Kroupa, Gregor. "Leibniz's Linguistic Realism." *New Realism and Contemporary Philosophy*. Ed. Gregor Kroupa and Jure Simoniti. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 19–40. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350101791.ch-002>>.

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Leibniz's Linguistic Realism¹

Gregor Kroupa

In the opening chapter of his exceptionally influential book *After Finitude*,² Quentin Meillassoux gives us his now well-known diagnosis of what has come to be understood—at least in contemporary realist circles—as the main trait of the majority of post-Kantian philosophy: so-called correlationism, that is, the view that being cannot be known in itself, but only as a correlate of the thinking subject. Meillassoux offers a compact and lucid reading of this idea, which has been as conceptually all-encompassing, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, as it has become widespread. His view consists in the interpretation that philosophy since Kant has rejected the possibility of a transparent cognitive relation to reality as dogmatic metaphysics and embraced the reflection of correlation as the only kind of knowledge that avoided such traps of early modern *naïveté*. One of the implications of identifying Kant as the progenitor of correlationism is that the history of philosophy turns out to be divided according to the lines of its approaches to reality: on the one side, pre-critical naïve realism, instantiated particularly by early modern rationalism in which the philosophy of substance dominates, and on the other, post-Kantian transcendental philosophy, which was given a new impetus by Husserl and his followers. In the twentieth century, the correlationist approach then took many new forms, according to which reality and truth were always already given to us as colored by particular transcendental spheres, each with their own *a priori* (power, discourse, economic relations, gender, etc.), yet the two chief “media” of correlation remained *consciousness* and *language*, developed by advocates of phenomenology and analytic philosophy, respectively.³

In the present chapter, I shall discuss the connection between the two correlations in the context of the history of European philosophy. While it is true that the so-called linguistic turn is commonly associated with developments in Anglophone philosophy (as embodied, for example, in the famous collection that Richard Rorty prepared in 1967⁴) in which the philosophy of language acquired the status of “first philosophy,” I am certainly not the first to point out that a similar turn towards language had also happened on the European continent much earlier. This fact has been little discussed in realist circles, as the debate has focused largely on both challenging and transforming transcendentalism and the ensuing promise of a new ontology. Therefore, I would first like to present a basic differentiation between “realist” and “antirealist” approaches to language in the history of modern philosophy, which relies heavily on the way

epistemological issues are handled. I will then try to situate Leibniz's linguistic thought in this context in order to show that his strategy for avoiding the danger of relativism and keeping a strong realist position in his epistemology and semiotics is only possible through a version of strong Platonist idealism, which, in his view, saves our direct access to truth and reality from the hopeless subjectiveness of ideas. In order to facilitate the mind in its contact with things themselves, Leibniz then outlines his idea of a *real* or *universal characteristic* in which signs or words become the aid of knowledge, rather than an obstacle to it, or a mere external tool of communication.

I Linguistic realism and determinism

Some historians of the philosophy of language have suggested a division that is perhaps less clear-cut, but still in a way analogous to the split between realist dogmatic metaphysics and antirealist transcendental philosophy.⁵ This division, however, does not run along the same lines, as the major turning point here is not Kant, but some of his critics and contemporaries.

According to this interpretation, the German philosophy of language culminating in Wilhelm von Humboldt's so-called "principle of linguistic relativity" is contrasted with its "naïve" predecessor, namely a certain assumption that words find their meanings in independently formed ideas, rather than in linguistic use. The latter view was widely held in the seventeenth-century tradition of universal grammar, as represented by the Port-Royal *Grammar* and *Logic*, and also in the rare but revealing passages about language in Descartes's writings, but particularly in Book III of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. According to this doctrine, articulated sounds are arbitrary signs of pre-linguistic thoughts, and human beings have the capacity of language because they are endowed with reason (Descartes, Port-Royal) or a certain species-specific semiotic capability (Locke). The belief that language is conditioned by human consciousness was sufficient to imply that it is something external to mental contents and processes, that it is merely instrumental to them and has no constitutive role in them.⁶ That is not to say that language was deemed unproblematic and could not influence thought. Locke, especially, made a long analysis of the perils of communication, which, according to him, often leads the mind into error for reasons ranging from the inherent "imperfection of words" to deliberate "abuse of words" giving rise to "*learned Gibberish*" of Scholasticism.⁷ But the challenges that language imposed on thought did not follow from some intrinsic linguistic nature of our ideas in virtue of which language would constitute the unsurpassable horizon of our minds; rather, the reasons for the so-called *cheat of words* lay in an improper understanding of the mechanism of signification. Thus, since the mental and linguistic domains were understood to be essentially separate, and true statements consisted in their correct connections, problems with language were deemed manageable if only the speakers stated clearly the meanings of their words, that is, if they specified the precise collections of simple ideas they associated with particular verbal sounds.

In the eighteenth century, this view of the mind's principal autonomy from language was progressively abandoned, to the point where historians speak of a genuine

"linguistic turn," which had been completed by the time of Humboldt's *The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (first published posthumously in 1836). Exactly who originated the new approach is somewhat debated, however, as are the lines of influence between its main figures. Christina Lafont,⁸ for example, has stressed the importance of Johann Georg Hamann's *Metakritik* (1784) of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in which Hamann pointed out "the genealogical priority of language" over the faculty of thought and argued that "the entire faculty of thought [is] founded on language."⁹ Michael Forster has recently argued, however, that it was actually Herder who had influenced Hamann, and that the crucial points of Humboldt's philosophy of language were all put forward by Herder.¹⁰ On the other hand, Hans Aarsleff emphasized in the late 1970s the influence of the then-neglected philosophy of Condillac and the circle of *Idéologues* on both Herder's and Humboldt's linguistic theories, and he downplayed the importance of a direct influence of Herder on Humboldt.¹¹ Scholarly differences aside, all these historical accounts nevertheless agree that a paradigm shift in the way the relationship between language and thought was understood had been completed in German hermeneutic philosophy, a shift that was perhaps as radical as the one separating early modern realist metaphysics from transcendental philosophy.

Forster nicely summarizes the traits of this new linguistic philosophy when he lists the four views that Humboldt shared with Herder:

1. "that thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by language";
2. "that concepts or meanings are constituted—not by referents, Platonic forms, mental 'ideas,' or whatnot, but—by word-usages";
3. "that mankind exhibits deep linguistic and conceptual-intellectual diversities, especially between historical periods and cultures," and consequently;
4. that "the investigation of the varying characters of people's modes of thought and conceptualization should primarily take the form of an investigation of the varying characters of their languages."¹²

This new take on the relationship between thought and language has sometimes been labeled "linguistic idealism"¹³ (a term I shall refrain from using in the following to avoid confusion with another kind of idealism I shall discuss in connection with Leibniz). It is no exaggeration to portray such views as a genuine "linguistic turn" vis-à-vis the linguistic theories of the preceding century. Moreover, they openly target every philosophy, such as Descartes's or Kant's, which does not elevate language into a kind of gateway to epistemology. It has been argued that this shift from the unity of reason toward the plurality of languages amounts to nothing less than a "*detranscendentalization* of reason"¹⁴ in favor of language, the ramifications of which can be traced in the theories of such different intellectual pedigrees as the linguistics of Saussure, the philosophy of late Heidegger, Gadamer or late Wittgenstein. It seems that the notion of the incommensurability of language games, which has been so popular in recent decades, is fundamentally a descendant of Humboldtian linguistic philosophy, much like phenomenology is nowadays often understood to be an offshoot of Kantian transcendentalism.

