a historiographer of, for example, pre-19th-century lexicography has to ask himself whether the early modern scholars under investigation would have been willing to see their research as part of this specific branch of learning or not (cf. Considine, 2016).

It is precisely against this background that increasingly more attention is paid to lesser-known names and unprinted texts. Although it is only natural that 20th-century investigations into the

almost unexplored history of Early Modern linguistic thought have mainly focused on intellectual and influential “highlights” such as Antonio de Nebrija, Julius Caesar Scaliger, and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (see Tavoni et al., 2009), such an approach entails the danger of what has sometimes been styled as “Höhenkammhistoriographie” (Schlieben-Lange, 1984, p. 20). In line with trends in cultural history in general, historians of linguistics have started attaching increasingly more significance to writings that are representative of the contemporary scholarly zeitgeist rather than exceptionally novel. This new strand of research can be exemplified by quoting the following insightful and witty project announcement by Asaph Ben-Tov:

Johann Ernst Gerhard the Elder (1621–1668) is not a household name. Like most scholars (present reader excluded) his work aged rapidly and was of limited interest to the next generation—and of none to the following. Gerhard’s life and work as an orientalist are nonetheless instructive. At the end of the 17th century the Duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg purchased the Gerhardina collection, incorporating the library and manuscript nachlass, of Gerhard’s father, the prominent Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), as well as Johann Ernst Gerhard’s papers. This massive collection includes Johann Ernst Gerhard’s library, heavily annotated dissertations and disputations, lecture notes, travel diaries, and his extensive correspondence. All these allow us an unusually close look at a 17th-century scholar at work as well as shedding light on the intellectual and social contexts within which his scholarship evolved. In a sense Johann Ernst Gerhard is an ideal “minor thinker”—typical enough of his day to be instructive, yet intelligent enough to be interesting. (Ben-Tov, n.d.)

The emphasis is thus on all learned practices, irrespective of their—seen from our present-day perspective—novel contents (see also Schlieben-Lange, 1984). In line with this, Gerda Haßler and Cordula Neis have convincingly argued that the answers to language-related prize questions, a typically 18th-century phenomenon (Berg, 2010), can cast highly interesting light on the development of linguistic concepts (Hassler, 2000; Neis, 2003), especially if not only the prize-winning essays are taken into account. A similar awareness of the importance of studying practices, going beyond the mere study of printed textbooks, manuals, and grammars, was recently fostered in the field of the history of language teaching and learning (cf. McLelland & Smith, 2014, p. 4; see, e.g., van der Wal & Rutten, 2013 on the practice of letter writing).

The lack of a language-centered discipline in the premodern period and the multitude of underexplored Early Modern writings evoke the question of to what extent Early Modern scholars regarded the study of language and languages as a branch of learning in its own right. In the middle of the 17th century, Brian Walton (1600–1661) formulated the following straightforward answer:

languages are just peels, yet cognition itself of things is the kernel. We do not learn languages as an aim in itself, but for something else. Whoever sticks to languages resembles a man halting in the arcades of a house, without entering it and without seeing its interior. (Walton, 1673, p. 218 [translation mine])

It was commonplace to mention the danger that scholars specializing in languages failed to distinguish means from ends to the point that they were doomed never to surpass the threshold leading to “real” knowledge (Kivistö, 2014, pp. 173–180). In contrast, the statement that “there are many elements in the erudite languages that authorize us to acquire a knowledge of them not only

to the benefit of other disciplines, but also for their own merits and in their own right” (Strunzius & Strunzius, 1707, para. 10 [translation mine]) seems to have represented the view of a minority only. Admittedly, there have been even more powerful claims pleading for studying languages in their own right: Trabant (2003, pp. 178–195) singles out some passages from the *Nouveaux Essais* in which Leibniz attaches utmost significance to the investigation of the languages of the world for their own sake. Elsewhere, Leibniz proposes, however, a much more instrumentalist approach to language studies. The merely ancillary position of language studies is even still defended by the man who is, as we have seen, in many textbooks styled as the founder of modern linguistics. In a 1784 letter, William Jones stated that he had always regarded “languages as the mere instruments of real learning” and that it would be improper to confound them “with learning itself” (quoted after Raj, 2007, p. 122).

Despite the primarily ancillary position of language-related studies in the Early Modern period and notwithstanding the at times disturbing belittling of Early Modern realizations in earlier general surveys of the history of linguistic thought (Harris & Taylor, 1989, p. viii; Waterman, 1963, pp. 11–17), it seems safe to state that the prolific language-related activity throughout the Early Modern period was much more than a weak foretaste of the breakthroughs attained in the 19th and 20th centuries. Auroux (1994) is probably right, when positing that, without the 15th- through 18th-century achievements in language description, present-day linguistics would have been simply unthinkable. There is, in any case, much more work to be done. By lack of a contemporary discipline centered on linguistics, historiographers of Early Modern linguistics have always focused on texts written in a wide array of disciplinary fields, such as history, philology, philosophy, and theology. This interdisciplinary approach to the study of Early Modern views on language(s) fits very well in the recent trend of studying the history of language-related thought in close interconnection with other branches of the humanities (Bod, 2013). And, finally, the increasing electronic availability and searchability of primary sources will enable researchers to study the persistence, circulation, and modification of certain linguistic themes, models, and concepts throughout, and beyond, the Early Modern period by relying on other kinds of information than explicit textual allusions (Bamman & Smith, 2012; for an example showing how typography can help detect lines of influence, see Östlund, 2010).

Acknowledgments

I am happy to acknowledge the detailed suggestions made by two anonymous reviewers, one of whom prevented me from making some disturbing misrepresentations. Special thanks are due to Andy Peetermans, a very critical reader of an early draft of this paper. I am also grateful to Doyle Calhoun, Anna Pytlowany, Zanna Van Loon, and Raf Van Rooy for their comments.

Further Reading

The most comprehensive book surveying Early Modern views on languages, with an emphasis on the emergence and development of linguistic concepts in the 17th and 18th centuries, is Haßler and Neis (2009). Both Lepschy (1998) and Burke (2004) are very accessible and wide-ranging introductions to the topic. Whereas the former is written by linguists specialized in the history of their discipline, the latter is composed by an authority in the cultural history of the Early Modern

period in general. In these books one finds more references to the extensive 20th-century literature. A digitized and searchable selection of 33 primary sources predating the 19th century can be found on the website *Corpus de textes linguistiques fondamentaux* (Colombat, n.d.). For a digital edition of Early Modern grammars, see Kärnä and Luhtala (2013–2018). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the majority of printed source-texts can be downloaded from sites such as Google, Hathitrust, Internet Archive, and Gallica, whose OCR possibilities are gradually improving. Tavoni et al. (2009) is a bibliographic repertory of secondary literature, which, however, does not include 21st-century studies. A very detailed bio-bibliographical repertory of 18th-century language scholars active in Germany has been composed by Brekle et al. (1992–2005). Although going beyond the Early Modern period, the following recent books contain general and original chapters covering Renaissance and/or Enlightenment linguistics. Colombat, Fournier, and Puech (2010) answer 50 key questions related to the history of linguistics, a large number of which concentrate on the Early Modern period. One chapter of Law (2003) offers a very accessible introduction to 16th-century linguistics. Formigari (2004) deals with the history of language philosophies in a very broad sense. Trabandt (2003) focuses on the tension between linguistic unity (“Adam”) and plurality (“Mithridates”) throughout history. From a different perspective and with a clear emphasis on grammaticography, Thomas (2004) sketches how the historical pendulum oscillated between periods focusing on the universal characteristics of language and periods having more affinity with their specifics.

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