The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy

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An early version of this study on the linguistic turn in hermeneutic philosophy appeared in Spanish in 1993. Since that time, I have become aware of many issues that arise as a natural consequence of the original study. But the attempt to address these issues necessarily led beyond the framework of the initial project; accordingly, the remarks that follow are an attempt to show how a somewhat broader framework emerges from the original one.

My original project was an analysis of the characteristic traits and problems of the linguistic turn in the German tradition of the philosophy of language.1 This turn can be regarded as having

1. With the characterization of this tradition as “German” I mean to distinguish it from the other main tradition of the philosophy of language in this century, which I will call “Anglo-American.” Admittedly, such labeling of traditions is always problematic, given the possible discrepancy between the nationality of an author and the effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte) of her work. The name “Anglo-American” may seem especially misleading for a tradition so deeply influenced by authors such as Frege, Carnap, and Wittgenstein. However, when we consider the effective history of the work of these thinkers, the label seems appropriate. At any rate, it appears less problematic than the attempt to subsume all of the diverse authors of a given tradition under the rubric of a single philosophical viewpoint. The difficulty of finding apt philosophical labels is especially clear in our own time, when the term “Anglo-American” has to include not only the analytic but also the postanalytic phase of this tradition. Equally so, the label “German” must cover not only the hermeneutic tradition (and its predecessors), but that of critical hermeneutics as well.
originated in the so-called Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition,\(^2\) which received further development and radicalization by Heidegger, and which through Gadamer has extended its influence to contemporary authors such as Apel and Habermas.

This German tradition exhibits specific features that distinguish it clearly from the Anglo-American philosophy of language. Perhaps its most important feature is the explicit attempt, found in all the authors of this tradition, to break with the assimilation of all functions of language to the cognitive function (language as a vehicle of knowledge) at the expense of its communicative function (language as a means of understanding). In other words, it is a central aim of this tradition to end what Humboldt terms the “primacy of logic over grammar,” a primacy that the authors in question trace to the very beginnings of Greek philosophy. The basic orientation of this tradition toward social and cultural phenomena rather than natural ones (toward the social rather than the natural sciences) explains this common motif among its authors. In keeping with this focus, the German tradition has always concentrated on the analysis of natural languages, and it has regarded these as constitutive of the relationship of human beings with the world at large. That is to say, this tradition’s philosophical interest in the analysis of language does not stem only from the crucial role played by language in our relationship with the objective world (by allowing us to have propositional knowledge of it). Rather, language is also held to be pivotal to our relation with the social world (which is essentially dependent on intersubjective communication), and even to our experience of our own subjective worlds (which are expressible only through linguistic articulation). In this way, language is considered in its multidimensional world-disclosing function.

However, the differences that appear obvious at first between the German and Anglo-American traditions cease to be so upon

\(^2\) As a solution to the difficulty mentioned in the previous footnote, Charles Taylor (1985) referred to this tradition of the philosophy of language as the “Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition,” a denomination that has now become standard.
closer analysis. Looking a bit more deeply, we find a clear convergence in their basic trends, and in the difficulties that begin to typify both traditions as a result of their own internal development: linguistic relativism, incommensurability, meaning holism, etc. Though such a convergence is far more obvious if the German tradition is compared with the Anglo-American philosophy of language since the 1950s (its postanalytic phase), this obviously could not have occurred had there not been a common basis for the linguistic turn in both traditions.

Although this book is directly concerned only with the analysis of the German tradition, it is crucial that we identify the common links between it and the approach of Anglo-American philosophy. This is important, first, owing to the systematic aim of my analysis, which is perhaps best expressed as an attempt to answer the following question: Are the difficulties mentioned in the last paragraph a consequence of the linguistic turn as such? That is, are they insurmountable problems that this turn alone has served to bring to light? Or do they result only from a peculiar way of executing the turn, so that they might be avoided by revising some previously unquestioned presuppositions? I am inclined to suspect the latter, again for reasons indebted to an Anglo-American trend that began in the 1970s—namely, the so-called theories of direct reference. This novel approach has convinced me that it is possible to avoid the consequences of an extreme linguistic relativism without renouncing the linguistic turn as such.