The history of modern linguistic philosophy thus indicates two main outlooks. What I shall call the “linguistic realism”¹⁵ of the rational grammarians and Locke (but the basic doctrine goes back to Aristotle’s *De interpretatione*¹⁶), refers primarily to the relation of language to the mind, not of language to the world. In line with the doctrine of pre-linguistic thoughts, truth is still primarily burdened with the correspondence between ideas and things, and it is deemed adequately expressible in language, on two conditions: *first*, that the thinking subject has previously done her cognitive work properly, and *second*, that the utterances of the speaking subject are backed up by sufficiently well-defined ideas involved in them, i.e., that no words are used blindly. But if the first challenge which the seventeenth-century philosophy saw in language was to avoid, as Locke described it, “the using of Words, without clear and distinct *Ideas*; or, which is worse, signs without any thing signified,”¹⁷ then the second was how to guard the precise thoughts of one’s mind against the fluidity of intersubjective semantics of which the speaking subject is not the master. In other words, language, if used carelessly, enables one *to speak without thinking*, whereas the most pure cognitive ideal was rather *to think without speaking*. Because of the unfortunate impracticability of telepathy of pure ideas, language was regarded as an imperfect tool for their communication; however, the connection between the two spheres was by no means seen as necessary, as nothing essentially prevented reasoning from happening without words. “Linguistic realism” thus refers to the claim that the relation between thought and language *is not a correlation*, since language does not necessarily interfere with our conception of reality. Berkeley nicely sums up the early modern belief that reality is accessible beyond language: “We need only draw the curtain of words to behold the fairest tree of knowledge, whose fruit is excellent, and within the reach of our hand.”¹⁸

“Linguistic determinism,” represented by the above-mentioned German philosophy, on the other hand, *does* assume a correlation between language and consciousness. Whereas the Kantian *cognitive* correlation consists in not being able to know the thing-in-itself without turning it into for-us (as it is forever in a correlation in which the world is given to *me* and this givenness is implied in every thought about the world), *linguistic* correlation means that, similarly, our ideas are not simply “there” for us as pure thoughts without their being (always already) mediated by some linguistic structure. In other words, if the Kantian correlation concerns the world trapped inside consciousness, then the linguistic turn in the German tradition can be understood as a further twist to the Kantian revolution: not only is the world of things only ever a correlate of thought, but even our thoughts themselves are only ever cast in linguistic mold, since no thought is formed without linguistic means. As Humboldt put it, “[t]hought and language are . . . one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a union with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the idea become a concept.”¹⁹ It is precisely this idea that Humboldt probably learned from Condillac, who was one of the first to break with the doctrine of pre-linguistic thoughts, having maintained that reflection was effectively enabled by language.²⁰

The “detranscendentalization of reason” mentioned above thus should be understood as adding the language–consciousness correlate to the consciousness–world correlate in which transcendentality is effectively doubled. In the light of the developments of

various forms of linguistic determinism in the twentieth century, it is clear that this approach is essentially antirealist and takes us even further away from the thing-in-itself, as it not only drives a wedge between reality and the thinking subject, but additionally alienates his thought through a pre-given symbolic system. Moreover, once the diversity of languages is brought into the picture, the path to different degrees of relativism is opened,²¹ as neither the views about the world-disclosing nature of language nor about the limits of one's language corresponding to the limits of one's world and the like have any ambition to step outside of our linguistic practices and "draw the curtain of words." If knowledge and thought are linguistically determined, if thought unspoiled by historically conditioned language is even impossible, the question as to where thought should take its resources for the old-fashioned campaign against *the cheat of words* seems like an epitome of early modern naïve metaphysics.

Leibniz occupies a peculiar place in this historical picture. Although he subscribed to a version of linguistic realism, contending that "ideas do not depend upon names,"²² he also insisted, before Condillac, that all reasoning was conducted in signs of some kind. In the variety of early modern linguistic theories, the two claims are seldom found together, because they seem incompatible at first. *Either* one admits the doctrine of pre-linguistic thoughts which are formed independently, and the sole purpose of language is then to be the external medium of their communication, however imperfect and imprecise, *or* thoughts are always already shaped by the grammatical and semantic systems of one's language, and then reasoning or a sequence of these thoughts is always verbalized, even if only cursorily and within the confines of one's mind. Leibniz, however, seems to adopt the premise of the former approach and the consequence of the latter: ideas and their connections are essentially free of the semantic and syntactic determinations of a particular language, since the concepts in our minds are governed by the laws of logic alone, and yet the process of connecting them into reasoning, even if they are not communicated, can never happen without language or at least some kind of symbolic expression—for Leibniz, the cognitive process is necessarily a semiotic operation.

I shall first explore Leibniz's account of the relationship between words, ideas and things in his critique of Locke's epistemology to account for the general "linguistic ontology" which relates to any symbolic system, including natural language, and then turn to his plan for *characteristica universalis* (CU). It is in his CU project, in the connection between his logic and semiotics (theory of expression) that Leibniz's views on the matter are best explored, rather than in his speculations about the origin of peoples based on what he considered etymological evidence, which he had delved into since the late 1680s.²³

II Leibnizian linguistic ontology

Locke's treatise on language in Book III of the *Essay* claims a place in the history of linguistic thought because it attempted to put an end to what he considered careless formulations found in writings about language, which used "ideas" and "things" interchangeably when discussing what words actually referred to. Locke's central

premise is that “Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those Ideas are collected from the Things, which they are supposed to represent.”²⁴ Words represent the ideas and knowledge a particular speaker has about a thing, as the speaker can only hope that the words uttered will evoke the same ideas in the listener. However, for Locke, the common mistake among philosophers had been not only that they often took the identity of words to imply identity of meaning, but, more importantly, that “Men . . . often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things.”²⁵ This nicely captures a standard linguistic ontology implicit in Cartesian writings as well, which puts words, ideas and things in a linear fashion, whereby an idea of a thing is formed from perceptions and abstractions, and a “Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea.”²⁶ There is thus no way in which words would indicate things themselves or their essences directly without the mediation of private ideas. It is clear from the outset that Leibniz’s linguistic ontology redistributes the ideas–words–things relations differently: words do not refer to things only by mediation of ideas concealed in one’s mind, because they can refer to anything. Leibniz completely disregards Locke’s separation of language and reality in the *New Essays*, emphasizing that “words indicate the things as well as the ideas.”²⁷

