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# COMPARATIVE LINES BETWEEN LEIBNIZ'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE AND SPINOZA'S REFLEXION ON LANGUAGE THEMES

Olga Pombo

## 1 Preliminaries on the concept of confrontation

The task of **confrontation** between two philosophers always involves serious hermeneutical difficulties. When those philosophers happen to be the authors of two of the most powerful and original systems of western thought, those difficulties become enormous. Each system is a singular universe of signification, a philosophical hypothesis which elects some determinate problems as deserving to be worked out and which faces them and tries to solve them in a determined way. In this sense, each great philosophical system is unique and incomparable.

However, it is possible to admit a sort of **life of philosophical ideas** in which the several systems have their roots, a problematic soil through which, even in the absence of any historical relationship, the various philosophical systems can all be related and in which it is possible to compare them. Furthermore, there are some **particular circumstances** — the historical proximity of the two philosophers, the mutual acknowledgment of their works or the existence of comments of one's writings by the other

— which, although not being decisive, can render easier the confrontation.

**That is the case for Leibniz and Spinoza**, where all these facilitating circumstances do indeed occur. They both belong, not only to the same historical period but to the same kind of philosophical endeavour — that of, after Descartes and in the frame of a rationalist position, looking for the philosophical integration of the new science. Add to this: Leibniz knew about Spinoza probably even earlier than 1669; they had common friends and correspondents; the two philosophers exchanged letters; they met themselves "plusieurs fois et fort longuement" (GM 2, p. 179) Leibniz has carefully studied, commented and criticized Spinoza's writings, first the *Principia* of 1663, then the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and, at last, the *Opera postuma* which he has so urgently demanded and which he has received early in 1678.[1]

These are probably some of the reasons why the **confrontation between Spinoza's and Leibniz's philosophical systems** has never ceased to draw the attention of their contemporary and posterior readers. Indeed, the points of convergence and divergence of the two great authors, the deep similarities, the profound differences, the several levels of relationship, have always been put in relief.[2]

However, concerning the **confrontation between Leibniz and Spinoza's theory of language** nothing has been written at all. The fact is that there is no common area where such confrontation could be accomplished. To have a confrontation we need to have two theories face to face, as in the case of Spinoza and Leibniz regarding to substance, individuation, God, etc. That is also what happens between Leibniz and Hobbes, or between Leibniz and Locke in regards to their full developed theories of language.

But in Spinoza there is not a theory of language. Language is not a

[1]It is yet to be noticed that Spinoza is one of the modern authors whom Leibniz most frequently quotes. Significantly, of his many references to Spinoza, none of them is concerned with Spinoza's conception of language and, in the leibnizian texts on language, Spinoza is never quoted.

[2]From Stein 1890 pioneering study to Friedman 1962, but also Foucher de Careil 1854; Robert Latta 1899; Rivaud 1914; Brunschvicg 1923, chap. XIII; Moreau 1971; Parkinson 1978 or even Deleuze 1968. On the reception of Spinoza, cf. Bell 1984.



**problem** which Spinoza has elected as deserving to be thought out. The conceptions he comes to formulate are never discussed in their controversial framing, nor related with any other of Spinoza's theses; he never discusses them within their polemical tradition nor does he establish any kind of architectonical relationship with some of his own other conceptions. On the contrary, for Leibniz, language is unquestionably a main problem, a question that can be said to occupy one of the centers of his system.[3]

Being so, there seemes therefore not to exist any kind of reason why one should look for similarities (or even for differences) between Spinoza's and Leibniz's theory of language, simply because Spinoza was not interested at all in language problems. As he states quite clearly and categorically, on the basis of a too much easy distinction between things and language:

> "But my purpose is that of explaining, *not the signification of words, but the nature of things*...That it would be enough to have make it clear once and for all" (*E* 3Def20, our emphasis).

## 1.1 The possibility of a general (negative) comparison

However, things are meaningful in different ways and even an absence can be significant. As has been done with Descartes, in the so called "oubli cartésien du langage",[4] we could ask: Why did not Spinoza have a developed **theory** of language? Why do not language **problems** find a systematic place within the philosophy of Spinoza? What feature, in the economy of his system, did not demand the developed formulation of a theory of language.

In this sense, we would like to argue, even if a positive full confrontation between Leibniz's and Spinoza's theory of language is impossible, yet —

[3]In a system with no center, a "réseau" as Michel Serres 1968 stands, language indubitably occupies, together with Logic, Dynamics and religious problematic (as Couturat 1902; Gueroult 1967 and Baruzi 1907, respectively argued), one of its privileged concurrent entries.

[4]Cf. Robinet 1978, pp. 79ff. For an analysis of the metaphysical and gnoseological reasons of this "cartesian forgetfulness of language", cf. also Belaval 1960, pp. 24–83.

**that is our first suggestion** — it would be possible to try a somehow **negative** kind of **general comparison**.

Why is not language an important problem for Spinoza while, for Leibniz, it is a major one, a problem to which he has devoted great attention along all his intellectual itinerary, dedicated a considerable amount of his effort and activity and which is at the root of his astonishing vast and diverse linguistic investigations, as a philologist, historian of human languages, etymologist and researcher into the origin of natural languages, as a speculative and comparativist grammarian and as semiologist who interrogates the methodological and epistemic scope of symbolism, studies and compares several kinds of signs and tries to determine the more adequate sign-system for his project of a Characteristica Universalis?[5]

Why did language, in spite of the dispersed, fragmentary nature of Leibniz's work, nevertheless give rise, not only to innumerable references, fragments, letters, "opuscules", brief passages of major works, but also to several important texts solely dedicated to questions of language (from the *De arte combinatoria* to the *Unvorgreifflichen Gedancken*) and, on the contrary, in a work endowed with such a powerful systematicity as the one of Spinoza, none of his philosophical writings, any chapter or specific set of paragraphs is systematically or exclusively devoted to the developing of this problem?[6] What metaphysical and cognitive reasons can explain that enormous distance and difference?

A large question which may deserve the status of a **general (even if negative) comparison**: it would involve a **complete general survey of the two systems**, it would require a full account and deep ponderation of their fundamental grounds, methods and designs — Leibniz's interest in language is fixed deeply and firmly in the core of his logical and metaphysical thought; Spinoza's carelessness of language is likewise

[5]See the *Brevis designatio* and the *Collectanea etymologica* (where Leibniz presents an extraordinary collection of etymological examples from different languages) or his many and deep studies on german language. On the several linguistic investigations of Leibniz and its possible unity, see Pombo 1987.