In short, the common basis of the two linguistic turns in the modern philosophy of language can be found in the way in which each was carried out by its main figure: Humboldt in the German tradition, and Frege in the Anglo-American. Both authors initiated their linguistic turns (it could scarcely have been otherwise) by introducing the distinction between meaning and reference. That

3. My preference for this denomination over the term “‘causal’ theories of reference” is not merely stylistic. As I will try to show in chapter 5, a defense of the crucial insights of these new theories of reference does not require or even imply the adoption of a causal explanation of reference, or that of a metaphysical-realist viewpoint in general.
is, they realized that the peculiarity of language, in contrast with any other system of signs, is that language makes it possible to refer to the same thing in different ways. But beyond this, both authors established this distinction in an identical manner, although this move is far from obvious: they generalized the meaning-reference distinction, viewing it as applicable to all linguistic signs (even proper names). In this way, they arrived at the general thesis that meaning determines reference.

But to accept this thesis as unrestrictedly valid leads to pernicious philosophical consequences. These become visible only when the claim that meaning determines reference, more or less harmless from a strictly semantic point of view, becomes burdened with epistemological tasks. Yet the linguistic turn as such seems to require such a burdening, given that language is no longer simply regarded as one object of study among others, but as the general paradigm for the solution of philosophical problems. In this context, the thesis that meaning determines reference is taken to imply that different linguistic expressions, with their different meanings, determine our (epistemic) access to their referents. That is, linguistic expressions are held to determine, if not what there is, at least what there can be for a linguistic community—or what such a community can say (i.e., believe) that there is. In this sense, the key function of language is held to lie in its world-disclosing capacity. For it is precisely this capacity that renders intelligible the attempt to reformulate all philosophical problems under the aegis of the philosophy of language. This also explains why the linguistic turn and the thesis that meaning determines reference seem to be one and the same. Or at least, it explains

4. Precisely because language, in contrast with other systems of signs, enables us not only to designate objects but also to classify them (i.e., to subsume different objects under the same term and the same objects under different terms), it performs a function of world-disclosure. That is, language allows us to have a general interpretation (and general propositional knowledge) of the world. To the extent that this function is what first makes language philosophically compelling, no linguistic turn can occur without the support of an account of this essential function of language.
why this was considered self-evident in both traditions for many years, and was only placed in question since the 1970s, in the Anglo-American context.

The pernicious consequences of the thesis that meaning determines reference become especially apparent once this thesis is combined with the fact of the plurality and contingency of natural languages and the worldviews peculiar to them (to use Humboldt’s phrase). For this combination necessarily poses serious problems for the possibility of objective knowledge of the world and of intersubjective communication across different languages. If “what there can be” in the world diverges completely for speakers of different languages, if they cannot talk about the same reality, how can they ever communicate? Worse yet, how can these speakers achieve any knowledge about reality?

However, the problems related to the thesis that meaning determines reference have not determined the development of both traditions in the same way. The essential difference is that Humboldt, and the German philosophy of language as a whole, were always interested in the analysis of natural languages, developed through contingent historical processes. By contrast, Frege worked in accordance with the Leibnizian ideal of a perfect language, a \textit{characteristica universalis}. His views remained closely tied to this revisionary project of constructing an artificial language. For this reason, the problems implied in defending the thesis that meaning determines reference for natural languages do not yet appear with Frege in an explicit form. The parallel course of both traditions, especially as concerns the problems of linguistic relativism, became clear only at a later point: namely, when the Anglo-American tradition, in its postanalytic phase, abandoned the ideal of a perfect artificial language. In this way, it became sensitive to

5. Indeed, in his famous footnote about proper names in “Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” Frege anticipates the problems related to the thesis that meaning determines reference when it is applied to natural languages. But he sees these problems solely as further arguments for his revisionary project, i.e., for the need to avoid the ambiguities of natural languages through the construction of a perfect formal language for the sciences.
the insurmountable character of natural languages, and thereby to the problematic implications of meaning holism.