The premises of this view can be traced in one of the most vocal disagreements between Leibniz’s Theophilus and Locke’s Philaetes in the *New Essays*. Leibniz never approved of the Lockean *new way of ideas*; in fact, he even accuses Locke of speaking incongruously when he chooses to refer to ideas as if they were merely private psychological entities secluded in our minds. Despite the fact that Leibniz occasionally does adjust to Locke’s usage of the word in the *New Essays* to keep the flow of the conversation (as he seems to do in the above quote), he often stresses that ‘idea’ should not be “confounded with the image,”²⁸ for ideas are not our “actual thoughts.”²⁹ The primary dispute between Leibniz and Locke is thus perhaps not the notorious question of whether or not ideas are innate, but first and foremost their ontological status: Leibniz takes them to be wholly objective models of reality residing in God’s intellect, logical blueprints according to which he chooses to create;³⁰ they are present in our minds only as potential demonstrative knowledge about the thing in question. In *Quid sit idea* (1677?), he maintains that “we are said to have an idea of a thing even if we do not think of it, if only, on a given occasion, we can think of it.”³¹ It is in this sense that he states in the *New Essays* that ideas are not the content of our consciousness, our thoughts, but rather “the very form or possibility of those thoughts.”³² Thus, when Philaetes claims that the absurdities arising in reasoning about eternity are due to the fact that any idea of eternity is insufficient, “however great a duration someone represents to himself,” Theophilus clearly distinguishes between ideas as objects of knowledge and mental images as objects of imagination: “There reigns here that same confusion of the image with the idea. We have a ‘comprehensive’, i.e., accurate, idea of eternity, since we have the definition of it, although we have no image of it at all.”³³ Consequently, ideas are innate insofar as they are in our minds as possibilities, forms of knowledge, and not as items of consciousness; they represent essences (genera and species of things), which we can laboriously unfold with our fragmentary concepts, aided by perception and logical reasoning:

That the ideas of things are in us means therefore nothing but that God, the creator alike of the things and of the mind, has impressed a power of thinking upon the mind so that it can by its own operations derive what corresponds perfectly to the nature of things. Although, therefore, the idea of a circle is not similar to the circle, truths can be derived from it which would be confirmed beyond doubt by investigating a real circle.³⁴

Hence, the ideas of genera and species of all "things" (such as gold, parricide, circle, eternity, redness, etc.) are complete concepts representing their natures or essences, which, like the complete concepts of individual substances in God's intellect, *contain the same amount of information as things themselves*. Of course, the difference between the ideas of individual and eternal essences is that the latter involve different degrees of generality, which makes the series of steps required for their complete analysis finite, even if our knowledge about them, our notions, often remain imprecise, partial, distorted, or simply false.

This is, of course, not merely an issue of terminology in which Leibniz would simply reserve the term 'idea' for a different entity than Locke. The critical point here is that Leibniz develops his epistemology based on rational concepts belonging to the objective domain of logical relations rather than on the intricate psychology of mental representations and their associations. For this reason, he cannot accept the necessary consequence of Locke's linguistic ontology in which the meanings of terms like 'gold' or 'parricide' consist in particular collections of simple ideas, which are the results of one's sensory inspection of gold objects, or one's own understanding of what constitutes the killing of a parent. For Locke, all words refer exclusively to subjective ideas; he only distinguishes the ways in which different kinds of abstract ideas are formed in the mind: whereas ideas of substances do have some external model with which they accord, ideas of "mixed modes" like 'parricide' are purely "*the Workmanship of the Understanding*."³⁵ The essences of things, the various genera and species of beings we designate using words with general meanings, are thus only abstract ideas in individual minds attached to a word, or, as Locke calls them (to Leibniz's horror), only *nominal essences*,³⁶ since, in the case of substances, the *real* essences responsible for the collections of our sensory ideas are unknown to us, and in the case of mixed modes, the distinction between real and nominal is superfluous for the reason that mixed modes are not "real"—their nominal essence (e.g., what one understands under the word 'parricide') perfectly matches their real essence (what parricide really is), which is "the workmanship" of anyone's understanding. For Leibniz, on the other hand, "essence is fundamentally nothing but the possibility of the thing under consideration"³⁷ and is thus always real and never merely "nominal." If there is a clear-cut example of classic realism in the early modern period, it is found here: what ultimately constitutes the essences of genera and species is not the fact that a perceived resemblance between many things is labeled by a word with a general meaning, but that "this resemblance is a reality"³⁸ in things themselves. This is as valid for mixed modes and relations as it is for substances and simple ideas, because no essence, insofar as it is the possibility of the thing, depends on our will—a combination of ideas either is or is not correct. Parricide, in short, has no less of an objective essence than gold, because this essence

depends neither on the way one chooses to understand it nor on the name one chooses to attach to it.³⁹

Leibniz's epistemology thus relies on his essentialist ontology. If anything is real as long as it is an essence and essence is nothing but the *possibility* of the thing, then whatever idea can be shown to be non-contradictory represents something real, which means that it exists in God's intellect (to which I shall return a bit later) independently of the knowing subject. Our more or less comprehensive knowledge of things, however, is distinguished on the background of what, unlike essences, *does* allow for the distinction between real and nominal, that is, definitions, for "although a thing has only one essence, this can be expressed by several definitions."⁴⁰ This distinction had been very important for Leibniz's epistemology at least since the late 1670s: a *nominal definition* of a thing is descriptive; the concepts involved in it have not yet been fully resolved to form an idea in the proper sense, because this type of definition merely lists a series of qualities which allow us to recognize the thing and distinguish it from others (Leibniz's example is the knowledge an assayer has of gold).⁴¹ *Real definition*, on the other hand, is analytical in that it shows the thing as possible (and thus the essence of the thing as real) by demonstrating the non-contradiction in its constitutive terms or concepts. Now, Leibniz distinguished between several kinds of real definitions, but what they all have in common is precisely that they all establish the *possibility* of the thing. In the case of substances, for example, this includes "definitions involving the generation of a thing, or if this is impossible, at least its constitution, that is, a method by which the thing appears to be producible or at least possible";⁴² however, the most perfect *a priori* real definitions (those pertaining to mathematics, but also to metaphysics) are the ones "which resolve the thing into simple primitive notions understood in themselves."⁴³ In this way, for the Leibnizian subject to know a thing by its real definition is to uncover the secrets of its eternal essence, regardless of whether the thing was actually produced or created. A real definition thus represents cognitive access to reality itself, not just to a collection of ideas that is merely corroborated by experience. The whole business of science and knowledge is then to transform nominal definitions into real ones, or, to elevate fragmentary concepts about things into ideas mirroring their essences.

To return now to the question of language, it seems that Locke made a quasi-transcendental step that Leibniz is trying to reverse when he says that "words indicate things as well as ideas." Since ideas in the Leibnizian sense are not our private mental entities, but assume an objective reality as soon as they prove to be non-contradictory, and because our conceptions lose their purely subjective character as soon as they make contact with the domain of logical possibility, words can refer to these possibilities directly just as well as to ideas in Locke's sense. According to Leibniz, terms like 'gold' or 'parricide' refer not to our representation of a substance with a particular color, weight, fusibility etc., or to our own interpretations of moral acts, but to the eternal essence of that substance or that act itself, just as the term 'circle' refers to an essence about which eternal truths can be demonstrated, which makes the target of linguistic reference independent of any person's knowledge about it. As Jaap Maat has nicely explained, the advantage of the Leibnizian approach is that it allows for the progress of knowledge about the thing without the need to update the reference of the word every time this occurs. It shows that *meaning* (our nominal definition of the thing) *does not*

determine reference, as meaning is provisional and does not yet take into account potential new knowledge.⁴⁴ We use words *as if they refer to everything that is true about the things*, even if a significant portion of these truths remain unknown to us; therefore, if our knowledge about gold is refined as a consequence of a particular experiment, we are adding to our knowledge about the very thing we have been referring to as 'gold' all along.