[6]To the exclusion of his *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* which obviously cannot be considered here since language is not there theorized, faced as a problem or theme of reflexion but simply ruled in its practice.



the consequence of a philosophical project which aims to be the architectonical expression of a self-consistent wisdom, of a transparent truth, directly and internally apprehensible in the independent, meditative, relationship of each one with the infinite being in which, and by which, every thing is and every thing can be conceived.

## 1.2 Particular comparative studies

But, perhaps we could go a step further. A philosophical system is like an ark, a magic locker in which are kept forgotten treasures, secret ideas, deep deflected questions and precious indications on the basis of which it is sometimes possible to build an interpretive and complex whole: as again with Descartes, there is not a complete silence or forgetfulness about language in Spinoza's works. If language is not a major point of Spinoza's writings, nor is it **a problem** which has originally quarreled him, it is nevertheless **a theme** he happens to treat, a subject which suddenly emerges in his text and which, even if accidentally, he came to thought out quite deeply.[7] If there is no developed **theory** of language in Spinoza's system, still there are, in the form of scattered, non-systematic statements, some important **reflexions** on language, acute remarks and illuminating observations which have already given rise to several monographic studies.[8]

Being so, it is possible to do more than the negative comparison referred to above. It is possible — **that is our second suggestion** — to establish, in a positive way, **particular comparative studies** between the references to language themes from Spinoza and the correspondent topics of the developed and complex theory from Leibniz.

[7]Permit me to recall again, but now in full to draw attention to the emergence of language *themes* in the very moment Spinoza declares his distance from language *problems*, the passage of the *Ethica* quoted above:

> "But my purpose is that of explaining, not the signification of words, but the nature of things, and of — now it comes the passage we wanted to emphasize — naming these by terms whose customary signification does not deviate at all of that with which I want to employ them. That it would be enough to have make it clear once and for all" (*E* 3Def20).

[8]Such as Savan 1973; Parkinson 1973; Zac 1977; Dascal 1977 or Brunelli 1977.

In fact, Spinoza comes to be in some way confronted with the theme; he has been, as it were, forced to give it serious attention in **two determined moments** (we mean, **directions**) of his intellectual activity: one concerned with his need to work out a rational exegesis of the Holy Scriptures; the other one arising from of the questions placed in the frame of his theory of knowledge. **The first** takes place at the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*; **the second** emerges mainly in the *Ethica*, in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* and also in the *Korte Verhandeling*.

However, it is necessary not to forget that, in both cases, Spinoza's interest or intention in the treatment of such subjects, the very context of its appearance in the text, is not concerned with the language problem ($1^{st}$) itself but again with his exegetical or gnoseological concerns (and $2^{nd}$ directions, respectively). That is why, even if we recognize the notability and indisputable interest of some of his formulations we cannot avoid stressing that they do not constitute a true theory.

## 2 The exegetical approach

**The first direction occurs in an hermeneutical context** when, at the theological chapters of the *TTP*, Spinoza proposes, as well known, the examination of the sacred books merely by means of an historical and philological critique, free of any dogmatic constraint and theological presupposition. In the accomplishment of that task in which, in spite of the self-taught and amateur character of his activity,[9] nevertheless Spinoza reaches an unquestionable place in the history of (biblical) hermeneutics (cf. Gusdorf 1988, pp. 11–113), he begins to establish the very **exegetical method** which he proposes to adopt himself.

In the $7^{th}$ chapter — a true "Discours de la méthode en matière d'exégèse", as Gusdorf 1988, p. 112, says — we find indeed a detailed exposition of that method which is fundamentally constituted by **three orders of requirements:**

[9]Cf. Zac 1985 and also Biasutti 1979, pp. 142–145 who argues that Spinoza had, specially through Vossius, direct contact with the humanistic philology.



1) etymological and morphological requirements related with the special attention to be given to the:

> "nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 99);

2) **internal structural requirements** concerned with the need of

> "arranging into different groups the statements of each book, reducing them to some main keys as a way to find easily those concerned with the same object (and)... those which are ambiguous or obscure or in contradiction one with another" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 100);

3) finally, **external historical and philological requirements** relative to the investigation of the life and habits of the author of each book, their aims and purposes, about the time, occasion, destination and other particular circumstances of the composition of the manuscripts, their posterior fortune and history, etc. (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, pp. 101–102).

Now, it is **within the frame of such an exegetical program** that Spinoza is compelled to deal (among various kinds of theological, and historical questions, among all sorts of philological details, among many analyses of the morphology, grammar, vocabulary, orthography, even of the punctuation of Hebrew[10] to deal, we were saying, with **language themes of reflexion**, such as the concepts of reading, translation, literal and allegorical interpretation, metaphoric and poetic language, popular and religious language, significative intention of the author, style, meaning, context; in a word, classical language questions about which he always makes the most penetrating remarks, the most acute comments, of which he sometimes gives us precise definitions, subtle distinctions, ingenious observations, but for which he never provides a full theory.

### 2.1 Meaning at the TTP

**Let us take the case of one of these issues** — an original conception of **meaning** which, besides being restricted to the case of the

[10]On Spinoza's deep knowledge on the Hebrew language, cf. Zac 1977.

Scripture books, is extremely interesting and close to the "hermeneutical turn" which characterizes our contemporaneity.

The context in which we suddenly find Spinoza making the defense of what we propose to call an **immanent conception of meaning**, is that of the status to be bestowed on the textuality and religious language of the Scriptures.[11]

As is well known, Spinoza starts from the distinction between **natural** and **revealed knowledge**. While the former, even if divine in its intimate root, comes from a set of principles of the natural light to which all men give full and free consent, the revealed knowledge is achieved by men through the mediation of a **prophet**, that is to say, an "interpreter of God's revelations" (*TTP* 1, p. 15), a translator, someone who receives the Word of God, understands it at his measure, translates it in an ordinary language, and communicates to others what he has been able to understand.[12]

> "Thus, revealed knowledge is already discourse, a human discourse which, solely through the prophet's prestige and reliance people place upon him" (*TTP* 1Adn2),

succeeds in being heard by others, to remain, to last through the centuries in the form of oral and written traditions.

