

Feral children and the origin-of-language debate in the eighteenth century

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Abstract: The origin of language belongs to the most controversial topics of linguistic and philosophical discussion in the 18th century. Due to its epistemological and anthropological implications it was hotly debated, especially with reference to writings of Condillac and Rousseau. Within the framework of hypothetical explanations for the origin of language, scholars frequently refer to the cases of feral children which are considered to serve as an appropriate model for the very moment of the genesis of language. Given the firm belief of the eighteenth-century scholars that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, feral children provided the model for the reconstruction of the scanty origins of language. Since that time, feral children have been considered as objects of curiosity.

Keywords: feral children, origin-of-language question, acquisition of language, ontogeny, phylogeny, (linguistic) deprivation, *experiment of Psammetichos*, language and society

1. Some general observations on the anthropological background of the origin-of-language debate in the eighteenth century

The origin of language, a topic with delicate anthropological, philosophical, and theological implications belongs to the most prominent topics of the discussions on language in the eighteenth century (cf. Aarsleff 1974; Ricken 1984; Gessinger / von Rahden 1989; Neis 2003 & 2006). There is no doubt that the debate on the origin of language culminated in a time that drew much attention to the question of human faculties in general. Scholars attempted to investigate the natural endowment of man in order to distinguish him from the realm of beasts or to promote man's emancipation from the ecclesiastical dogma. The tendency to conceive human faculties as a work of mankind and not as a work of God was largely influenced by Epicurean ideas (cf. Gensini 1999) that had been adopted by freethinkers and libertines who pursued the divulgation of the doctrine of Epicurus (342-271 BC.) and Titus Carus Lucretius (97-55) in the whole of Europe.

Epicurean philosophy had a strong impact on the thought of leading personalities of French sensationalism such as Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) or Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709-1751). It is a well-known fact that both Condillac and Rousseau gave a strong impulse to the origin-of-language discussion (cf. Aarsleff 1974) – a discussion that had already dominated reflections on language in Antiquity. Since Plato's discussion of the relationship between words and things in his *Cratylus* (cf. Schmitter 1987 & 1991, Borsche 1991, Malmberg 1991 and White 1992), the problem of the origin of language has persisted through centuries of philosophical debates. It was largely influenced in the seventeenth century by Descartes' observations on the nature of mankind in contrast to the beasts. For Descartes (1596-1650), the faculty of language was the distinctive criterion of the human species in comparison with the beasts. This faculty permitted man to maintain a position of absolute supremacy. The faculty of language was conceived by Descartes as an indicator of the existence of human understanding that contrasted sharply with the instinctive mechanisms of beasts.

In Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* (1637), the latter were treated in a somewhat unfriendly manner and qualified as *automata*, as machines lacking higher intellectual capacities and therefore being deprived of a soul. Humans however possessed language and were therefore endowed with understanding and a soul (cf. Ricken 1984, Ricken et al. 1990, Haßler 1999, Neis 2003). Descartes' position provoked vehement protestations by Condillac, a philosopher who argued that there was only a gradual difference between humans and beasts. In his *Traité des animaux* (1755), Condillac was eager to demonstrate that even animals were capable of a kind of pre-intellectual reaction as they could intentionally focus their attention to objects surrounding them (cf. Condillac 1947: 347b). It is well-known that the same Condillac, in his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), imagined two infants of both sexes in a desert, isolated from the rest of the world, just after the Flood. This couple were the protagonists of his theory of the origin of language. He exposed these two children to the vicissitudes of a life in isolation, thus describing their first steps towards the invention of language. Condillac imagined a kind of natural state anterior to the civilized world in which his hypothetical subjects lived in conditions similar to those of beasts. But Condillac was not

the first to have invented this hypothetical experiment. It is noteworthy that he borrowed deliberately from Bernard de Mandeville (1670-1733) without making any reference to his source (cf. Juliard 1970).

The idea of children raised in isolation with the only company of beasts as a source of vocal emanations had for a long time already fascinated those who endeavoured to discover the origin of language and the so-called “primitive” language. In this context, let us briefly recall the case of the Egyptian King Psammetichos I (663-609 BC) who wanted to know which was the oldest language of mankind. For this purpose, he ordered two infants immediately after birth, to be abandoned in the wilderness and only be entrusted to a shepherd who had to see to their nourishment without ever talking to them. As these infants first of all imitated the bleating of the sheep and uttered the sound “bek”, Psammetichos supposed that the Phrygian language was the oldest one because “bekos” signified “bread” in Phrygian. This is what the great historian Herodotus (ca. 484-430) tells us in his *Five books of history* (Book II,2). It is plain to see that this story oscillates in a somewhat strange manner between history and myth. In the course of history, several sovereigns are said to have ordered such experiments to be carried out: King Frederick II the *Stauffer* (1192/93-1150), the Scottish King James IV (1473-1515) and the Indian Mogul Akbar the Great (1542/1556?-1605). For the tradition of the Psammetichos experiment cf. Sulek 1989, Eco 1993, Neis 2003, Haßler/Neis 2009.

For Condillac, however, the experiment is only a hypothetical one, but he clearly follows the pace traced by Herodotus. As we have seen, the conception of infants isolated from human society is an important model for the reconstruction of the origin of language. This framework is indispensable to a correct interpretation of the hypothetical language-acquisition research in the eighteenth century.

