

From divine inspiration to empirical enquiry in the German Enlightenment: Johann David Michaelis on language and civilisation

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Biographical background

Avi S. Lifschitz is Lecturer in Early Modern European History at University College London. He received his DPhil from the University of Oxford, where he was William Golding Junior Research Fellow in the Humanities at Brasenose College, and an MA from Tel Aviv University. He held research fellowships at the Clark Library and the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at UCLA, the University of Potsdam (Germany), and the Institute of Historical Research in London. He is currently working on a monograph about the eighteenth-century debate on the origins of language, while embarking on two new projects: an examination of the reception of J.-J. Rousseau's works by different intellectual groups in Berlin, and an analysis of Enlightenment discussions of animal language as the boundary between the human and the bestial. He is also co-editor of *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, a volume of essays on various appropriations and interpretations of Epicurean themes (to be published in December 2009 by the Voltaire Foundation, Oxford).

Paper introduction

The current paper is based on a chapter of the monograph on which I am working. It constitutes part of my attempt to highlight the distinctive features of German contributions to the eighteenth-century debate on the origins of language, especially by authors based in Berlin and Göttingen. As mentioned in the introduction to the paper, my initial interest in Michaelis was sparked by his prize essay on language and opinions (1759). This essay was written at a time of keen interest in the crucial role of signs and language in the emergence of civilisation, as can be attested by similar treatises written in the late 1750s and early 1760s by Rousseau, Smith, and Maupertuis. It is therefore not surprising that the Berlin Academy dedicated its 1759 prize contest to a related question. However, in spite of the increasing awareness of the significance of the Berlin debates on language and society, no serious examination of this contest has so far been undertaken – in contrast to the 1771 prize competition on the origin of language and the 1784 contest on the universality of French (each has been the subject of several studies). By focusing on early Enlightenment theories of language and on discussions of language in Berlin of the 1750s, my project highlights the 1759 competition as a transformative point in a vigorous debate that had preceded it. The contest on language and opinions needs to be studied on its own terms, not as a negligible event on a predetermined trajectory leading to the 1771 contest and the works of its laureate, Johann Gottfried Herder.

One of the by-products of my study of the 1759 contest on language and opinions should be a renewed interest in Johann David Michaelis and a shift of focus from his involvement in the debate on Jewish emancipation (in the 1780s) to his early scholarship. Another consequence of my project is a reassessment of the traditional view of the eighteenth-century Berlin Academy as a stronghold of radicalism and

French materialism, inimical to the development of German philosophy. By challenging Wolffian philosophy but also frequently recognising the originality of its adherents and crowning them with its prizes, the Berlin Academy proved a unique centre of intellectual regeneration. This is clearly demonstrated by the debates it initiated about language in society and in the human mind, in which authors such as Michaelis, Lessing, Mendelssohn and Sulzer took part. The Berlin debates of the 1750s and the 1760s also prompted Hamann and Herder to compose their first works on these topics, some of which were written as direct responses to Michaelis's prize essay.

Bibliographical note

There is, unfortunately, no scholarly edition of Michaelis's prize essay in English. A second-hand translation from the French was published in London in 1769 as *A Dissertation on the Influence of Opinions on Language, and of Language on Opinions*, but this version was disowned by Michaelis in the British press through his close collaborator Robert Lowth.

For general background on the eighteenth-century debate on the origins of language, see Hans Aarsleff's article "The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder" in *From Locke to Saussure* (1982; the article was originally published in 1974). While my paper emphasises German traditions and developments, Aarsleff highlights the importance of Condillac's 1746 *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746) which he has recently translated into English as *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (2001). Beyond Condillac's *Essay*, other contemporary reflections on such issues are Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent* (1751), Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'ingéalité parmi les hommes* (1755; especially its first half), and Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1771).

Whereas the originality of Herder's prize essay was questioned in the 1970s in several articles by Aarsleff, James H. Stam adhered to the traditional view of this work as a philosophical landmark in *Inquiries into the Origins of Language: The Fate of a Question* (1976). A first step towards a much-needed contextualisation of Herder's essay was made in Alan Megill's unpublished PhD dissertation, 'The Enlightenment Debate on the Origins of Language and Its Historical Background' (Columbia University, 1975). A similar task has recently been undertaken by Cordula Neis in her *Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts. Die Berliner Preisfrage nach dem Ursprung der Sprache* (2003). On contemporary discussions of language in Berlin, see my article 'From the Corruption of French to the Cultural Distinctiveness of German: The Controversy over Prémontval's *Préservatif* (1759)', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (SVEC) 2007:06.

Anglophone studies of Johann David Michaelis's works are rare. An example of recent interest in him as a precursor of late nineteenth-century racism can be found in Jonathan Hess, "Orientalism and the Colonial Imaginary: Johann David Michaelis and the Specter of Racial Antisemitism", in *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (2002). More attention to other aspects of Michaelis's scholarly works can be found in

Peter H. Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975) and more recently in Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (2005).