Now — Spinoza observes — since today there exist no prophets anymore who could be heard in a direct way, we must content ourselves with the antique texts left by the ancient prophets (cf. *TTP* 1, 3, p. 6). Everything we have is in there, **closed** within the texts of the Old Testament, kept in the words (ambiguous, equivocal signs) of a vulgar, plebeian tongue — the Hebrew. There is no external authority which could be considered, no arbitrary doctrine, no dogmatic constraint, no human invention which might be respected (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 97). Not

[11] For a detailed study of the religious language at the *TTP*, cf. Brunelli 1977 and also Watt 1972.

[12] Revealed Knowledge is thus a human translation of the Word of God which consists in a sole, unique precept — the practicing of justice and charity. Note also that such a meaning — it could be stressed — comes from the text of the Scriptures as a whole.



even the natural light, if that would be the case,[13] can help us since, the Scripture treats very often of things which cannot be deduced by natural light (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 84) such as stories, miracles, incredible facts which are adapted to the opinions and beliefs of those who have written them.

That is why, as Spinoza states:

> "**all the knowledge of the Scripture must be taken from Scripture only**" ("Tota itaque Scripturae cognitio ab ipsa sola peti debet") (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 99, our emphasis).

In this central statement Spinoza stresses the classical thesis of the autonomy of the letter in contrast to the spirit, a thesis which obviously is rich in exegetical consequences, namely in the opposition to all the allegoric methods of interpretation of the Scriptures.[14] But what we would like to emphasize is the fact that such a statement is also rich in notion the concept of meaning which Spinoza will have to work out in order to found it a solid ground.

That is to say, if the purpose of this statement is exegetical, its defense is going to imply the formulation, or better, the "**invention**"[15] of **a new concept of meaning** in which it is supposed that:

1) the meaning is **internal** to the text;
2) the seat of the meaning is neither the letter (as the cabalists wanted), nor the word and sentence (as, in the case of Leibniz), but the text, **only the text**.

Spinoza emphasizes strongly this interesting thesis; he repeats it several times, almost in the same formulation; he develops further the idea, showing how it is on the sole basis of the **internal context of the text** that it is possible to decide the meaning of an obscure, ambiguous sentence (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 100). Meaning is not something which the reader could

[13] And it is not since, as seen above, these two forms of knowledge must keep away one from the other. "Quin imo apprime cavendum est, quamdiu sensum Scripturae quaerimus, ne ratiocinio nostro, quatenus principiis naturalis cognitionis fundatum est (...) praeoccupemur" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 100).

[14] Namely the allegoric method of Maimonides. Cf. *TTP* 7, 3, pp. 113ff. Cf. also Zac 1985.

[15] We use here an expression of Zac 1977, p. 623 who qualifies it even as "a great invention".

reactualize in a different epoch, accordingly to his own views or private engagement with the text.[16] For Spinoza meaning is enclosed within the Scriptures from the first moment of its writing by the ancient prophets and thus it is through the text itself, through **the internal logic of the text solely**[17] that we must interpret the meaning of a statement, such as: "God is a flame" or "God is jealous", which he analyses in an exemplary form (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, pp. 100–101).

## 2.2 Meaning and exegetical method

He even says that his entire exegetical method is grounded on that single rule — that the knowledge of the Scripture must be taken from the Scripture alone.[18] And so it is, in fact, but — as we will try to demonstrate — only for the two first methodological requirements.

As seen above, the first **methodological requirement** stressed the need of a deep knowledge of the **language** in which the books of Scripture were written in order to its proper exegesis. A requirement which can be seen as contradictory with the above mentioned rule in the sense that the meaning of the text would then be somehow external to it, lying not in the text but in the language in which the text is written (language being here thought out, accordingly to a **conventionalist conception of meaning**, as the instituted and institutional seat of the meaning). But, on the other hand, this requirement can also be seen as a necessary consequence of that rule: the meaning of the text is internal to the text and thus to the language in which this text is written; since a text is nothing but a fragment, or better, an expression, one of the possible manifestations of the language in which it is written (language being here thought of, not as an exterior element of the text but as its intrinsec component, its very means).

[16] Something which, as Levinas 1982, pp. 201–206, stresses, is contradictory to all the Talmudic tradition as well as to our contemporary hermeneutical feelings according to which the reader of the text has a decisive role in the production of the meaning of the text.

[17] "... ex ratiocinio, quod nullum aliud fundamentum agnoscit quam Scripturam" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 100).

[18] "... ut cognitio Scripurae ab eadem sola petatur" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 106).



**A greater difficulty** seems to occur when Spinoza, seeing that the original language of the Scriptures was fundamentally **Hebrew**, a language of which, as he says, we have:

> "not even a dictionary, nor a grammar, nor a rhetorical treatise (...) but only some fragments of the language and a few books" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 106),

he concludes that:

> "it is impossible to get a perfect historical knowledge of Hebrew" (**ibid**);

furthermore, since the Hebrew is also a language in which exist, besides those common to all languages, many particular causes of ambiguity (which he signals and describes), Spinoza concludes further that there is no method which may permit one to determine the true meaning of an ambiguous passages of the Scripture (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 107) — a conclusion which seems to compromise the principle of the interpretation of the Scripture by the Scripture alone.

However, if we are not mistaken, it is possible to interpret this same question as follows:

1) if those texts existed, we mean, dictionaries, grammars, literature in general (or, in the cases where they exist), it would be in them and by them that we could get a perfect knowledge of the language;

2) the knowledge of a language — in this case, Hebrew — can only be obtained, not by the fact that one speaks the language, but by the knowledge of a set of texts in which the language does exist — dictionaries, grammars, literature. Otherwise, it would be always possible, for a speaker of the language, to discover, even to decipher the meaning of old words and idiomatic expressions; there would be an heuristic creativity of the language itself that would make it possible (something which Spinoza cannot accept in view of what he states about the unsurpassable difficulties of a perfect knowledge of Hebrew);

3) wether those texts exist or not — as in the case of Hebrew — it would be then the knowledge of those texts which would provide the

knowledge of the language and, therefore (contrary again to what the first methodological requirement would seem to stress), language is not, in itself, the true, the ultimate (and external) seat of meaning to which we might appeal for the discovery of the meaning of the text (in this case, the Scripture);

4) generalizing, we could say: the meaning of the text(s) must not be sought in the meaning which the language keeps in itself, but, on the contrary, it is the meaning of the language that has to be discovered in and by the meaning of the text(s).