This underlying similarity between the two traditions encouraged me to pursue a specific line of research: I set out to examine whether the questioning of the thesis that meaning determines reference, a challenge initiated by the defenders of the theories of direct reference, could also prove fruitful elsewhere. In particular, I wondered whether such questioning could be useful for identifying and problematizing the source of the reification of language (the linguistic idealism) typical of the German tradition.

Certainly, the various attempts to develop a theory of direct reference have yet to provide a full account of reference in general. But their questioning of the thesis that meaning determines reference—the common denominator of all such efforts—already goes a long way toward undermining the relativist and incommensurabilist consequences resulting from the linguistic turn in both traditions. This questioning is carried out through an analysis of the peculiarity of designation as opposed to predication (i.e., world-disclosure). As I will try to show toward the end of the book, this analysis undercuts the alleged determinative and limiting character of natural languages, and it also helps us recognize the systematic way in which the use of language is inherently related to our capacity for cognitive learning. In turn, this insight allows us to identify the fallacy involved in epistemologizing the semantic distinction between meaning and reference. Such a procedure confuses the obvious fact that our descriptions of referents (via the meanings of the words we use) express our de facto beliefs about them with the purported fact that our descriptions thereby determine that to which they refer. Whereas the former supposition is owing to the trivial truth that “the limits of my knowledge are the limits of my world” (i.e., of how I believe the world to be), the latter gives rise to the myth that “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” (i.e., of the world that I can talk about). Insofar as the latter claim extends beyond the former, insofar as it is taken in the normative sense that we can only refer to that which corresponds to our beliefs, it is mistaken. The expressions
of a particular language with their varied meanings may deter-
mine our (epistemic) access to the referents. As pointed out be-
fore, they may even determine what a linguistic community can say
that there is. But they cannot also determine what this community
considers its beliefs to be about: they cannot determine what the
linguistic community can refer to.

Precisely by virtue of its referential function, language enables
us to transcend the limits of our beliefs by enabling us to refer to
things independently of how we conceive of them. That is to say, it allows
or even forces us to treat referents as logically independent of our
particular ways of conceiving them. When we learn the referential
use of linguistic expressions, we learn that the real referents of
these expressions cannot be reduced to whatever happens to satisfy
our descriptions. That this cannot be what we refer to, no matter
how reasonable our knowledge may be, forces us to recognize that the
descriptions of the referents that make up our alleged knowledge
about them can be mistaken. Only in this way can speakers refer
to the same things, even if they disagree about how these things ought
to be described. Or rather, only in this way can they disagree and
thereby learn from each other.

Language not only plays a crucial role in our interpretative ac-
cept to the world, but has an equally pivotal role in our under-
standing of the world as logically independent of any particular
way of conceiving it. By learning the referential use of language,
we learn precisely about this independence. Thus the practice of
referring involves the formal presupposition of a single objective
world, a world about which our interpretations may differ. Without
such a presupposition, as I will try to show, the entire prac-
tice of rational discussion and collective learning would utterly
collapse.

However, the question that immediately arises is how to give an
account of the referential function of language that is consistent
with an account of its predicative function. Put differently, the
challenge is to give an account of the realist intuitions highlighted
by the linguistic function of designation (on which the epistemic
intuitions regarding the objectivity of knowledge, fallibilism, etc.,
seem to depend), without denying the world-disclosing function of language. How can we do this without appealing to a metaphysical realism that would deny our unavoidably interpretative relationship with the world?

But it is precisely here that it would be difficult to rely on the Anglo-American tradition. For if it is possible to find in some versions of the theory of “direct” reference an attempt to answer this challenge (most notably in Putnam’s “internal realism,” on which the present book relies heavily), there are also versions of this theory which seem instead to evade it. Theories of “direct” reference of the latter kind tend to rely on causalist, naturalist, or metaphysical-realist strategies. In my view, all such strategies are doomed to nullify the linguistic turn, and to forsake much of what has been learned in the meantime about our inevitably interpretative relationship with the world.

