

## 1. Language embodied

As is well known, ‘embodiment’ is all but a unitary concept. Tom Ziemke for instance distinguishes no less than six different and not always compatible notions of the term (Ziemke 2003, p.1305ff). When it comes to embodied accounts of language, the field is equally heterogeneous. What distinguishes them in general is perhaps best determined by what they all reject, namely the unfortunate conceptual coupling of the rise of language with the vanishing of the body, be it the body of the speakers or of language itself. In particular, they object to classical cognitive and computational approaches and decidedly distance themselves from positions primarily focusing on a kind of aseptic linguistic competence, most prominently represented by Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker. In these theorists view, the so-called faculty of language in a narrow sense (cf. Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch 2002) is referred to as an internal or I-language, while what we are used to calling language is disqualified as an external or E-language and excluded from the field of linguistics. For embodiment theorists though, the assumption of an independent I-language, above all one that is supposed to be located in a competent mind alone, is tremendously misleading: language is realized only in performance, i.e. in speech, and speech involves speakers of flesh and blood that are situated in specific cultural settings.

However, embodiment theories of language tend to fall short in analyzing the tension between the formation of (and adaptation to) a linguistic community and linguistic creativity and individuation. While Jordan Zlatev (2007, p. 297f) justifiably criticizes that in embodied accounts the role of linguistic convention goes largely unheeded, one could also go one step further and inquire into the processes in which these conventions are both established and challenged. What is at stake here are the dimensions of linguistic experience – an experience that is characterized by the entwinement of activity and passivity, of dissociation and integration.

Moreover, a common bodily basis of our symbolic articulation is often taken for granted as if it were a natural feature, neglecting the fact that also the body itself is semiotically structured. And while there is broad agreement that the human body and human sensory perception in terms of anthropological universals prestructure our linguistic actions, it is worthwhile to sharpen the question by exploring in what kind of body in particular language is thought to be grounded at any one time. In how many ways linguistic experience and its bodily basis can be conceptualized emerges most clearly – and most adventurously – in debates about the origins of language. The genealogical steps that led from ordinary to linguistic actions still remain strikingly obscure, yet this surely is nothing for which philosophers and scientists are to blame. From the very beginning, discussions on how man might have become a talking being have always been a highly speculative enterprise, the



## The Body of Language in Interaction

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advanced theories often bearing the characteristics of a narrative, and maybe even necessarily so. As Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote in his essay *On the Comparative Study of Language*, “no language has been discovered in the state of flux from which its forms are just emerging” (Humboldt 1820, p. 2). And so it is no wonder that even though empirical research over the last two centuries enabled remarkable progress in the study of language acquisition, theories on the origins of language are to this day occasionally marked by a kind of fairytale flavor – and often reveal more about the presuppositions and anthropological convictions of their advocates than about the origins of language per se.

In order to carve out the interrelations of body and language, it is helpful to expand and animate the landscape of embodied accounts of language by looking back at how these accounts themselves were embodied when they first appeared – a moment to be located mainly in the 18th century, when speculations on the origins of language assumed a continuous and almost ubiquitous character. These considerations did not focus on language alone, but were mostly embedded in a larger anthropological context. Among the issues addressed were the role of sensibility and rationality in the cognitive process, the existence of innate ideas and the question in how far thought depends on experience, but also man’s creativity on the one side and his dependence on divine mercy as well as the determinedness of action in general on the other. In the following, I will pick out just two voices from this line of thought, those of Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder. Both of them particularly fathomed the dynamics between activity and passivity in the process of language evolution. But they did so starting out from different conceptions of human corporeality and sensitivity, shedding likewise different light on what one could call the anthropomorphic disclosure of the world. And last but not least, their tales

about the very origins of language are among the most poetic and compelling ones to exist.

## 2. Vico: Bringing forth the world in signifying actions

Vico was one of the first thinkers who attempted to examine in detail to which extent language and the bodies of its speakers affect human cognition. Of course, to dwell on the origins of language in 18th century catholic Naples was a delicate task. How man received the gift of language could (and at that time should) be read in the Bible and the vigilance of censorship was not to be underestimated. Vico managed to investigate human language acquisition – without doubting its divine origin – by way of narrative artifice, inventing a subchapter to the Holy text. As he expounds in his *New Science*, after the universal flood some of Noah's sons became lost in the woods and ended up in isolation. Forfeiting more and more of their human traits over time, they eventually sunk into a state of bestiality and had to become human again by their own efforts. The subsequent (re)formation of societies went hand in hand with the creation of language and was characterized by a continuous struggle for dominance, be it over terrain, clan members or the interpretation of signs. According to Vico, the first man-made language consisted of gestures, actions and bodies and was thus corporeal in more than one respect, comprising

a) Something physical in the world, chiefly threatening natural phenomena, to which people pointed or that were onomatopoetically mimicked in passionate cries, such as thunder and lightning.