III Language as calculus

It was necessary to establish this contrast between what I designate here as the linguistic ontologies of Leibniz and Locke to fully understand the idealist framework within which Leibniz's project of CU is built. For it is impossible to even fantasize about such an endeavor within a philosophy that makes essences or things themselves either completely inaccessible to, or a product of, either mind or language. By contrast, a strong tenet of a parallelism, even isomorphism, between concepts and reality had been a leading motif of Leibniz's writings ever since his first published work *De arte combinatoria* (1666) in which he says that just as things have real parts insofar as they exist, so they have conceptual parts insofar as they can be *thought*.⁴⁵ A striking example of this appears in the *New Essays*, where, in the debate about simple ideas, Leibniz claims that the idea of green only appears to be simple, since it must be, like the color green itself, composed of ideas of blue and yellow and can thus be analyzed into its constituent parts, notwithstanding the fact that even after this analysis is performed with the help of an experiment, the perception of green (our "sensory idea of green") will remain confused and thus appear simple.⁴⁶ So, if a thing is composed in reality, it must be composed conceptually, too.

However, the parallelism between the ideal and the real alone is not enough to satisfy the requirements of CU. What Leibniz needs to establish is that the symbols of a language (words, characters, numbers etc.) themselves mirror reality, for only thus can reasoning become a mechanical process of symbolic operation wherein reasoning is truly determined and guided by signs alone. When he was considering Hobbes's claim—as shocking as it sounded to his ears—that all truths are arbitrary for the simple reason that arguments rely on definitions of words which are themselves settled arbitrarily, he came up with an answer which tries to establish some accord between the domains of language and things. If language was to convey truth, then it was necessary for the system of signs to be expressive, i.e., that there was something common in the two domains. In the theory of expression that he first developed in *Dialogus* (1677), he holds that the arbitrariness of language, or the fact that words are not made to resemble the things to which they refer, by no means precludes a certain isomorphism between them. Every expression is founded on something which serves as the foundation of their correspondence, indeed as the foundation of *truth*, even if they are very dissimilar: "For although characters are arbitrary, their use and connection have something which is not arbitrary, namely a definite analogy between characters and things, and the relations which different characters expressing the same thing have to each other."⁴⁷ While Leibniz admits that similarity between signs and things—as a

drawn circle is a sign of an ideal one and a map is a sign of an area—would make the words of natural languages all the more useful and expressive, it is enough that there be a formal analogy between them, “a kind of complex mutual relation [*situs*] or order which fits the things; if not in the single words at least in their combination and inflection, although it is even better if found in the single words themselves.”⁴⁸ Thanks to this formal analogy, truths can be uttered in different languages, just as calculations can be made in different systems of arithmetic notation, since truth does not depend on what is arbitrary, but on what is invariable in the symbols, i.e., “the very connection and arrangement of characters.”⁴⁹

Now, even if this general analogy between words and their referents is granted, the problem with natural languages remains in the fact that they do not allow for a calculus, since the truth of an uttered or written proposition is not apparent *from its very form*.⁵⁰ Any symbolic system thus can express truths, but the reasoning behind them is wholly dependent on the cognitive and rational powers of knowing subjects. The usefulness of symbols is measured by their expressivity, and the latter in turn by the quantity of relations that the symbols convey. For this reason, mathematical symbols, which can be blindly trusted, relieve the subject of the constant need for intuition, and provide what he calls *filum meditandi*:

The more precision the characters have, that is, the more relations of the things they exhibit, the more useful they are. And when they exhibit all the relations of the things among themselves, in the way the arithmetical characters used by me do, then *there is nothing in the thing which cannot be grasped through the characters*.⁵¹

This kind of maximum expressivity of characters is precisely the final piece of the puzzle that Leibniz needs to establish to at least theoretically satisfy the ambitions of CU. As he says in *La vraie méthode*, the quintessential but neglected benefit of mathematical calculation is the fact that it is performed by operating the symbols alone. A system of notation such as algebra is thus much more than just a neutral tool for representing quantitative relations; it enables us to check the correctness of a calculation merely on the level of symbols, and thus needs no external verification. According to Leibniz, this was the principal reason for the regrettable fact that the mathematical method had been only partially implemented in other sciences and was wholly absent from metaphysics and morals: it consists not only in a deductive procedure, but also in the fact that mathematical symbols fully relieve the mind of the burden of reflecting upon the quantities themselves. In virtue of this, such symbols enable one to perform an easily available experiment, a test “not made on a thing itself, but on the characters which we have substituted in place of the thing,”⁵² so one can fully trust the operations of semiotic substitutions, transpositions or transformations without needing to perpetually attend to the “semantic” values of the symbols.

This last point is the principal requirement Leibniz had envisaged for his CU—the so-called “blind thought,” the mechanical operation of carefully invented characters according to rules, which guarantees that the truth about any subject matter whatsoever as it were effortlessly unfolds on a piece of paper. If we said earlier that the early modern ideal was, *first*, to think without speaking, and *second*, to avoid the questionable use of

language in which people seemed to speak without thinking, then Leibniz adopts the contrary approach: (1) He never stops reminding us that "all human reasoning is performed by means of certain signs or characters" and that it is indeed "neither possible nor desirable that the things themselves or even the ideas of them be always distinctly observed by the mind," since no geometrician, arithmetician or jurist would ever reach the end of their proof, calculation, or legal consideration if they were to recall each time the definitions or "modes of construction" of a hyperbolae, "the values of all the marks or ciphers" or mentally examine the essential conditions of a particular "action, exception or benefits of a law."⁵³ (2) For this reason, Leibniz wants to devise a universal symbolism so "expressive" that the symbols alone dispose of the need for thought (other than the observance of the formal rules of transposition of characters) in complex and winding reasonings. Blind thought, which amounts to trusting that the signs of a language are backed up by clear and distinct notions and definitions, does indeed have negative consequences when we wish to reason in natural languages (and Leibniz gives many examples of such cases in metaphysics),⁵⁴ but it becomes an asset of artificial philosophical language, which is thereby designed as a kind of semiotic truth-machine. In other words, if "ideas do not depend on names," this "defect" is to be rectified in CU: reasoning would be made fully dependent on characters by way of making characters dependable, which is Leibniz's way of combining very strong linguistic realism with linguistic determinism.