To avoid this problem, we can draw on the resources of the German tradition of the philosophy of language. Thanks to the strong idealist tendencies of this tradition, causalist strategies of explanation—indeed, naturalisms of any kind—are quite alien to it. If anything, the problem that arises here is just the opposite. As I will try to show, the challenge is to preserve a realist perspective that can account for the normative presuppositions that guide our cognitive and communicative activities, while integrating it within a general pragmatist strategy that would also account for the interpretative or creative character of those activities.

My analysis of the view of language serving as the basis for Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is meant to answer this systematic challenge. Accordingly, this analysis is unlike the others in this book, insofar as it is not merely a reconstruction. This is owing to the singular position of Habermas’s view within the German tradition.

On the one hand, the elaborate character and systematic ambitions of Habermas’s view make his analysis of language incomparably more complex than the others analyzed here. This is undoubtedly owing to the broad scope of his theory of communicative rationality. On the other hand, Habermas’s approach is also the only one in the German tradition that marks an explicit
attempt to defend a universalist or rationalist perspective against any kind of relativism. For this reason, his theory is the natural place in this tradition to analyze the systematic problem at the heart of my project.6

Moreover, the crucial importance of Habermas’s view for this project lies in the peculiar combination of theoretical strategies that he has employed from the outset. The analysis offered here of Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality rests on the conviction that there is a tension in this theory between two distinct strategies. The first is of a decidedly antirealist, constructivist character. The second incorporates realist elements within a general pragmatist strategy; drawing on Putnam, I will call it internal realism. As developed so far, Habermas’s theory does contain elements of both strategies. It is my conviction that only the latter strategy can provide adequate support for a universalist approach. For this reason, my original analysis of Habermas’s philosophy of language focused on a primarily critical task: I concentrated on discrediting the viability of certain antirealist strategies that he had suggested as possible ways of completing his theory of communicative rationality.

Since the publication of the Spanish version of this book, I have repeatedly met with the following question: To what extent can the realist strategy briefly sketched in that first edition be effectively integrated and consistently developed within the framework

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6. Another natural place to look, of course, would have been K.-O. Apel’s view of language, from which Habermas’s view of communicative rationality received decisive impulses. But owing to the complexity and systematic breadth of both standpoints, an examination of Apel’s approach would have required a separate analysis in its own right. This had to remain a task for the future. On the other hand, owing to the similarities of some of the theoretical strategies favored by both authors (e.g., an antirealist conception of truth), some of the criticisms of Habermas’s approach developed here are applicable to Apel’s position as well. However, there is an important difference with respect to the recognition (fundamental for my criticisms) of the normative presuppositions underlying the designative use of language, for Apel has explicitly analyzed the theories of “direct” reference in a way similar to my own. Unfortunately, I became aware of this source of indirect support for my analysis only after this book was originally completed.
of Habermas’s own theory? That is, to what extent can this strategy account for everything that Habermas’s theory had aimed to explain?

In an effort to answer this question, I have added a new, third part to the English edition, in which I attempt to take a constructive step. In contrast with the changes introduced in other chapters, this has required advancing to some extent beyond the scope of the original project. On the one hand, this step has an obvious systematic aim, in view of which the differences between the two traditions of philosophy of language become irrelevant. On the other hand, the attempt to show the viability of developing Habermas’s full theory of communicative rationality through an internal-realist strategy stands under the requirement of completeness. This entails passing outside the domain of the philosophy of language in order to disentangle, however sketchily, the problematic links between theoretical and practical reason. But in a different sense, this addition to my project represents only another step in the never-ending search for an answer to my initial question: what is the connection between reason and language?