b) Objects that were employed as signs to metaphorically indicate more abstract concepts, as for example the holding up of three ears of grain to refer to having harvested three times, which meant “three years” (*SN* 44, 732)<sup>1</sup>.

c) The human body itself that served as an interpretational key to a multitude of phenomena, as in “[...] head for top or beginning; the brow and shoulders of a hill [...]; the tooth of a plow, a rake, a saw, a comb; the beard of a wheat; the tongue of a shoe; the mouth of a river [...]; foot for end or bottom; the flesh of fruits; a vein of rock or mineral” (*SN* 44, 405).

Both physical objects and the human body were used to indicate either ideas or other, more distant objects by way of extrapolating specific traits of the former and applying them to otherwise incomprehensible things and notions<sup>2</sup>. These bodily metaphors were by no means marginal or ornamental. They were what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call orientational metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, p. 14ff).

What mattered even more for Vico than the metaphorical transfer of mere body parts, though, was a context of actions, motivated by needs and passions that were projected onto the world by animating it. The first humans, according to Vico, believed to live in the midst of

entities that were in a certain sense just like themselves: “Heaven or the sea smiles, the wind whistles, the waves murmur; a body groans under a great weight. [...] and our rustics speak of plants making love, vines going mad, resinous trees weeping” (*SN* 44, 405).

But above all, they felt exposed to living forces and surrounded by gods whose actions were explicitly *directed* towards humanity. The first signs were a kind of divine imperative, and the first answers consisted in acting accordingly. To talk with the body was not limited to gesticulation, but meant to partake in a communicative situation that was all about giving orders and obeying – and in which articulation aimed at practical orientation, not at theoretical knowledge. The imagined gods were more like a way of living than an object of reflection. Thus, whether men were vocalizing, gesturing or acting, they gained a symbolical distance to the world together with increasing control over threatening natural phenomena and physical objects (and, by imposing certain ways of “reading” them on others, also over some of their fellow men). At the same time, however, the signs they used were themselves corporeal. Moreover, they turn out to be very eloquent, revealing the body- and action-based frameworks in which the world was conceived – frameworks that were rather symptomatically present than consciously chosen:

“Man in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe [...], he has made of himself an entire world. So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (homo intelligendo fit omnia), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by *not* understanding them (homo non intelligendo fit omnia)” (*SN* 44, 405).

In other words, by ostensibly imitating what confronted them, Vicos *poeti*, the creators of the civil world, are actually constructing it. Travelling backwards along the way of construction, we can *reconstruct* the pre-reflective underpinnings of our own symbolic articulations, which can be read in two ways: While their symbolic or propositional side represents the shared world views people agree upon, their symptomatic or expressive side presents the imaginative requisites that are grounded in the ways we are bodily and interactionally structured. The active forces, initially perceived as being “out there”, and the allegedly passive effort to decipher what they want to communicate can be identified as two different principles within ourselves.

## 3. Herder: listening to the world

Herder delineates the gradual disclosure of the world mainly with regard to early infantile development. Influenced by the Lucretian theory of the *impetus*, in the fourth part of his *Critical Forests* he explicates how the child, resting in itself, is struck by a first disturbance from the outside which after a few repetitions leads to a first distinction, namely the one between “me” and “not me”. The initial stimulus, to be followed by others,

is attributed to something active in the child's surroundings and becomes identifiable in the course of repetitive occurrences – until at length more and more stable objects and events can be singled out by way of comparison and distinction. Only later on does the child begin to tell apart not only various exterior but also his own interior states, slowly acquiring an awareness of time. What stands at the end of this process is the discovery that the different perceptions it experienced as something imposed from the outside were the fruits of its own distinctive acts. As in Vico's theory of the evolution of mankind (which he largely devised on the basis of ontogenetic developmental phases that he mapped onto phylogenetic ones), for Herder, the maturation of infantile consciousness eventually leads to the child's insight into its own active part in perception.

