

The Work of Hans Aarsleff: A Brief Introduction

Knud Haakonssen (e-mail: k.haakonssen@gmail.com)

Summary:

The essay provides an overview of the main lines of argument that run through the work of Hans Aarsleff. The emphasis is on the history of language theory as an integral part of intellectual history.

Key words: Aarsleff, history of language theory, intellectual history

In the preface to the second edition of his first book, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, Hans Aarsleff suggests that its main virtue was that it had taken a new approach to its subject when the work first appeared in 1967. This approach had subsequently become generally accepted so that the history of language

was moved into the province of intellectual history, based on the well-founded thesis ... that the study of language in any period is intertwined with events in the larger cultural context, such as developments in natural science, in philosophy, and even in political and religious thought.¹

This is an entirely accurate assessment, to which one should add that *The Study of Language in England* and Aarsleff's subsequent work were driving forces in this development towards what we now call contextualist intellectual history. However, it is telling that Aarsleff's methodological statement was made in retrospect, for contextualism has for him always been an approach and a practice, rather than a theory or a programme. Although in later years he has occasionally expressed an appreciation of Wittgenstein's idea of language as a feature of life forms, he has never committed himself to a definite philosophy of language as the basis for a historiographical method. Contextualism was and is

¹ Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, 2nd ed., (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), vii.

for Aarsleff rather a matter of good empirical history in accordance with the sound injunction, 'beyond context, beyond criticism'. Again and again, he has showed how scholars, past and present, by neglecting the wider contexts in which ideas of language have been articulated have deprived themselves of critical checks on their work.

Aarsleff's transformation of the history of the study of language into a branch of modern intellectual history did in fact coincide even more precisely with the well-known articulations of the new programme in Cambridge, especially by John Pocock and Quentin Skinner.² We find it already in the doctoral dissertation that Aarsleff wrote in the 1950s and completed in 1960.³ As indicated by the shared title, this dissertation was the basis for the subsequent book, and in both he sought to replace the dominant view of historical conceptions of language. In so far as these were not considered irrelevant by modern linguists, they consisted, he found, of a simplistic line-up of what was considered contributions to or anticipations of contemporary ideas – in other words a teleological construction of a useful past that might function as an introduction to contemporary studies. This critical starting point was of course one he shared with the 'Cambridge School' in the history of political thought, but there is a particularly close similarity to what Aarsleff's friend, Donald Winch, a few years later sought to achieve for the history of economic thought.⁴ In both disciplines, an impoverished canon of works was all that survived in a prevailing scientism that saw the big names of the past as little more than fall-guys for modern professional work. Aarsleff also pointed to new work in the history of science, including that of the contemporary Thomas Kuhn, as a source of inspiration and

² See John Pocock, *Political Thought and History. Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 8; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 39-44 and 58-66.

³ Hans Aarsleff, 'The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860', (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1960).

⁴ See Donald Winch, 'Intellectual History and the History of Economics', in *Companion to Intellectual History*, ed. Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), ch. 13.

emulation. In the case of Aarsleff's task it had to begin with the adoption of a broader label; 'linguistics' was a nineteenth-century neologism and thus to write the history of earlier efforts as the history of linguistics was anachronistic from the start. As a matter of history, it had to be 'the study of language' so as to signal a much broader human concern.

Although Aarsleff's work is deeply contextual, it is by no means devoid of grand vistas. To the contrary, he ends up with an extraordinarily wide sweep of intellectual history in which ideas of language are crucial. However, this was not his starting-point but a clear-sightedness achieved through the construction of multiple interlocking or overlapping contexts. The result has been the raising of serious question marks over some of the most entrenched categories used to organise intellectual history in general and language history in particular from Bacon to modern structuralism. These categories include British versus Continental, Lockean versus Cartesian; German historicism versus French (or Enlightenment) rationalism; and Enlightenment versus Counter-Enlightenment; along with Saussurean structuralism; and Cartesian linguistics – to mention the most obvious. Aarsleff achieved these effects in a piecemeal manner and not by a linear presentation. Just like David Hume followed the practice of witches in saying their prayers backwards by beginning his *History of England* with the most recent period, so Aarsleff began his historical trajectory with the nineteenth century and then built up his case, or rather cases, from the preceding two centuries.⁵