I would like to thank Graham Harman for his indispensable help with the preparation of this new edition.
Introduction

The linguistic turn in the German tradition of the philosophy of language, also known as the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition, is characterized by two main features resulting from the identification of language with reason that is integral to this tradition. Such an identification goes beyond mere etymological reference to a common origin in the Greek *logos*. More than this, it entails two shifts that are both unprecedented in the tradition to which these authors react and unassimilable by it:

1. The view of language presupposed by the philosophy of consciousness is subjected to a critique. On this view, the role of language is relegated to that of a tool mediating the subject-object relation; consequently, language becomes a medium for the mere expression of prelinguistic thoughts. The critique of this standpoint arises by regarding language as constitutive of thought, and by recognizing accordingly the double status of language as both empirical and transcendental. In virtue of this status, language lays claim to the constitutive role traditionally attributed to consciousness, to a transcendental subject.

2. Furthermore, this transformation amounts to a *detranscendentalization* of reason. Reason comes to be unavoidably situated in the midst of a plurality of natural languages, which cannot guarantee the unity of reason in the same way as could the extrawordly standpoint of a transcendental subject.

These two central features have become commonplace in twentieth-century philosophy, with different philosophical traditions carrying out a similar linguistic turn along rather different paths. Given their apparent significance, it is important to examine whether these features have to be regarded as constitutive of the linguistic turn as such, or whether they should instead be called into question as consequences resulting only from an implausible reification of language.

To shed light on this issue, I will begin by examining Hamann’s critique of Kant, which can be viewed as the starting point of the linguistic turn in the German tradition, the point at which this tradition makes a definitive break with the philosophy of
consciousness (chapter 1). Next, I will proceed to discuss Humboldt’s view of language, which is not only far more elaborate than Hamann’s brief and fragmentary remarks, but also far more influential in the context of contemporary German philosophy¹ (chapter 2). Examining the views of these authors will provide the needed background for assessing the way in which Humboldt’s conception of language is radicalized by hermeneutic philosophy (chapter 3). It will also help us to understand how Habermas develops his own view from out of this hermeneutic tradition, even while trying to recover those aspects of Humboldt’s standpoint that it neglects (chapter 4).

¹ Precisely because this tradition inaugurates a new philosophical paradigm, it was not well received by the dominant philosophy of its time and was confined to the shadows by the preeminence of German idealism. However, its influence on German (as well as non-German) philosophers in this century has become significant.
The significance of Hamann’s critique of Kant is certainly not due to its initial repercussions in the author’s own lifetime, which were rather minimal. The weight of this critique is actually due to its anticipation of ideas that took hold only two centuries later. Hamann’s critique of Kant, never read by the latter author,1 is contained in two brief papers. The first is a review written on the occasion of the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Hamann read while it was still in press. The second (dating from 1784) is a more elaborate if equally fragmentary paper entitled “Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft.”2

We can see the *leitmotiv* of Hamann’s metacritique in his claim that “reason is language, *logos,*” or that “without the word, neither reason nor world.” As mentioned earlier, this theme recurs systematically in the tradition that extends down to Heidegger and Gadamer.3 Given its great importance, it is necessary to reflect

1. For a discussion of Hamann’s relationship with Kant, see F. C. Beiser (1987), pp. 16–43.
2. In the collection of Hamann’s works, *Vom Magus im Norden und der Verwegenheit des Geistes.* (See the bibliography for the complete references to all works cited throughout the present book.)
3. Herder also begins his critique of Kant by pointing out that “the Greeks refer to both reason and language with a single word, *logos*” (XXI, p. 19). Although Herder’s elaborate critique of Kant is interesting in its own right, I will not
on the precise meaning of the identification of language and reason by the authors in question. For it is noteworthy that no such identification can be found in Greek philosophy, Gadamer’s interpretative efforts notwithstanding.