These theses reinforce, in fact, the spinozistic conception of meaning (as well as the first interpretation given above for the first methodological requirement) according to which the meaning lives solely in the text.

Immediately after that, Spinoza calls in help for his **second methodological requirement** which is clearly the practical of the text outcome, the technical consequence of his immanent conception of meaning:

> "to group the statements contained in each text reducing them to a certain number of principal keys, as a way to find easily those which are relative to the same object; then, those which are ambiguous or obscure or in contradiction one with the other" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 100),

that is, to do what he calls a "**orationum collatione**", significantly defined here as:

> "the only way (...) to reach the true meaning of a text which, *according to the usage of a language, allows various others*" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 109, our emphasis)[19]

a definition which stresses again the interpretation given above on the first methodological requirement.

[19] A procedure, which is near the equivalent to the principles of fragmentation and pertinence of the structuralist textual analysis, as for instance Roland Barthes 1966 defines them.



## 2.3 Ambiguities in Spinoza's conception of meaning

But, as we will see, Spinoza formulates, or better, uses, not only one but **several and sometimes antagonistic conceptions of meaning**. They are all working in the text not without some contradiction.

That is what happens with the **last of the three methodological requirements**, namely, the need to take in account the historical and philological details relative to the author and the historical particular circumstances of each text. Such a requirement supposes in fact the adoption of a quite different and antagonistic conception of meaning according to which the key for the discovery of meaning in the text is not "inside the text only", but, on the contrary, outwards, at the knowledge of its author (life, habits, aims, and so on) and, in general, of its historical determinations.

That is to say, the third requirement of Spinoza's exegetical methodology supposes the adoption of an **externalist conception of meaning (psychological, historical)** which is contradictory with the principle of enclosure which we have been emphasizing.

Now if we remember what Spinoza said about the status of the Scriptural texts, the fact that they were the written transcription of what the prophets wanted to tell us about the Word of God — that they had the opportunity to hear, while we, other people did not — we must recognize that, for Spinoza, the last aim of the hermeneutical work with the Scriptures, his ultimate goal, cannot be other than the reconstruction of what the prophet wanted to say, of what did the author had in his mind. Spinoza himself states it clearly when he says:

> "if we do not know who was the author (of the text), in which time and occasion it was written, it is vain if we try to know its meaning (...). We can not at all know which was or which could be the *intention* of the author; on the contrary, when we know exactly all that (...) we do not mean other things then *those which the author could have in his mind*" (*TTP* 7, 3, pp. 109–110, our emphasis).[20]

[20] Further on Spinoza refers the case of similar stories given by different books and

It is clear that Spinoza postulates here **another conception of meaning — a third one** — which we could name as a **romantic** conception, to use Gadamer's 1960 classification, in which meaning is thought out as lying ultimately in the author's significative intention.

What is interesting is that Spinoza is dealing here with various and contraditory conceptions of meaning which can live peacefully side by side. However, the contradictions we have pointed out do not decrease the value of the main thesis, they do not reduce the originality of that "**spinozistic invention**"; those contradictions are not able to make us forget the hermeneutical importance, and the philosophical merit, of a principle by which Spinoza stresses the need, for a free interpretation of the text, out of any authority or interpretative tradition, listening, to attend to the text by its own, to read it in its materiality, to pay attention to the manifest plenitude of its meaning.

## 2.4 Truth and Meaning

However, it is important to ask: Why such a thesis ? Why has Spinoza invented it? What was the problem — if any — which this thesis tried to face?

In order to look for an answer, we must remember that, for Spinoza, the Scripture appeals only for faith, for **obedience** (cf. *TTP* Prae, 3, p. 10). Being so, the only thing a man need to know of the Scripture is if he has interpreted well what it states, if he has correctly understood what it commands, if he has properly apprehended what he ought to obey. He need not appreciate the truth of such commands.

Scripture is therefore not to be interpreted in its **truth** but only in its **meaning** — a fundamental distinction which, being at the root of his very immanent conception of meaning, is clearly stressed by Spinoza, who states:

says that only on the basis of the knowledge of their authors' design, it is possible to interpret what each author would have wanted to say. Cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 110.



> "We only look here for the meaning of the text and not for its truth" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 100).

and adds, further on:

> "... it is necessary, when we look for the meaning of the Scripture, not to have the mind preoccupied with our reasoning, which is grounded in the principles of the natural knowledge (...) in order to do not mistake the true meaning (of a discourse) for the truth of the things" (**ibid**).

**Truth is the task of the philosopher** but not of the **believer** who only looks for **the meaning of the words**, who is solely interested in knowing what he is supposed to obey, what God wants him to do. Thus, in a way, it is not, as we have already repeated, a genuine interest in language problems which is at the root of the so called "Spinozistic invention", but the status granted to the **pragmatic** range of the Scripture.

A last question could yet be raised: are we here face to face with **another conception of meaning — a fourth conception** — according to which the criterion for the valuation of a correct interpretation of the meaning of a text (a normative text like the Scriptures are), is the correspondent behaviour which it induces someone to perform, in this case, the behaviour of obedience? Are we here face to face with another "spinozistic invention", this time not an immanent but a **pragmatic conception of meaning**?

In any case, the spinozistic principle of the interpretation of the Scripture by the Scripture only, even if confined to the exegetical context of the Scripture books in which, in fact, it is solely formulated, that is to say, even if it can not be generalized to all kind of texts (and, it can not since, with other texts, it is the natural light that guide us),[21] has the merit of calling attention to the possibility of the meaning being lodged, not at the semantic level of the sign, word or sentence, but at the architectonical level of the text — the reason why we have denominated it as an **immanent conception.**

[21] See the opposition established in the texts of Euclid a little further in the text. Cf. *TTP* 7, 3, p. 111.