Aarsleff's starting point was deceptively particular: what was the view of language that lay behind the creation between the 1860s and the 1920s of the *New English Dictionary* that in time became the *Oxford English Dictionary*? The

⁵ In fact, much of the earlier history is foreshadowed in chapter 1 of *The Study of Language in England* and in the corresponding chapter of its dissertation forerunner, but it is only worked out in detail in the essays collected in Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and in several later papers, culminating in the large essay on Wilhelm von Humboldt below. Aarsleff explains his way of working at length in the introduction to *From Locke to Saussure*.

short answer is, a view of language as a human institution that has its own history and has to be understood in historical terms – but the history of how the historical view of language was acquired in England was intricate indeed. As Aarsleff tells it, it is a story of how two sharply opposed philosophies of language vied for predominance from the closing decade of the eighteenth century until around 1860. On one side was a line of argument that had been decisively shaped by John Horne Tooke and which essentially made language an aspect of psychology, a view that was then forcefully reinforced by the intellectual descendants of the associationists David Hartley and Joseph Priestley and by the utilitarians, especially James Mill, in the theory of the mind. On the other side was the historical view of language that eventually won out, and Aarsleff devotes much attention to the multiple channels by which this view came to the fore in English intellectual life and of how this happened only after a prolonged intellectual and institutional struggle. Aarsleff focuses on two main sources of the relevant linguistic historicism; one was the work of Sir William Jones, which was exactly contemporary with that of Horne Tooke but had a harder time being heard in England than on the Continent. It was here that Aarsleff identified the second source of direct influence in England, namely the historical approaches developed by Danish and German thinkers, especially Rasmus Rask, N. F. S. Grundtvig, Johann David Michaelis, Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm, all of whom had a decisive impact.⁶

So far, so good. But both of the opposing views of language had historically conditioned complexities of considerable depth, which Aarsleff had begun to analyse and explain in *The Study of Language in England* and which have been the focus of his subsequent extensive oeuvre. In the early work he had already explained how both the associationists' and Horne Tooke's reduction of language to part of our mental furniture was a serious perversion of John Locke's view of language and, indeed, of his philosophy as a whole. Aarsleff came early to the view that in general Locke had been fundamentally misunderstood and that a

⁶ Aarsleff's personnel is much larger and of course he includes in his high appreciation of Göttingen an account of the importance of Herder in the German context.

proper reading of him was key to understanding the nature and central role of language in subsequent philosophy. In harmony with the Christian idea of original sin, Locke's basic suggestion was that humanity was deprived of any divinely guaranteed correlation between the objects of understanding, the ideas of the mind and the words tying both together. In one of his boldest moves, Aarsleff argued that this was the main point of Locke's criticism of innatism and nothing to do in particular with Descartes. To the contrary, Locke was himself a rationalist, for while he had rejected the possibility that the human mind is issued with innate ideas and the corresponding Adamic language, he had always affirmed that the mind has innate intellectual powers. Entirely in keeping with Descartes, Locke saw the exercise of these powers as ideally a language-free mental discourse. However, this ideal could never be achieved in practical human reasoning, and in acknowledging this Locke in fact gave some important clues towards a theory that eventually would remedy his own inability to find a theoretically coherent account of language. Thus he not only saw that the lack of a natural or divine link between words and what they designate entailed that words must stem from humans; he also understood that language was a public medium and therefore bound to change over time. So despite his theoretical difficulties, Locke said enough to make it impossible to read him as a simple associationist in the theory of language, which was nevertheless what happened, and Aarsleff traced this distortion through the eighteenth century up to the point where he had started this story – Horne Tooke, James Mill and their like.