In the view of language sketched in the first book of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*, we already find language in its mediating role between two fixed poles, namely, the “things out there” and the affections of the soul. This inaugurates a tradition, extending down to Kant, that explains the workings of language by way of a model centered in the designation of objects with the help of words (or names). As Aristotle explains:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.⁴

The full workings of language are thereby reduced to its designating function, such that language becomes an intraworldly tool for “representing” objects that exist independently of it. This makes it impossible to view language in its various constituting functions, in its quasi-transcendental role for our understanding of the world. And precisely this constitutive view of language is what lies behind its identification with reason in the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition. On this point, Schnädelbach remarks as follows in his *Philosophie* (1986):

Although Aristotle means by logos both reason and language, he is oblivious of any perspectivism concerning languages. For him, the diversity of natural languages is no objection against the unity and permanent

discuss it here, for it would divert us from the general themes of the present book. For the same reason, I will discuss Hamann’s critique of Kant only insofar as it anticipates central ideas of the new conception of language elaborated by this tradition, without providing an exhaustive exposition of it. For an interesting reconstruction of Hamann’s critique, see J. Simon (1979), pp. 135–165.

⁴. *De Interpretatione* I, 16a3–8.
identity of reason, because he interprets language as a set of conventional—i.e., in principle arbitrary—signs of those affections (pathemata) to be found in every consciousness—which are in turn (non-conventional) signs of external objects. Given the sameness of the external world and the structure of human sensibility which is common to all men, that to which signs refer also has to be the same for all men. . . . This purely instrumental view of language, linked to the idea of an invariable human reason, constituted the unquestioned foundation of philosophy of language from Aristotle to Kant. . . . In their critical confrontation with this view of language, Hamann and Herder saw that language is not a mere instrument for fixing and communicating the experience of the world, for that which we experience is determined, “constituted,” by the character of our own language. The cost of recognizing this is that reason . . . cannot be thought as “alingual” either; it has to be already, in itself, linguistic reason. Hamann and Herder criticize Kant for holding fast to a “pure” reason, independent of language. . . . Since then, “reason and language” has been the systematic central problem of all philosophy of reason in general.5

1.1 Language as the Hidden Common Root of Understanding and Sensibility Sought by Kant

In light of the theme sketched above, we can now consider the central features of Hamann’s metacritique of Kant. The core of this critique touches on the three “purisms” pursued by Kant, which in Hamann’s opinion are not feasible:

The first purification of philosophy consists in the attempt—partly misconstrued and partly failed—to make reason independent of all tradition and belief. The second reaches even further in its transcendental aspiration and ends up with nothing less than the complete independence of reason from experience and everyday induction. . . . The third, highest and, as it were, empirical purism concerns language, that unique first and ultimate organ and criterion of reason, with no other credential whatsoever than tradition and use.6

According to Hamann, this triple “purity” of reason has a single origin: the illusory attempt to separate reason from the actual

Chapter 1

and historical conditions of its existence. He criticizes this general tendency of the Enlightenment with a systematic objection, namely, the impossibility of "purifying" reason of language in any way, since language is the "unique first and ultimate organ and criterion of reason."

To defend this point of view, Hamann chooses the indirect path of a metacritique. That is to say, he develops his critique by examining the conditions of possibility of the very analysis carried out in the Critique of Pure Reason. To this extent, he understands his criticism as a metareflection on that which Kant tacitly presupposed. This metareflection is carried out by Hamann by means of a question that Kant did not answer, insofar as he "forgot" to pose it: "how is the capacity to think possible?" Only through the prompting of such a question could Kant have discovered that "the capacity to think rests on language." If Hamann succeeds in justifying the implicit assumption that language is "constitutive" of thinking, the general aim of his critique will have been achieved. If thinking is inextricably bound up with an already existing language that makes it possible, the very idea of a presuppositionless starting-point, which underlies the depiction of reason as "pure," is a mere illusion. As Grunder points out, "insofar as there can be no thinking without a language, there cannot be a suprahistoric or ahistoric reason."