In order to fully grasp the linguistic realism of CU, we must keep in mind that it is founded on Leibniz's theory of double expression: just as ideas may express things perfectly, so signs can be made to express ideas perfectly and, by the same token, things themselves, for expression is not a relation between the signifier and the signified, but between the logical and real composition. The basic scheme of Leibniz's plan to unlock the power of science is then founded on his combinatorial logic, according to which a complex concept is a particular combination of simpler concepts in conformity with intentional logic, which observes his principle that the concept of the predicate is included in the concept of the subject (predicate-in-notion). Thus, every term or concept can be analyzed into its simpler constituents, the ultimate goal being, of course, the reduction to "simple primitive notions understood in themselves."⁵⁵ However, Leibniz wrestled with the status of primitive concepts, and he grew increasingly skeptical through the years about whether they were at all within our reach. While in *De arte combinatoria*, where the idea of CU first appeared, he was still convinced that a limited number of intelligible highest genera or categories existed, which, when combined in various ways, make up the whole world, he had settled on the claim since the 1670s that it is perhaps not within human power to resolve everything *a priori* "to the first possibles or to irreducible concepts, or (what is the same thing) to the absolute attributes of God themselves or the first causes and the final end of things."⁵⁶ Accordingly, Leibniz claimed that we must at least reduce the multitude of things "to a few, whose possibility can either be supposed and postulated, or proved by experience,"⁵⁷ and then show how everything is made of their combinations, just as it is possible to analyze curves as products of combining straight lines and circles in geometry, and just as in jurisprudence a particular legal case consists in a combination of actions, promises, sales etc., which are understood to compose it as its "parts."⁵⁸

In a further step, a catalogue of such primitive or provisionally primitive notions (categories of highest genera) would amount to “an alphabet of human thoughts,”⁵⁹ while their organization, the display of their natural order, would form an encyclopedia unlike any other, i.e., not a simple collection of facts, but rationally ordered hierarchies of concepts which would reflect the composition of complex units. Now, to devise a universal language, one only needs to find suitable characters for the primitive (or provisionally primitive) notions, since the composition of complex characters will follow the composition of complex concepts and the different domains of the things–ideas–language triangle will thus be harmonized:

As a matter of fact, when thinking about these matters a long time ago, it was already clear to me that all human thoughts may be resolved into very few primitive notions; and that, if characters are assigned to them, it will then be possible to form characters for the derived notions, from which it will always be possible to extract all their conditions [*essentialia requisita*], as well as the primitive notions they contain, and—let me say explicitly—their definitions or values, and, therefore, the properties which may be deduced from the definitions as well. Once this is assured, anyone who would use this sort of character in reasoning or writing, would either never make a mistake, or his mistakes would always be easily detectable by himself as well as by others. Moreover, he would, as far as possible, discover the truth from the given, and if in some cases the available data were not sufficient for discovering that which is sought, he would still see which experiments or observations are necessary in order, at least, to be able to approach the truth, as far as possible from the data, either by approximations or by the determination of a higher degree of probability. In this system of characters, sophisms and paralogsms would be nothing more than what errors of calculation are in Arithmetic, or solecisms and barbarisms in language.⁶⁰

The crucial element of Leibniz’s idea of CU is thus not simply that we should devise a symbolic system that would simply mirror our thoughts adequately, unequivocally or unambiguously. Moreover, it is a language where the semantics of its terms are determined by the logical syntax of the predicate-in-notion principle. To know the true “meaning” of a character amounts to an explanation of the true nature of the thing itself and, consequently, its relations to other things. As Leibniz puts it in a letter to Tschirnhaus, “the analysis of concepts thus corresponds exactly to the analysis of a character,”⁶¹ from which it follows that the definition of a certain concept is performed by substituting for a complex character simpler ones that are involved in it, much like the product 35 can be equivalently expressed, defined or substituted by combining its “primitive notions,” the primes 7 and 5. Moreover, any proposition or truth expressed in subject–predicate form—and according to Leibniz, *all* truths can be expressed in this way—is a combination of two terms in a composite term, which makes demonstration and definition the two sides of the same coin: a demonstration of a truth is a chain of definitions of the concepts involved, but also, as we have seen, a real definition is nothing short of a demonstration of the possibility of the thing in question—it proves that the complex concept is not contradictory. It is symbolic or blind thought supported by characters carrying their own definitions that precisely helps our reasoning in transforming nominal definitions

into real ones,⁶² and Leibniz does not shy away from saying that new knowledge obtained from such definitions and demonstrations which only consist in substitution of characters is explained by “what Plato called ‘reminiscence.’”⁶³

On the basis of a scheme so conceived, Leibniz frequently made very ambitious claims about CU, such as that it would enable truths to be grasped “as if pictured on paper with the aid of a machine,”⁶⁴ that reasoning would become no more difficult than speaking, and truths could be expressed in this language even without knowing, since the characters themselves will reveal them to us, or that this language is like a telescope for the mind, a *filum meditandi* leading us “into the interior of things” themselves, etc.⁶⁵ Furthermore, in one of the most famous rhetorical exaggerations with which Leibniz frequently described the benefits of CU, he promises that once this language is invented and adopted, the verbal disputes not only of scientists, but also of metaphysicians, lawyers and moralists would disappear, for whenever two scholars disagreed on a matter, they would resolve their controversy “by simply taking a pen, so that it will suffice for two debaters (leaving aside issues of agreement about words) to say to each other: let us calculate!”⁶⁶

IV Conclusions

There are, of course, also many hitherto unmentioned issues, problems and inconsistencies in Leibniz's *characteristica* project, particularly surrounding the application of its rigid aprioristic design to empirical sciences. He merely outlines some ideas about how new findings from experiments would have been incorporated into the system of characters or how it would have been possible to use the characters for judging not only truth but also probability in moral or political matters. Further, his claim that one could start with merely provisional characters of simple terms before finding “true” ones is far from clear, given the fact that his design essentially calls for a bottom-up approach. Moreover, nothing has been said about his attempt to find the expression of logical relations in significantly reduced and simplified Latin grammar; and finally, we find a fair amount of hesitation about the very typographic appearance of the characters, as Leibniz originally proposed a kind of pictographic script in *De arte combinatoria*, then settled on using prime numbers and letters in his various sketches of logical calculi, only to return to his original idea in the *New Essays*. I have deliberately ignored these issues. My intention was to situate his linguistic thought in general, and universal characteristic in particular, into the general scheme of the relationship between words (or characters), ideas (or concepts) and things (or essences). I shall now add some concluding remarks about the Leibnizian doctrine regarding the loosening of the divide between linguistic realism and determinism, the widening of the scope of reality as a consequence of his Platonism, and about his ontological approach to philosophy, which seems to benefit the cause of realism even today.

(a) The conceptual character of language

If we play linguistic realism against determinism, there is a consequence on each side to be avoided. In the linguistic realism typical of the early modern era, it is the fact that

language and meaning are treated only after the theory of knowledge has already been established, as it merely adds to it a non-essential layer demanded by the need to account for communication. On the side of linguistic determinism, it takes some effort to resist its relativist consequences once the view of language as imposing a particular worldview is combined with empirical study of linguistic diversity. Of course, the version of linguistic determinism Leibniz was facing was considerably less nuanced than the one developed in the time after Humboldt. But whereas he did not have to deal with the transcendentalist premises of linguistic relativity, he did have to address the concerns about relativism, particularly as they were raised by Hobbes's above-mentioned arbitrariness thesis.