Aarsleff put his reading of Locke into the context of the new view of science propagated by the Royal Society, on several of whose leading figures he did original work. The basic point was that if the language of Adam had been lost to humanity in its current state and had to be replaced with human tongues, then language was a source of nescience and only an empirical study of the book of nature could lead to truth. In other words, language was outside of nature and had to be studied on its own terms. There was no shortage of attempts to pull language back into the realm of nature, whether nature in the form of the divinely instituted mind, or nature as the law-bound system accounted for by associationists and materialists. But the important point was that the Lockean

view threw open the possibility that language could be understood as a *sui generis* factor in the life of humanity, namely as what Aarsleff called the first social institution. This possibility was brought nearer by a very different context for the consideration of language, namely the cultivation – especially in France from the late seventeenth century onwards – of the set of connected arts consisting of opera, dance and mime, and closely associated with those a renewal of oratory through a new rhetoric. These practices and the theoretical attention to them conveyed the idea of language as expressive of sentiments and as a matter of social interaction. It is here that modern ideas of sympathy and sociability as the cement of social life and of language as action that expresses such sentiments turn up. The core of Aarsleff's post-Lockean story is that this 'expressivist' idea of language was theorised by a number of thinkers right through the eighteenth century as an answer to the problem of how to understand language as the basic social institution.

On Aarsleff's view, pioneering efforts in this chain of arguments were made by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, Bernard Lamy, Fénelon, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos and George Berkeley, and of course the theory of sympathy reached its greatest articulation in David Hume and Adam Smith. But the key figure in Aarsleff's account is Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, and it is one of Aarsleff's major achievements to have established the Frenchman as a thinker of great intellectual stature. Often taken to be no more than an abbreviated French version of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) was, on Aarsleff's reading, a radically different work.⁷ It was not about the human understanding but about human knowledge, namely its origins, and these were essentially the human ability to use language. Condillac had never had the chicken-or-egg problems concerning language and thought and concerning language and society that Rousseau formulated several years later in the first part of the *Discours sur l'origine et les*

⁷ When Aarsleff undertook a modern English translation of Condillac's work, he followed the eighteenth-century translation in using the title, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*; see Hans Aarsleff, introduction to Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xvii-xviii.

fondemens de l'inégalité parmi des hommes (1755), only then to solve them in the second part with basically the same line of argument as that put forward by Condillac. A recognisably human life is always social to some degree, at least out of sheer need. This means that there will always be spectators, to use Smith's language, to our expressive reactions to our surroundings, whether these reactions be oral or behavioural, and some of these expressive reactions will be perceived as signs by the spectators – signs of objects of fear, attraction, or whatever. This signing function of certain forms of expressive behaviour can in turn be adopted deliberately, so that art imitates nature to create actual communication, whether between different persons or between one person's earlier and later selves. This is the basis for Condillac's detailed analysis of mental processes as inherently linguistic in character, and it is thus an account that is far from reducing language to animalistic cries - as had commonly been thought by interpreters – but that rather makes it key to a view of knowledge as a process of interpersonal exchange that is driven by the full variety of human interests or 'passions'.

Aarsleff emphasises how this organicist account contrasts with the common idea of the Enlightenment as rationalistic and mechanistic.⁸ It makes it intelligible how Condillac had to reject universal grammar's rationalistic idea that there is a natural word order and how he could see the flexibility of word order ('inversion') in languages such as Latin as more natural than the rigid French in the sense that the former was better able to capture – express – the variety of human sentiments. It was this role of inversion that gave rise to the idea that 'the language of action' had a vitality that Diderot called *energy*, a notion that plays a central role in Aarsleff's analysis of von Humboldt's later development of his

⁸ In recent work the same caricature has been rejected on the basis of the life sciences in the Enlightenment, but without mention of either Condillac or Aarsleff's much earlier organicist interpretation; see H. P. Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005). Aarsleff has particular fun with the common misconception that Condillac's famous speechless statue is representative of his view of human nature; one might suggest that it has an argumentative function similar to Rousseau's radically isolated natural humans, except that the Abbé did not take it quite so seriously.

theory of language. The organic and holistic understanding of the linguistic community that Condillac developed - and which Denis Diderot adopted - led him to see language as key to the character and 'genius' of a people, and to see the literary forms that were most expressive, namely poetry, as the most important in this regard.