In clear contrast to Vico, however, the condition of man at the very beginning of his formation is all but a brutish one. This becomes most notably evident in Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, the essay he wrote for a Berlin Academy contest that raised the issue of whether human beings, abandoned to their natural faculties, could invent language by themselves – and if so, by which means. In the central passage of his award-winning answer to this quite suggestive question, Herder sketches out a situation that resembles the one with the infant mentioned above: man, exposed to a uniform plenitude of sensations, encounters a lamb that is white, soft, woolly – and bleating. And as in the case of the child, this event has to take place repeatedly in order to be identified. As the lamb passes by again, the human soul, groping for a sign of recognition, grasps a property that it perceives through the most passive of the senses, the ear – and famously names it: "Aha! You are the bleating one!" (Herder 1772, p. 88). What is crucial in this scene is that the first linguistic action is neither a gesture to be carried out with the whole body nor a fervid cry, but a verbal expression that is human to the core. For Herder, being human and disposing of language are inextricably linked: man is a human being insofar as he speaks, and he speaks insofar as he is human. Although men and animals share certain traits of communicative behavior, such as voicing their joys and sufferings and reacting to each other's utterances, this is not where language originates. Rather than in expressive vocal gestures, its basis has to be sought in the specifically human faculty of awareness [*Besonnenheit*] – a faculty that both allows and propels us to become acquainted with the world instead of merely perceiving and confronting it driven by passions and physical needs. Thus, the lamb appears to man "Not as to the hungry, scenting wolf!, not as to the blood-licking lion [...]. Not as to the aroused ram, which feels the [she-]lamb only as the object of its pleasure" but is recognized "in a human way" (Herder 1772, p. 88). Awareness, however, is not just an additional property, some supplementary attribute that stands above our sensual capabilities, but

a fundamentally different manner in which the senses are organized. Since the first human word is occasioned by the willingness to learn, and since getting to know the world cannot be accomplished but through language, language and thought are not only interdependent; they are one and the same. And despite the fact that the primary function of language is cognitive, cognition depends on the possibility of dialogical interaction with others – an interaction that, unlike Vico's fear banishing rituals and forcible acts of self-assertion, is fundamentally based on acknowledgement. This implies that what is conferred to the world and concurrently used for its understanding is not human body parts and passions, but indeed the interweavement itself of acting and suffering the actions of others – not by chance is the first thing in the world that actively gives rise to the first perception a meek indulgent lamb.

#### 4. Understanding interaction

While Vico unfolds the developmental stages from brutish exigencies to human deliberateness and from bodily metaphors to abstraction, in Herder's evolutionary scenario, man even as a speechless creature is human right from the start. Thus, to say that language and thought are one and the same is to say that in the first case we are initially dealing with barbarian thinking that involves boisterous gestures and vocalizations, whereas in the second case we are always already in the midst of an ongoing process of conscious self-creation and self-education. Here the first word, although pervaded with sensuousness, is a "word of the soul" (Herder 1772, p. 88). And while for Vico reflection is wrested from fear and fervor, for Herder it is as natural to human beings as weaving nets is natural to spiders.

Despite these and other discrepancies, though, both approaches elaborate that

– Body and language are interrelated also in the sense that what counts as "body" or "language" can be determined in various respects and on various levels. "Body" can e.g. refer to something distinguishable in the world as well as to a body- or action-based manner of signifying something that can be retrospectively "read out" (like defining years according to agriculture or perceiving a lamb on the basis of its bleating) – and it can also refer to language itself (for example when we speak about a linguistic *corpus*, comprising assonances, connotations etc.).

– "Body" not only applies to our biological bodies, but also to the fact that we are social beings who are moved and moving in social contexts, and also societies themselves do have a corporeal side. Moreover, who is talking to whom (and why) cannot be disregarded or only tacitly assumed when describing the entwining of cognition and communication, be it in an evolutionary or systematic setting.

– To be grounded in bodily activity means that both action and cognition are motivated by experiencing

and producing distinctions all along the way, be it in the form of violent antagonisms or reflective positing. Instead of primarily tracing the universal bodily prerequisites of mutual understanding, the strength of Vico and Herder's argument lies in their methodical pursuit of what continuously generates and challenges linguistic convention. To pinpoint the interactive emergence and disintegration of common concepts and a common language means to at least approximate the mystery of the origins of language as "actions, and still nothing that acts there" (Herder 1772, p. 100), and thus it reassures us of our ability to act and suffer in general. More than being just an intermediate step on the way to shared world views, symbol grounding in this sense must be understood as an end in itself.

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- 1 Vico's *New Science* of 1744 (= *SN 44*) is quoted according to Nicolini's numbering of paraparagraphs and can therefore be looked up in any edition.
- 2 Cf. *SN 44*, 122: "It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand."

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