Leibniz's engagement with these issues can be summed up in three steps. *First*, against the realists, he recognizes the necessity of language for cognition, since constant non-symbolized pure intuition would be epistemologically too burdensome. *Second*, against Hobbes, he denies that this dependency on language would lead into relativism and establishes a definite analogy between relations among the items of any language and relations among things, which leads to his theory of expression. And *third*, he devises a plan for a symbolic system expressing all the known conceptual relations between things and their parts (and allowing for the later inclusion of hitherto unknown relations). So, after disposing with the particular consequences of both linguistic realism and determinism, the proposed system of characters also decisively embraces their most productive characteristics. On the one hand, such universal language is *realist* in that it does not lock the mind into a *particular* worldview imposed by a *particular* language, nor does it distort its access to reality; in fact, it provides an external aid to the mind to penetrate being, for the composition of characters wholly reflects the essential composition of things themselves. On the other hand, it is also *determinist*, as these characters do not allow one to perform any operations that are not permitted by its logical syntax. The skeptical claim that language is the unsurpassable horizon of thought is thereby given an optimistic reversal: if the system of symbols is sufficiently expressive, then this horizon matches reality itself, just as algebraic notation allows for perfect expressions of all possible quantitative relations, including theorems that have not yet been discovered. We see that Leibniz utilizes linguistic determinism normatively, rather than descriptively: it is not a positive theory of natural language, but a criterion to be observed in designing the ideal future language. CU *must* be devised in such a way that the written characters themselves completely determine the correct way to reason. The early modern wedge between the domains of signs and ideas is thus removed; however, unlike the positions resulting from the Humboldtian linguistic turn, it does not result in, as Lafont describes it, "the immanent linguistic character of concepts,"⁶⁷ but rather in the *immanent conceptual character of CU*.

(b) Idealism and realism

Before we dismiss Leibniz's placing of eternal ideas in God's intellect as metaphysical dogmatism of the worst kind, we must point out that the status of the divine is somewhat debatable here. Whereas Leibniz certainly cannot escape such accusations in his doctrine of the best possible world, the "inclining" though not "necessitating"

reasons God had for creating it and a plethora of other claims in his metaphysics and theodicy, I think that the role of the divine in his epistemology and logic is surprisingly lightweight. Unlike in Berkeley's "hypostatization" of the correlation in God's mind, as Meillassoux puts it,⁶⁸ where God continuously perceives all ideas to ensure that the world does not cease to exist behind our backs, and unlike in the case of Descartes's God, who not only warrants the truth of clear and distinct ideas, but also determines which truths are to be necessary, in Leibniz's idealism, the placing of ideas in God's mind seems to be motivated by his wish to give ontological grounding to logic itself, but without the metaphysical commitments. The reason for this is that the intelligible domain is regulated by the predicate-in-notion principle of combinatorial logic, non-contradiction, the doctrine of compossibility, etc., over which God has no power whatsoever. Nowhere does Leibniz *justify* ideas by cloistering them in God's mind; he rather labels the domain of ideas with divine character as a *consequence* of the infinity of such a domain. Strictly speaking, something is not a possibility because God contemplates it; rather, because there are infinite possibilities, God must contemplate them all. If the human intellect is too limited to know all truths, particularly to perform infinite analyses of contingent truths, it is simply not conceivable for Leibniz that unthought truths would thus exist nowhere. The divine intellect is then a convenient place for the infinite realm of possibilities with objective validity, the existence of which any logic must permit in one way or another, but the totality of which we cannot possess due to our finitude. In other words, insofar as he equates the realm of eternal ideas with the divine intellect, the latter is just Leibniz's way of expressing the absolute validity of logic and its principles, to which God is equally subject.

That the realm of the divine intellect is used as a synonym for logic itself can be observed in various passing comments Leibniz makes when dealing with epistemological matters, in which he frequently invokes theistic vocabulary to convey his conviction that something must be valid in itself even if there is no human mind to confirm that validity. In such instances, a higher intelligence presents itself as a means of ontologizing logic rather than the principle or source of logic. Thus, when he wishes to convince one of his correspondents that it is *impossible* to explain perception by way of Aristotelian forms, Leibniz rhetorically amplifies this by saying that even an angel "will accomplish nothing by chattering about forms and faculties."⁶⁹ Similarly, when he wants to establish that everything happens due to causes which are *intelligible* even if the causes remain permanently unknown to us, Leibniz translates this into a claim that we would understand such causes "if some angel wished to reveal them to us."⁷⁰ Also, to say that the reality of relations and modes depends on "a supreme intelligence" is just another way of saying that "the ideas of them are *real* just so long as the modes are *possible*,"⁷¹ which means that "a divine idea" is perfectly synonymous with "real possibility,"⁷² and so on. *Reality*, *possibility*, *impossibility*, and *intelligibility* need some ontological grounding outside the human mind, which shows that the divine *intelligence*—but not divine grace, goodness, omnipotence, etc.—is precisely coextensive with the infinite domain of the combinatory logic of concepts, and that, in this limited respect, Leibniz's theistic phrasing acts merely as a rhetorical device to convey the universality of logic. So, whereas genuinely metaphysical reasons exist for God's creating of this individual substance or another, in Leibniz's epistemology, the guardianship of God and the angels over ideas appears to be

a secondary maneuver serving merely as a tool to desubjectivize them, whereby he establishes a version of Platonist idealism.

Thus, we must carefully distinguish the idealism in Leibniz's writings about logic and language from the more widely established "idealism" of his metaphysics of monads, which is a doctrine of *reality as existence*, and thus requires the principle of sufficient reason in addition to the principle of non-contradiction. One of the often-neglected aspects of Leibniz's CU, however, is the fact that it was never intended as a tool for describing existing individual objects or singular events, but rather as a scientific language expressing primarily truths about the genera and species of things. For Leibniz, general terms come before individual ones in the natural order of ideas, "they have a wider spread over individuals with which they agree, carry a lighter load of ideas or essences; they were very often the easiest to form, and are the most useful,"⁷³ whereas the knowledge of individuals, as is well known, is burdened with infinity and is therefore in the domain of divine, rather than scientific, knowledge. Hence, for Leibniz's wider project of General Science, of which the universal characteristic is a tool, possibilities, which include all non-contradictory concepts and categories insofar as they are the building blocks of the intelligible world, belong to the domain of reality no less than existing things precisely because it is the business of science to extract the general and universal, i.e., possible features from existing individual things. The point of Leibnizian idealism is thus neither to exchange the existing physical reality for lofty heights nor to convert the worldly into the ideal, but *to widen the scope of the real* from the existing and individual to the possible and universal in which the reality (but not the existence) of the individual ultimately consists. For not only are existing things, insofar as they were chosen by God to make up the best possible world, only a subset of possible things; more importantly, they are all instances of certain genera and species, which are not individual, and the scientific knowledge of them therefore consists in what is possible and ideal in them. The reality to be known and designated by CU *is essentially ideal*, for it is through the essential and eternal that the existing and individual is known and designated by science.