Aarsleff's thesis is that through Condillac's *Essai* and its elaboration in his subsequent work, as well as in the work of Diderot, Turgot and others a socio-historical view of language had been established that was fundamental to the philosophy of language throughout the rest of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. It was by no means a linear development, and much of Aarsleff's work consists of the recreation of intellectual episodes in which the Condillacian idea was half understood, misunderstood or rejected with hostility, as well as ones in which it was elaborated. In Germany Aarsleff emphasises the value of Johann David Michaëlis' influential account of language as part of social practices and hence as a subject that has to be studied historically.⁹ But at the same time there was an important restatement by Johann Peter Süssmilch of the traditional idea that language was a divine institution. In Scotland where the attention to language was particularly close, Adam Smith developed the most sophisticated theory of sympathy as the basis for sociability, yet his explicit theory of language had no place for social relations and was a rather rationalistic exercise out of touch with current ideas. In odd contrast, the Common Sense philosopher Thomas Reid had the most lucid conception of the language of action, while his eclectic follower, Dugald Stewart, formulated the sharpest and most coherent criticism of the reactionary development in British linguistic thought that was, as mentioned earlier, due (in particular) to Horne Tooke. However, the effective cause of change only came later and from abroad through the works and the personal influence of the Danish and German thinkers also referred to earlier.

⁹ For a recent study very much in Aarsleff's mould, see Avi Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debate of the Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The aspect of Aarsleff's general thesis that has attracted most attention is undoubtedly his account of Herder and von Humboldt. It was, he suggests, Condillac who so excited the young Herder in his early work on language in the 1770s, and it was the dominance of the *idéologues'* Condillacan approach that so challenged the young von Humboldt when he arrived in Paris at the end of the 1790s. It is in this part of the story that Aarsleff has repeatedly run into scholarly controversy; the idea that these two luminaries in many respects were dependent on the ideas of other thinkers, both earlier and contemporary, has been taken to derogate from their stature,¹⁰ and since so much of the scholarly work on them has had – and still has – a distinctly celebratory character, criticism of such scholarship inevitably appears as the opposite of celebratory. The polemical tone has occasionally been sharpened by the fact that there is a barely hidden cultural nationalism involved.¹¹ Part of Aarsleff's thesis is that there is a continuous tradition in French language theory from Condillac and Diderot through the *idéologues* of the turn of the century to Hippolyte Taine and Ferdinand de Saussure in the late nineteenth century, and that these French thinkers and their associates formed important parts of the context in which thinkers elsewhere, including the major German ones, worked. Not only has this been strongly objected to because of the stature of the individual figures, but also because it plays serious havoc with the idea of a distinct historicism in German intellectual culture, one that was seen as setting a sharp end point for the Enlightenment not only in Germany but in Europe generally, and which in fact could be characterised as a 'Counter-Enlightenment'.¹² As Aarsleff himself has pointed out, scholarship in this nationalist mode has a long ancestry, going back to the nineteenth century and the needs in Wilhelmine culture (and indeed much earlier in the century) for a useful past that would set recent German

¹⁰ A memorable and amusing case is Sir Isaiah Berlin's Olympian pronouncements in this regard in the *London Review of Books*, 5-18 November 1981.

¹¹ The suggestion has sometimes been made that Aarsleff's Danishness somehow makes him inherently anti-German, which is as ignorant of his work as it is offensive to his character – but since we are in the territory of *ad hominem* arguments, I should explicitly declare my own Danishness.

¹² For a recent consideration of this idea, see the roundtable discussion 'Was there a Counter-Enlightenment?' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 49 (2015): 51-69.

achievements apart from shallow Enlightenment thought in France, not to speak of British 'materialism' and utilitarianism.¹³ As we now know, also from much German scholarship, the historiographical categories that were formed under these circumstances have had a remarkable longevity, but it is somewhat disconcerting to meet echoes of them in the sort of discussions referred to here. After all, what Aarsleff has been pleading for is that there has been a constant interchange between French, British and German thinkers, as well as many others, in a continuous debate that could serve as a model for contemporary intellectual life in Europe. What is more, he has never suggested that nothing changed in the decades after the 1790s, he has only objected to seeing this as a complete watershed in intellectual history since such a view has blinded scholars to the kind of continuities and overlaps of context that alone can explain the changes in question. The long essay that forms the centre of the present publication is one more concerted effort to make textual and contextual evidence speak to the episode that is perhaps the most controversial in Aarsleff's extraordinary story of the study of language as an integral part of intellectual history.

¹³ Cf. the literature surveyed in Suzanne Marchand's contribution, this issue.