It is easy to see that this spinozistic conception could be compared with the **leibnizian conception of meaning**. It would be possible to show how Leibniz was necessarily committed to a **semantic conception of meaning** according to which the meaning (and the truth which is the final goal of the continuous development of the meaning process and not a qualitatively different instance) lies at the judgment. Then, seeing that the meaning (and the truth) of the judgment is in Leibniz dependent of its analyticity, that is, of the meaning of its components, it would be workable to show how meaning is thus thought out by Leibniz as having its roots in the concept which the judgment expresses. Afterwards, since meaning (and truth) has its ultimate seat at the level of the concept (and of the word which expresses it), it would not be perhaps too difficult to show how, in last resource, meaning comes to be for Leibniz deeply grounded in an **onomastic (semiotic) conception of meaning.**[22] This is a thesis which, besides, is in Leibniz perfectly articulated with his theory of the non-arbitrariness of language to which we will pay same attention further on.

## 3 Gnoseological approach. Obstacle and transparency in language.

**The second main direction** in which Spinoza comes to give attention to language themes corresponds to an less specific, localized interest.

In this second direction, which has been sufficiently studied by others,[23] would be included those well known spinozistic theses and conceptions such as: the distinction between ideas and words (*E* 2S49), the physical essence of words and images (**ibid** and *TIE* §§58, 88, 89), the vulgar, arbitrary origin of languages (*TIE* §89), the essential equivocal, confused nature of words and their consequences at the gnoseological and communicative level (*E* 2S47 and 19; *CM* 1/6; *KV* 2/16, 6), the ways we can

[22]Cf. Benveniste 1967 who distinguishes between the semantic and the semiotic levels accordingly to the fact that the seat of the meaning is considered to be, respectively, the sentence or the word.

[23]Guéroult 1974; Parkinson 1973; Biasutti 1979.



use to try to overcome those difficulties (*E* 3IEx20; *TIE* §17 and *TTP* 7ff.), the question of universals (*E* 2P40S1, 2), of negative names (*TIE* §§58, 88, 89; *CM* 1/1), and other, more or less directly connected with language, themes.

**One of the more important theses in this context** is the conception according to which, language is for Spinoza, not only the inferior (imaginative, confuse, inadequate) degree of knowledge, but also an **obstacle** to the true knowledge which "makes itself manifest" (*TIE* §44), needing no words at all, that is, a cause of ambiguities and misunderstandings of all sorts, but the very "vehicle of mistake", as Guéroult 1974, p. 434 says, which further more cannot be eliminated, but is simply diminished or attenuated.

This is thesis coming mainly from Bacon and Descartes, and with which there exists indeed a **complete opposition to Leibniz**, analyzable in the frame of their diverse metaphysical principles and theories of knowledge, namely of their so very different positions with regard to the relationship between reason and imagination.[24]

However, it is important to note that **Leibniz was, in this point, in opposition to all his contemporaries**, maybe with the exception of Hobbes.[25] In fact, **only Leibniz**, in his time, has realized, in all its

[24]While for Spinoza there is a clear distinction to be made between *imaginatio* and *ratio*, for Leibniz the only difference is one of degree since being both constitutive elements of a continuous series of perceptions, they only differ from one another by degree of clearness and distinction. Furthermore, while for Spinoza *imaginatio* is the cause of falsity and ratio the cause of necessarily true knowledge, on the contrary for Leibniz every perception contains or involves an infinity of "*petites perceptions*" relatively obscure, confused and unconscious, that is to say, imagination and understanting are necessarily inseparable elements presupposed one by the other. As Leibniz says, precisely in the context of a critique to Spinoza, "*ratio sine imaginatione et memoria est consequentia sine praemissis*" (*Animadversiones*, FC, p. 58) or also, "*les plus abstraites pensées ont besoin de quelque imagination*" (GP 4, p. 563).

[25]Accepting the hobbesian thesis of the eminently linguistic nature of human language, his definition of reason as a calculus and the primacy given by the Scottish philosopher to the mnemonic function of language over the communicative one, but rejecting his merely evocative conception of the sign, that is to say, Hobbes's demand that names should be always accompanied by the concepts they designate, Leibniz was able to go beyond the internal limitations of Hobbes's philosophy of language and to explore the heuristic possibilities of symbolism, of which Hobbes was never aware. We

epistemic consequenties, the decisive role of language in the constitution and progress of scientific knowledge, that is, has recognized that human language does not disturb the knowledge of reality but, on the contrary, leads to its rational penetration, not merely reflecting but also promoting and clarifying our knowledge of reality. As Leibniz says in his *Letter to Tschirnhaus* of May, 1678:.

> "Nobody must fear that the contemplation of characters would lead us away from things; on the contrary, it lead us to the interior of things" (*ad intima rerum ducet*) (GM 4, p. 461).

On the frame of this **cognitive conception of language**, a conception mainly formulated and developed in the debate against Descartes and within the frame of the epistemological doctrine of the blind thought,[26] Leibniz has indeed clearly stressed the heuristic importance of symbolism which he considers to be the proper, necessary and essential means of human reason, that which allows us to operate with ideal significations which can only be established by signs and that only signs — as symbols of the virtual determinations of our ideas — enable us to thought. As he says in the celebrated *Dialogus de connexione inter res et verba* of 1677:

> "I will never be able to know, to discover, to prove without using words or without the presence in my mind of other signs" (GP 7, p. 191).

Even if here we are face to face with one of the passages where this thesis is the most clearly stressed, it is irrefutable that Leibniz was completely aware of the inexhaustible field of cognitive possibilities opened up by the use of symbolism, that is, of the non-merely judicative or demonstrative power of symbolism, but also of its prospective and heuristic potentialities.[27]

discuss this issue in the *Appendix* of Pombo, 1987, pp. 199–209.

[26] See the *Meditationes de Cognitione, Veritate et Ideis*, published by Leibniz at the *Acta Eruditorum*, Leipzig, 1684, the text which opens the debate with the cartesians.

[27] Leibniz's position is in fact not always as strongly stated as in the passage cited above. Compelled by the epistemological and linguistic limits of seventeenth century, as well as by the aporias of his own theory of symbolism, he has, as if it were, sometimes avoided a strong defense of this thesis. His position is marked by certain ambiguities concerning the effective status conferred to the sign. Cf. Pombo 1987, pp. 101–119 where we study the several texts in which this thesis is defended and their oscillations.