On this account, Leibniz's realism appears to be twofold: he is, of course, a pre-critical realist in the sense that, for him, the access to in-itself is granted, but he is also a realist in the sense of no lesser philosophical pedigree than anti-nominalism or Platonist idealism. Leibniz's insistence that essences are *real* whenever ideas of them are demonstrated as *possible* makes the whole framework of his epistemological theory decisively Platonist:⁷⁴ ideas *qua* possibilities *represent reality in the most literal sense*. Thus, notwithstanding the limited reach of human knowledge, for Leibniz there had never been a radical gap between the subject and what Meillassoux calls "the great outdoors."⁷⁵ The notions of the mind, even if fragmentary or false, are woven into the fabric of ideal reality with the help of perception and logic; they must be ordered into logically coherent ideas in which the human mind thereby always already participates. In this perspective, the doctrine of innate ideas serves as an epistemological supplement to Leibniz's preconceived idealist ontology. Hence, the two meanings of 'realism' mentioned above are connected: if Leibniz believes that things themselves are accessible to knowledge, it is only because the conceptual relations explaining their essences are real and not imposed on them by the mind. The basic Leibnizian view is thus that

cognitive labor consists in navigating the maze of pre-existing potential knowledge rather than in bridging the gap between thought and being with adequation. The former was the trademark of the Platonist ontological vein in philosophy, which had been receding in Leibniz's time, whereas the latter has been more at home in the epistemological tradition ever since Aristotle.

(c) Philosophies of consciousness, philosophies of being

When scouting for allies and foes of realism in the history of philosophy, this distinction between philosophies of consciousness and philosophies of being should perhaps be kept in mind even more than the historical divide between Kantian transcendentalism and pre-critical dogmatism. One's chances of reaching the in-itself are greatly influenced by whether one decides to approach the issue of what there is through the gateway of epistemology or ontology. Descartes is perhaps the most typical example of the former approach, since, strictly speaking, it is epistemology rather than metaphysics that is the real Cartesian *prima philosophia*. Similarly, Locke, Hume, Kant, and Husserl all belong to this tradition, regardless of whether their philosophical endeavors end up as realist or not. However, one can hardly overestimate the importance of the fact that for Leibniz (and even more explicitly for Spinoza), the point of departure is very different: the question is not how to reach ontological statements from the mind, the *esse* from the *cogito*, but how to account for the mind, among other things, within the pre-given structure of reality. Rather than questioning the possibility of true knowledge of things by way of scrutinizing the subtleties and inner workings of our mental sphere, Leibniz harmonizes the issues of being, knowledge, and language within the pre-given ontological framework.⁷⁶ As his debate with Locke clearly shows, the *existence* of desubjectivized ideas and eternal essences is given and need not be proven per se; it is their *nature* that has to be laboriously explored and demonstrated. So, unlike Locke or Descartes, Leibniz does not start philosophizing from introspection to then demonstrate the existence of the external world, other minds and the workings of language; rather, he starts with ontological commitments, and accounts for cognition as he proceeds. The method of doubt, for example, is thus entirely alien to this vein of philosophy, according to which objectivity is not to be secured within consciousness or from consciousness—it is out there, and within us, waiting to be uncovered in the infinite complexities of logically nested concepts. In short, for philosophies of being, reality is never treated as *the great outdoors*, because our minds are always already navigating across it.

As this division is as old as philosophy itself, it also seems to run through the present debate about realism. Meillassoux, for example, acknowledges the strength of correlationism, but tries to overcome its limitations by absolutizing them, by “put[ting] back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought.”⁷⁷ He accepts the epistemological game of correlationism and seeks the absolute within the implications of its commitments. However, object-oriented ontology, particularly in Graham Harman's iteration, rejects the transcendental perspective altogether and starts with a flattened ontology in which the cognitive relation between the mind and objects is reduced to a mere instance of relations between any objects whatsoever. While Harman admits that human cognition is significant, at least in its being far more

complicated than most other relations, it is nevertheless not *ontologically* special or so radically different from any other object–object relation as to deserve the status of the original meta-relation from which every philosophy should depart.⁷⁸ The difference between Meillassoux and Harman is therefore not a difference of conclusion, but a difference of the original premise. Harman does not derive his ontology of withdrawn objects from the fact that they elude our knowledge, nor does he ground their unity in the categories of cognition; he prioritizes objects, inexhaustible by the relations between them, and *then* attributes the status of such a relation to cognition. Now, even if Harman would advocate neither transcendental nor transcendent realism of the Platonist kind, what he nonetheless shares with Leibniz is that they both prefer to ground their epistemologies in their ontologies (unlike Descartes, Locke, or Meillassoux, who take the opposite route). Moreover, just as for Harman, the point is not “that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally *objects*,”⁷⁹ which includes sailboats, atoms, the Dutch East India Company as well as pixies, nymphs, utopias, and even square circles, so in the Leibnizian universe indeed *not everything exists, but everything is equally an essence insofar as it is a possibility*, including number, parricide, gold and redness—granted, with the exception of square circles and other contradictory notions. I would argue that the necessary condition of this particular similarity is the fact that they both share the ontology-first approach to philosophy.

The break between philosophies that favor introspection as a starting point and which must then deal with the “scandal” they impose on themselves, and philosophies that attack being directly, appears to be more fundamental than the historical turning point at which dogmatic metaphysics is superseded by transcendental philosophy. It has also been decisive in the history of the philosophy of language. The doctrine of pre-linguistic thoughts and instrumental views of language can be found in the epistemologically oriented philosophies of language between Aristotle and Kant, and they are, of course, burdened with bridging yet another gap between language and mind. Leibniz, as we have seen, avoids this by being a much stronger linguistic realist than Locke, who, despite having kept the primacy of ideas over words untouched, nevertheless completely excluded things themselves from all semiotic relations. For, just as in the Kantian transcendental philosophy the truth of a scientific statement is decided based on the verifiability of that statement within the scientific community, and not in correspondence with thing in itself, so, too, in Locke’s linguistic philosophy the meaning of a word in communication is determined by an agreement between the complex ideas of individuals using a particular word and not by the essence of a particular substance or mode. By contrast, Leibniz believes that our knowledge and our semiotic systems, be it natural language, CU or algebra, are simply harmonized expressions of a pre-given ontological structure.

Notes

- 1 The research included in this paper was funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) under the research project “Language and Science: The Possibility of Realism in Modern Philosophy” (J6-7364).

- 2 Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006).
- 3 Cf. *ibid.*, 6.
- 4 Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).
- 5 See, e.g., Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, trans. José Medina (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999) ix–xviii, 3; Michael N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–5, 249. For the Cartesian theory of language, see Ulrich Ricken, *Linguistics, Anthropology and Philosophy in the French Enlightenment: Language Theory and Ideology*, trans. Robert E. Norton (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 9–11, 27–32.
- 6 As I shall make Locke an example of this view, a cautionary remark is in order. Michael Losonsky attributes the first “linguistic turn” in modern philosophy to Locke, because he was the first to recognize the important role of language in epistemology (see Michael Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 10–12). I do not dispute this importance. But whereas in the drafts of the *Essay* Locke indeed made claims which seem to ascribe to language a role above and beyond communication and recording of one’s thoughts, the textual evidence in the *Essay* is less convincing. It is true that Book III shows an important shift away from the theories of rational grammar, and although Locke’s sensualist epistemology could thus not avoid stating the close connection between ideas and words, this connection nevertheless remains decisively weaker compared to the later German tradition, or even Condillac, since language and thought in principle remain separable.
- 7 John Locke, *An Essay concernig Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 475, 490, 495 (III.ix–x, III.x.9). Here and hereafter, the italics are Locke’s.
- 8 Cf. Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 5–7.
- 9 Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 211.
- 10 Cf. Forster, *After Herder*, 3, 9, 17, 56–7.
- 11 Cf. Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 14–15, 335–55. Forster criticizes this interpretation as “provocative but rather eccentric” (Forster, *After Herder*, 79n).
- 12 Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88–9.
- 13 Cf. Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, xiv; Lia Formigari, *Signs, Science, and Politics: Philosophies of Language in Europe, 1700–1830* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993), 169. The phrase has also been widely used in analytic philosophy of language.
- 14 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 3; cf. also Forster, *German Philosophy of Language*, 92.
- 15 This has also been called the “nomenclaturist perspective” on language. See Roy Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 27.
- 16 Cf. Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, I (16a).
- 17 Locke, *Essay*, 490 (III.x.2).