Hamann’s justification of this claim, as we shall see a bit later, lies in his view of language as that common root of understanding and sensibility for which Kant had searched in vain. Hamann’s explana-

7. The general line of Hamann’s critique of Kant fits perfectly with the later critique of Hegel in his attempt to "dissolve the Kantian dualisms." This is recognized by Hegel himself, for whom Hamann’s critique hits "at the core of the problem of reason" (Hamanns Schriften, in Berliner Schriften 1818–1831, p. 270, cited by Simon 1979, p. 158). However, the emphasis on the connection between language and reason that is characteristic of Hamann’s critique is not followed up by Hegel. This is the aspect of Hamann’s critique which is, in retrospect, revolutionary.

8. MK, p. 208.

9. Ibid.

tion of this view not only makes up the core of his metacritique, but also represents the key to any subsequent linguistic turn:

Words, then, have an aesthetic and logical capacity. As visible and audible objects, they belong, along with their elements, to the realm of sensibility and intuition. But according to the spirit of their purpose and meaning, they belong to the realm of the understanding and of concepts. Therefore words are as much pure and empirical intuitions as they are pure and empirical concepts: empirical because they cause visual and auditory sensations; pure inasmuch as their meaning is not determined by anything belonging to these sensations.11

The special character of language lies precisely in its hybrid character as both empirical and conceptual, that is, in its “aesthetic and logical capacity.” Insofar as language unifies these two dimensions, it is the condition of possibility of that which can only be generated after the acquisition of a language—namely, the conceptual domain of meanings detachable from their sign-substratum. The abstraction of such a domain can only be explained by recourse to our linguistic capacity, in terms of our ability to use signs to represent nonlinguistic entities. This is why Hamann talks about “the receptivity of language” rather than about “sensibility,” as Kant does.

Such a priority of language over the transcendental aesthetic expresses the peculiar “turn” that Hamann gives to the Kantian transcendental project. The synthesis that Kant sought in the “schematism of reason” (and that led him to the insoluble puzzle of explaining this synthesis as a causal interface between the understanding and the things in themselves) is always already linguistically realized. Reflection always comes too late, as it were, when it tries to “deduce” such a synthesis by means of what Hamann ironically termed a “violent, illegitimate, idiosyncratic separation of that which has been put together by nature” (p. 202).

Hamann is well aware of the scope of his critique, which questions the very idea of an a priori deduction of the principles that reason “dreams” it can give to itself as if by spontaneous generation. As he points out:

no deduction is necessary to establish the genetic priority of language . . . over the seven sacred functions of logical principles and deductions. Not only does the entire capacity to think rest on language . . . but language is also the center of the misunderstandings of reason about itself. (italics mine) 12

1.2 The Untenability of the Kantian Distinction between A Priori and A Posteriori

Questioning the very idea of an “a priori deduction” is one of the central consequences of Hamann’s critique of Kant. Viewed in retrospect, it is surely its most revolutionary feature, remaining unparalleled until twentieth-century philosophy.

The background to this critical move can be reproduced as follows. Hamann’s metacritique radicalizes the transcendental viewpoint by asking for the conditions of possibility of an allegedly “pure reason.” This radicalization culminates in the discovery of something (namely, language) that is both transcendental and empirical. But this discovery necessarily renders dysfunctional the application of the basic categorical distinctions of transcendental philosophy—for these distinctions were meaningful precisely only under the exclusion of such a possibility (that of a transcendental-empirical hybrid).

A fateful tension already appears if one tries to apply the a priori—a posteriori distinction to language. Accordingly, this distinction is strangely transformed, as Hamann expresses in his claim that the meaning and use of words is “a priori arbitrary and contingent, but a posteriori necessary and indispensable.” 13 Language is

12. P. 208.
13. P. 211. The critique of Kant’s a priori/a posteriori distinction implicit in this formulation of Hamann situates his metacritique in the same line as Quine’s critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” Wittgenstein’s reflections on the peculiar status of “propositions that hold fast” in On Certainty, or the transformation of the Kantian apriorism into an “a priori perfect” carried out by hermeneutic philosophy. For the different consequences that can be drawn from these critiques, see footnote 12 in chapter 3.