**Spinoza**, on the contrary, **follows the usual thesis of his time**, a thesis coming, either from English skepticism (interested in deepening the obstacles to knowledge), or from French intuitionism (interested in stressing the merely instrumental, communicative role of language) and, in general, defended by all the modern philosophy which had established a too deep rupture with Renaissance inspirations and with the analogical sense of its wisdom; a thesis which, in the case of Spinoza, was strongly necessary as a way to safeguard the absolute wholeness of divine intuitive knowledge.

That is, **the opposition between Leibniz and Spinoza in this important issue**, even if obvious and "trenchant", seems to us not to be completely relevant; since Leibniz was, in this point, in opposition to his time. He was exceeding the epistemic limits of his epoch. That can happen in fact in philosophy, even if it is only there that men can go beyond their (temporal) boundaries.

## 3.1 The arbitrariness of human language

Yet, let us give some attention to **another important issue** which also makes its appearance in the second direction we are referring to, that is, at a gnosiological context: the fundamental question of the arbitrary versus non-arbitrary nature of human language.

This is an issue which, furthermore can be presented as **a sample** able to illustrate the two authors' usual procedure in what regards language. As a matter of fact, when reading the Spinoza's passages about language, one is astonished by the appearance of so many important, interesting questions that Spinoza's genius suddenly finds and recognizes. But, as his interest is not there, he gives them a quick solution — even if deep — and goes on. He recognizes the question, formulates for it a brief, decisive statement, and drops it out. But he never discusses the questions he finds. On the contrary, with Leibniz, we see him intentionally dealing

with those problems which truly interest him, we see him discussing several hypotheses for its solution, estimating their respective consequences, appreciating their grounds, taking them again, many years later, in very different contexts — always the same problems, obsessively returning in different occasions.

After having stated (*TIE* §88) that words, like imagination, can be the cause of serious and multiple mistakes, *Spinoza* writes in the following paragraph:

> "Add that words are constituted arbitrarily accordingly with common people" (*TIE* §89).

Note that this thesis, which makes its appearance ,in the Spinozistic text in such a sudden way, is formulated just once. Note also that such a thesis could be a strong way and an excellent opportunity for Spinoza to justify the negative conception of language he has just stated in the previous paragraph (*TIE* §88). We could thus expect to see Spinoza giving a greater attention to such a fundamental thesis. But he does not do so.

It is true that there are other passages which can be related to this one, for instance the one in which Spinoza says that books, being conserved by learned men, can be corrupted while the tongue, being conserved by them and also by the people, cannot be corrupted. **People** are considered the guarantors for the incorruptibility of the language (cf. *TTP* 7, 3, pp. 105–106), what can be read out as a kind of an undertermined praise to the anonymous people in his onomaturgical power, that is, a kind of reassertion of Spinoza's conventionalist position, now as if it were accompanied by a beginning of explanation of its nature (here thought out in its social, institutional dimension).

In the *Ethica* there is also a passage in which Spinoza, without even mentioning the arbitrariness of human language, in some way provides a complementary explanation for that arbitrariness, here thought out, less from a sociological angle than from a psychological one, when he explains that the reason for the mistakes coming from the use of words have its origin in the **habit** by which people gave names to the particular, subjective ways by which they were affected by exterior bodies (cf. *E* 47S).



However it is clear that Spinoza is not really interested in the question of the arbitrariness of human languages. He finds it at the middle of his route, gives it a conclusive answer, becomes conscious of its difficulties and goes ahead on his own way.

## 3.2 Locke and Leibniz

On the contrary, **Leibniz** has worked out that question all through his intellectual activity, exploring almost all possible directions, pursuing in parallel multiple perspectives, different, divergent, apparently contraditory lines of research. As if Leibniz, being in such a way aware of the central role of that question for the understanding of what is the essence of human language, felt quite clearly how much each answer, and all of them together, were unable to exhaust the mysteries of language.

In that which, significantly, is the longest paragraph of the *Nouveaux Essais* (*NE* 3-3-1), Leibniz refutes the conventionalist position of Locke's philosophy of language. The dispute comes fundamentally from the opposition Leibniz establishes to the thesis, presented by *Philalethe*, of the multiple **imperfections** which are inherent in natural languages, that is, in the frame of the discussion of Locke's negative conception of language.[28]

Indeed, **according to Locke**, these imperfections and abuses have their root in the arbitrary nature of every language. As he states in a paragraph precisely entitled "*Of the imperfection of words*" of his *Essay*:

> "Words having naturally no significance, the idea which each stands for, must be learned and retained by those who would exchange thoughts and hold intelligible discourse with others, in any language." (*Essay*, 3-9-5)

On the contrary **for Leibniz** it is precisely because language is not arbitrary that it is possible to overcome all its imperfections and "find remedy" (GP 5, p. 317) for each of them.

[28] A dispute that can even be considered as lying at center of the polemic between the two authors over the problem of language. Cf. Aarsleff 1982, p. 42.

While recognizing the relevance of the imperfections and abuses of language referred to by *Philalethe*, which he discusses one by one, Leibniz defends in fact, in harmony with his cognitive conception of language referred to above, two major arguments: **1)** the imperfections listed by *Philalethe* do not came from languages themselves but are the responsibility of the human subjects who use them; they are not therefore inherent to human languages but a consequence resulting from its defective use, that is, from our "**negligence**" (*NE* 3-9-9); **2)** thus within men's reach is the possibility of introducing modifications, of filling gaps and fixing indeterminacies, of overcoming ambiguities and stabilizing the meaning of words (cf. GP 5, pp. 317–318, 320–321).

Now **the solutions proposed by Leibniz** — basically, the recognition and exploitation of the qualities of writing and of the potentialities of definition — are all **internal** to language itself; they are processes which emerge from the field of possibilities which language itself opens up to us. Why ? Because of two central thesis that Leibniz stresses quite clearly in the *Nouveaux Essais* as well as in many other texts: languages are "the best mirror of human mind"(*NE* 3-8-6) and "the oldest monuments of humankind" (*NE* 3-9-10), that is, because languages are not arbitrary but, on the contrary, are motivated, both at the level of their grammatical structures (which mirror the logical structures of human reason), and of the lost origin, but still present thickness of their vocabulary, with their expressive words, their indicative transparency, their radical openness to the world in which they were created and which, in them, is expressed.