- 18 George Berkeley, "A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Desmond M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82 (Introduction, §24).
- 19 Wilhelm Freiherr von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 54–5.
- 20 It must be noted, however, that this opposition of linguistic realism and determinism also has its limits, of course. Not only is it perhaps a little sketchy in its depiction of the thinkers associated with both views, but the story of the philosophy of language since the seventeenth century could also be (and has been) told through a set of different oppositions. For an alternative interpretation which portrays the history of modern philosophy of language as a battle between enlightenment empiricists and German idealists, see Lia Formigari's *Signs, Science, and Politics* (169–89). Interestingly, the prism of this duality depicts Locke and Condillac as advocates of the constitutive role of language for thinking and portrays the German tradition as having freed the mind of such empirical constraints. Formigari puts Humboldt in the same camp as Kant because of his emphasis on the *Sprachformen* and the transcendental place of language (not *empirical* language, but its ideal essence). It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with these interpretations critically; however, it must be said that the alternative divisions always stem from the original question asked. Formigari is mainly interested in the opposition between contingency and the necessity of knowledge, whereas the present division (shared by Forster and Lafont) concerns only the character of language–consciousness relation. In this sense Locke is closer to Descartes, and it is in this respect that Condillac, otherwise a Lockean phenomenalist, most significantly departs from his master.
- 21 However, as Losonsky (whom I follow on the terminology of "linguistic determinism" instead of "idealism" here) correctly points out, linguistic determinism should not be understood to necessarily lead to relativism, i.e., the incommensurability of different natural languages, and therefore, ways of thinking. There is no clear evidence of outright relativism in Condillac or even Humboldt. But while the connection between the two is not necessary, it was certainly frequently assumed in the twentieth century, often implicitly. Cf. Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*, 81.
- 22 Georg Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 214.
- 23 See G. W. Leibniz and Hiob Ludolf, *Leibniz and Ludolf on Things Linguistic: Excerpts from Their Correspondence (1688–1703)*, trans. John T. Waterman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).
- 24 Locke, *Essay*, 405 (III.ii.2).
- 25 *Ibid.*, 407 (III.ii.5).
- 26 *Ibid.*, 405 (III.ii.1).
- 27 Leibniz, *New Essays*, 287.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 301.
- 30 Cf. *ibid.*, 296.
- 31 G. W. Leibniz, "What Is an Idea?" in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1975), 207. Hereafter, citations from this edition shall be abbreviated as L followed by the page number.
- 32 Leibniz, *New Essays*, 301.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 262.
- 34 Leibniz, "What Is an Idea?" L 208.

- 35 Locke, *Essay*, 416 (III.iii.14).
- 36 Cf. *ibid.*, 417–18 (III.iii.15–17).
- 37 Leibniz, *New Essays*, 293.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 292.
- 39 Cf. *ibid.*, *New Essays*, 292.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 294.
- 41 Cf. Leibniz, “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” L 292.
- 42 Leibniz, “On Universal Synthesis and Analysis, or the Art of Discovery and Judgment,” L 230. A further advantage in the case of substances is that we know that they exist by experience, and therefore we know that the idea of gold is non-contradictory, even if we do not know precisely all its constitutive concepts and have thus not established its possibility *a priori* through proper real definitions. See Leibniz, “Of an Organum or Ars Magna of Thinking,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London and Melbourne: Dent, 1973), 4; *New Essays*, 293–4.
- 43 Leibniz, “On Universal Synthesis and Analysis,” L 231.
- 44 Cf. Jaap Maat, *Philosophical Languages in the Seventeenth Century: Dalgarno, Wilkins, Leibniz* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 345.
- 45 Cf. Leibniz, “Dissertation on the Art of Combinations,” L 80.
- 46 Cf. Leibniz, *New Essays*, 120, 297, 403.
- 47 Leibniz, “Dialogue,” L 184.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 Cf. Leibniz, “Thought, Signs and the Foundation of Logic,” translated in Marcelo Dascal, *Leibniz. Language, Signs and Thought: A Collection of Essays* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987), 182.
- 51 Leibniz, “A Geometric Characteristic,” in *Leibniz. Language, Signs and Thought*, 167 (emphasis mine).
- 52 Leibniz, “Preface to the General Science” [“La vraie méthode”], in *Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 14.
- 53 Leibniz, “Thought, Signs and the Foundation of Logic,” 181.
- 54 Cf. Leibniz, *New Essays*, 185–6. It is on these grounds that he criticizes Descartes’s ontological proof. See “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” L 291–2.
- 55 Leibniz, “On Universal Synthesis and Analysis,” L 231.
- 56 Leibniz, “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” L 293.
- 57 Leibniz, “Of an Organum or Ars Magna of Thinking,” 3.
- 58 Leibniz, “Dissertation on the Art of Combinations,” L 82.
- 59 Leibniz, “On the General Characteristic,” L 222; see also “On Universal Synthesis and Analysis,” L 229.
- 60 Leibniz, “Thought, Signs and the Foundation of Logic,” 182.
- 61 Leibniz, “Letter to Walter von Tschirnhaus,” May, 1678, L 193.
- 62 On this point, see Stefano Gensini, “‘Filum Meditandi’: Semiotics and Scientific Knowledge in the Thought of G. W. Leibniz,” *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 14, no. 2 (1992): 116.
- 63 Leibniz, “On the Demonstration of Primary Propositions,” in *Leibniz. Language, Signs and Thought*, 149.
- 64 Leibniz, “Letter to Henry Oldenburg,” December 28, 1675, L 166.
- 65 Leibniz, “Letter to Walter von Tschirnhaus,” May 1678, L 193; see also “Letter to Duke Johann Friedrich von Hannover,” fall 1679, L 261–2 and dozens of other papers and letters.

- 66 Leibniz, "Synopsis of a Book whose Title Will Be: Foundations and Examples of a New General Science . . .," in *The Art of Controversies*, ed. Marcelo Dascal (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 217.
- 67 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 17.
- 68 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 11.
- 69 Leibniz, "Letter to Hermann Conring," March 19, 1678, L 189.
- 70 Leibniz, "On a Method of Arriving at a True Analysis of Bodies and the Causes on Natural Things," L 173.
- 71 Leibniz, *New Essays*, 265.
- 72 Ibid., 268.
- 73 Ibid., 275.
- 74 For more on the Leibniz's Platonist epistemology, see Christia Mercer, "The Platonism at the Core of Leibniz's Philosophy," in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 228–30.
- 75 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7.
- 76 This was emphasized particularly by Michel Serres in his *Le système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), 537–47.
- 77 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 53.
- 78 Cf. Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 6; *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2007), 212.
- 79 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 5.