Contrary to **Locke**, whose aim is to stress the **effect of opacity** which, he believes, any language introduces between reality and the human mind in view of its arbitrariness, **Leibniz** (but also Spinoza and many others), and again in the frame of his cognitive conception of language, not only exculpates natural languages, laying the blame for their imperfections on human subjects' incorrect use of them, but also (because he starts from the thesis, opposite to Locke's, of the motivated origin of natural languages), tries to show how, at the two levels — the syntactic and the morphological — rather than canceling the reality it names, language becomes the space of **rational and prospective penetration** of that



reality, the only *medium* men has at his disposal to promote and clarify his knowledge of the world.

## 3.3 Non-arbitrariness in Leibniz

But the thesis of the non-arbitrariness of language is not puerly presented by Leibniz in such a polemical context, as a refutation of Locke's position. On the contrary, it is a **systematic implication** for the principles of sufficient reason and pre-established harmony[29] and one of the central theses of Leibniz's philosophy of language. A thesis which accomplishes the role of a kind of **regulative idea** crossing all the leibnizian linguistic investigations and which, in our opinion (cf. Pombo 1987, pp. 193ff.) can also be seen as **giving unity and coherence to his three divergent, apparently contraditory linguistic projects**: a) the study (and perfection) of natural languages (namely, german), in which Leibniz discover — and praises — besides the etymological level, the still present motivation of its vocabulary; b) the search for the constitution of a Rational Grammar on the basis of the deep universal structure underling the grammatical particularities of the various national languages; and c) the construction of a Universal Language endowed with a similar (or even higher) representative nature.

Leibniz's main purpose would be that of investigating the motivated origin of natural languages, both at the level of their vocabulary (German especially) and of the deep structure underlying their grammatical particularities (Rational Grammar), try to comprehend its origin, to understand its mechanisms and determining laws, and, subsequently, to apply those discoveries in the construction of a new philosophical language, of a similarly motivated nature; that is, to use that knowledge in order to recover and (re)construct that motivation in an artificial language in which it would be possible to somehow repeat (and even perfect) something that had already been achieved in natural languages.[30]

[29] "Certam quandam et determinam inter Res et Verba connexionem esse dici nequit; neque tamen res pure arbitraria est, sed causas subesse oportet, cur certae voces certis rebus sint assignatae" (C, p. 151). Cf also *NE* 1-1-5 and Dutens 6-2-28.

[30] Since universal language would be fundamentally graphic, its motivation would

In that sense, we can easily understand the reason why Leibniz has explored so many kinds of **motivation in natural languages**, both at the level of their vocabulary, distinguishing and trying to understand the secret and original root of their different forms of motivation,[31] and of the universal structure underlying the grammatical particularities of each natural language, which Leibniz has so deeply investigated in the context of his projects for a Rational Grammar (cf. Dascal 1987, pp. 125–144).

Also it is easier to understand why, at the level of his project of a *Characteristica Universalis* — in which that "regulative idea" takes the form of a search for the **representativity of the characteristic signs** — his aim that signs, besides operativity (or functional capacity within the formal system) should also be natural, representative or directly opened to the reality they are supposed to say[32] — he has pursued so many models in order to get that representativity for the characteristic signs, has he attempt and explored so many different ways of reaching such a representativity.[33]

avoid the oscillations and the progressive extinguishment to which natural languages have been submitted by time and human displacements.

[31]Onomatopoeic phenomena, phonetic and articulatory symbolism (cf. GP 5, pp. 260–264), rhythmic analogies between the sign and the reality expressed (cf. C, p. 1521), direct relations between sound and idea (cf. Dutens 4-186-189), relative motivation resulting from the morphological composition of certain words (cf. GP 7, p. 192.

[32]In fact, since the *De Arte* Leibniz has noted the property which the sign should have of adequately expressing the idea signified which he designates as "naturalness". Cf. GP 4, p. 43.

[33]As we tried to show, it is indeed possible to distinguish three great models within the leibnizian theory of the representativity of the sign, from the extreme proposal of a ***figurative representativity*** as the pictural, representation of the most pregnant traits of the signified reality — " des petites figures a la place des mots"(GP 5, p. 379), to a second and weaker model, which we propose to call ***essentialist***, in which representativity is conceived as the direct designation of the essence — "rei ipsius ideam"(GM 5, p. 216), thought out either as a causal, generative principle (illustrated in the leibnizian project of constituting a Characteristic on the basis of a binary arithmetic (cf. FC, p. 167, C, p. 430) — ***genetic representativity***), or as the "Key" (***"clavis"***) or unifying principle of the multiplicity of the properties which compose the signified idea and in which representativity of the sign implies a process of analysis of the sign itself, which would identify in it, both the constitutive elements of the represented idea and the law of their combination, as in the case of the analysis into prime factors (cf. C, p. 277) — ***analytical representativity***) and, finally, to a third and last model which we propose to call ***expressive***, in which Leibniz conceives representativity as the analogical and structural reproduction of the very system of relations which constitutes the idea and its articulations and in which we try to demonstrate to be yet possible to distinguish three subtly different subtypes since, Leibniz conceives structure either as purely formal — the semantic level tending to be entirely reduced to the syntactic — this is the possibility explored in the important fragment ***Essais d'analyse grammaticale*** (cf. C, p. 285), or as source of meaning in itself since it would be able to imitate the real conceived as a structure (this is the case expound in the ***Dialogus*** (cf. GP 7, p. 192) where it is structure itself that tends to become semantic), or as being absorbed by the sign and through it becoming expressive (as it is suggested in the fragment ***Characteristica Geometrica*** (cf. GM 5, p. 141) where Leibniz clearly recovers the ideal of the semanticity of the sign itself). Cf. Pombo 1987, pp. 176–189).



Even if each of those models (which here it is impossible to more than conclude) proved to be incomplete and insufficient, the very fact that Leibniz has outlined so many strategies and hesitated, up to the end of his life, with regard to the sign-system to be adopted, can be read as a signal of the crucial importance he attributed to the establishment of such a requirement. Also it appears as the **mark** — and the complex, hard and intricate **profile — of a true theory** in the very movement of its own problematic growth and enlargement.

## 4 Conclusive remarks

There is yet **another comparative line** which deserves to be considered. The fact that, having no developed theory of language, Spinoza has stressed the importance of a **philosophical style**, while Leibniz, to whom language is a central item, did not.

Contrary to what might be expected, while Spinoza has elected a particular style — the "*more geometrico*" style — as the necessary, adequate form which philosophy should look for, Leibniz stresses that any style can be used given that truth and clarity would be warranted.[34]

According to this **monist conception**, Spinoza explicitly uses in his masterpiece a deductive methodology for the establishment of his sys-

[34]Recognizing the importance of elegance in capturing the attention and facilitating memory of the reader, Leibniz considers that the fundamental qualities of philosophical discourse are clarity and truth (cf. GP 4, pp. 138–139).

tem which, on the basis of self-evident (hypothetical) first principles and with the help of definitions, scholium and corollaries, deduces the nature of humanity. Leibniz could not follow the rigorism of Spinoza: his perspectivism affects also his style. In an attitude of **manifest pluralism**, Leibniz has used, in the expression on his thoughts, almost all kinds of literary genders and styles, from the "Essay" to the "*disputatio*", from the "*opuscules*" to the "*dissertatio*" and the dialogue, the aphorism, the preface, the journal article, the autobiographical text, circumstantial writing or simply brief note.

This kind of approach would have taken us to the study of the use which both authors have attributed to language in the literary expression of their systems. It would be a **real confrontation** and not merely a **comparative study** since at this level, both authors are in the same circumstances. They both left us **a Work** in the most deep, strong sense of the word. But it would be a confrontation, more of the literary nature of the two authors' texts and styles than of their conceptions of language.

However, that investigation leads to **another question**, apparently irrelevant: What could it **mean** the fact that Spinoza has so deeply thematized the question of the philosophical style, while Leibniz, since the preface to Nizolius considered that question as secondary? Why has Spinoza left us such a perfect monument as the *Ethica* is, where he tries to apply the style he has elected, while Leibniz, being so deeply aware of the cognitive and heuristic importance of language, has not stressed the advantages of a determined literary genre for philosophical texts and, on the contrary, has left us such a fully recognized pluralistic work? What meaning could be ascribed to this poetic difference?

It was this last question, apparently accidental, which has led us to the somehow **paradoxical thesis** with which this paper ends: Leibniz did not care about what should be the literary genre of his texts because he was aware of the importance of language, while Spinoza, on the contrary, was aware of the literary genre of philosophy because his system did not reserve a special place to the language problem.

Having arrived this point, we came to ascertain that, perhaps, it is possible — **that is our third and last suggestion** — to establish here a **general positive comparison** between Leibniz and Spinoza in



regards to language. Perhaps what appears as paradoxical may become the ground for that very difference!

Stressing the cognitive, prospective nature of human language, Leibniz was obliged in his writings to proceed by development; Spinoza, in view of his radically negative conception of language, was determined to use a deductive style.

Because language is an obstacle and because, furthermore, Spinoza is a conventionalist, he has to stake an initial consensus, that is, that the philosophical text must be grounded in its transparent beginning. From this perspective, Spinoza looks for the divine, intuitive nature of the first principles, origin and source of all ideas, cause of every beings, and tries to keep that truth by the strictness of deductive chains, aiming thus to give rise, not to a great variety of texts and other language performances, but to an architectonic whole as the *Ethica* is — the supreme masterpiece of his entire contemplative life.

Leibniz on the contrary, being a defender of the representative nature of language and of its openness to reality, makes a bet in the gradual transmission of meaning, in the exploration of the proliferating heuristic potentialities of languages, trying to exhaust the horizon of signifying potential announced by each sign, by each word, by each sentence, by each writing, by each gender, by each style, that is, he was mainly interested in the active systematic exploration of the speakable, in the gradual development and ex-plication of what may be implicit in the universe of meaning that structures reason and its language.

In the end, if in Spinoza there exists a clear rupture between truth and meaning — a distinction which, as seen above, is at the very root of the "invention" of his immanent conception of meaning — that is, if in Spinoza there must exist a deep rupture between intuition and text, between reason and language, on the contrary, in Leibniz, the meaning is the road for the truth, that is, language is the way for knowledge. This is, in fact, the "**great invention of Leibniz**": truth and meaning have only a difference of degree.

As Leibniz does not establish any rupture between meaning and truth, he does not formulate any immanent theory of meaning. He has no reason to be interested in the text and in its aesthetics. On the contrary, because

Spinoza makes clear such a rupture, formulates that fruitful conception of meaning which calls attention to the text. That is perhaps why he was so much attracted by the beauties of style.

> "Euclid has only written extremely simple and perfectly intelligible things, he is easily explicable by anyone in any language; to understand his thought and to be sure of having found its true meaning, it is not necessary to have a full knowledge of the language in which he has written; a very common and almost childish knowledge is enough" (*TTP* 7, 3, p. 111).

In the face of beauty, it is the very meaning that is exhausted. Or, does then the meaning become truth?

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## RESUME

Notre objectif est celui de suggérer quels pourront être les plus pertinentes lignes d'analyse comparative entre les réflexions sur le langage de Spinoza et la théorie du langage de Leibniz.

On envisages trois grandes possibilitées:

1) faire une espèce de comparaison negative général en se demandant pourquoi il n'y a pas chez Spinoza un vrai problème du langage tandis que, pour Leibniz, il est un des centres privilégiés du système;

2) faire des études comparatifs particuliers dans le deux directions fondamentales auxquelles Spinoza s'est plus profondément confronté avec les enjeux du langage: la direction exégètique (au *TTP*) et la direction gnosiologique (surtout dans l'*Ethique*). Dans la premiere on étudie la conception immanente du sens que Spinoza a été comme que obligé à développer au livre VII du *TTP* et on essaye de montrer dans quelle mesure cette conception pourrait être étudiée comparativement à la conception sémantique du sens à laquelle Leibniz s'est nécessairement engagé; dans la seconde direction, on essaye de monter jusqu'à quel point l'opposition entre une conception négative du langage chez Spinoza et la conception cognitive et prospective de Leibniz est claire et bien-fondé. Dans ce contexte encore, et à titre exemplificatif, on étudie avec quelque détail la position de Spinoza et celle de Leibniz sur la question de l'arbitraité du langage;

3) établir une comparaison positive général entre les deux auteurs en ce qui concerne la rélation entre leurs position sur le style philosophique et leurs respectives conceptions du langage.