But Condillac, in his conception of the origin of language, did not give enough importance to the problem of the relation between language and society – this is what Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed who criticized Condillac in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755). Although Rousseau was largely indebted to Condillac for his theory of the origin of language, he accused him of not having enough respected the role of society for the invention of language (cf. Rousseau 1992 [1755]: 199). In his *Discours* that was an “eighteenth-century bestseller” (Megill 1974: 242), Rousseau emphasized the crucial importance of human society for the formation of language. However, he could not cope with the difficult question of the anteriority of language and society, thus entangling himself in a vicious circle. Rousseau integrated his theory of language into his conception of a natural state of mankind, anterior to civilization. In this natural state, man was conceived as a creature leading a vagabond life and living from the fruits of the forest. In contrast to “civilized man” he benefited from an incorruptible health and knew how to defend himself against the attacks of the beasts of prey. It is plain that Rousseau imagined the so-called “natural” man, the *homme de la nature*, to be an ideal creature who lived in harmony with his environment and who was satisfied with his simple, monotonous way of life. In contrast, the so-called “civilized” man (*l'homme de l'homme*) was conceived as the tangible result of a process of degeneration and corruption of the virtues originally inherent in the human species. (The anthropological grounds of Rousseau’s philosophy exposed in the *Discours sur l'inégalité* and their relationship to his philosophy of language are thoroughly explained in Claparède 1935, Derrida 1961, Duchet 1971, Duchet/Launay 1967, Verri 1970, Starobinski 1971, Fetscher 1975, Philonenko 1984, Ricken 1984, Droixhe/Haßler 1989 and Neis 1999& 2003).

The idea of a “natural state” was not an invention of Rousseau but had been fostered by leading theoreticians of the law of nature such as Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). It was especially Thomas Hobbes with his *Leviathan* (1651) who acquired fame for his Machiavellian conception of the necessity of the absolute state for the taming of the ferocity of primitive man. According to the “device” of *homo homini lupus*, natural man could only be prevented from tearing his fellow men to pieces by the establishment of an absolute state. Rousseau, in his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, fights against Hobbes’ profound anthropological pessimism. He refuses to apply moral categories of the “civilized” world to man in the state of nature. Living in isolation, primitive man ignores feelings of hate or jealousy. He has nothing to do with the Leviathan imagined by Hobbes. When Rousseau integrates his conception of the origin of language into his vision of the initial state of mankind, he makes language arise as a result of the primitive needs of man. He thus follows the Epicurean conception of the origin of language which stresses the crucial importance of the satisfaction of needs as motivation for the invention of language. Following this Epicurean vision Rousseau also adopts Condillac’s theory of the *langage d'action*, a first step of communication based on gestures and instinctive cries (cf. Sgard 1982, Ricken 1994, Hoinkes 1991).

2. The essay contest of the Berlin Academy

The vision of society and language exposed by Rousseau in the *Discours sur l'inégalité* had a strong impact on the discussion of the origin of language in the second half of the eighteenth century. This holds especially true for the prize essay contest on the origin of language organized by the Berlin Academy in

1769. After a long discussion within its own walls, the Academy invited scholars to submit their papers to the origin-of-language question. The precise wording of the question runs as follows:

En supposant les hommes abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, sont-ils en état d'inventer le langage? Et par quels moyens parviendront-ils d'eux-mêmes à cette invention? On demanderoit une hypothèse qui expliquât la chose clairement, et qui satisfît à toutes les difficultés. (vgl. Harnack 1900: Bd II,1: 307)

As language was considered to be an essential component of the natural constitution of man it was to be revealed how man had invented it and whether he had been able to create it on his own. This question must also be seen in the light of a discussion at the Berlin Academy which was caused by a lecture given in 1756 by Johann Peter Süßmilch (1707-1767): the *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe*. In this text, published ten years after being read, Süßmilch himself a member of the Berlin Academy, defended the divine origin of language. He protested vehemently against all origin-of-language conceptions based on the Epicurean doctrine. Because of its high degree of perfection, language could only have been the work of God. And natural man, lacking the higher dispositions of understanding, would never have been capable of inventing a system of such a complexity as language.

It seems obvious that the Berlin Academy by announcing the origin-of-language question in 1769, endeavoured to find a convincing solution which defended the possibility of a human invention. Apparently, scholars considered the question to be highly important because thirty-one entries were submitted to the Academy – an unusually high number of entries (cf. Megill 1974: 353). Today, 24 manuscripts can still be found in the archive of the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften*. 11 entries were written in German, 10 in French and 3 in Latin. Unfortunately, in most cases it is impossible to identify the authors of the manuscripts. In the eighteenth-century essay competitions, it was customary to preserve the anonymity of the essays.

The 24 entries (Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Signaturen I-M-663 bis I-M-686, (Preisschriften 1771)) sent to the Berlin Academy constitute an important *text series* (cf. Schlieben-Lange 1984) in the field of language origins. Apart from the winning essay by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the other entries have been almost completely forgotten. For a long time, only Allan D. Megill, in his dissertation of 1974, had devoted serious attention to the Berlin manuscripts but his analysis remained superficial because he hardly respected the individuality of the different entries. However, a profound analysis of this voluminous material was necessary to reveal the general way of thinking about language origin in the eighteenth century (cf. Neis 2003). When analyzing this text series, you will discover that there are certain recurrent commonplaces in the argumentations of the different participants. There are certain *topoi* which appear in the large majority of the entries and which served their authors as models for the explanation of the genesis of language (cf. Neis 1999 & 2003). As this moment is beyond historical times it can only be hypothetically imagined. Scholars interested in gaining further insights into this problem proceeded by applying a kind of *hypothetical empiricism*. This means that they tried to base their hypothetical investigations as much as possible on facts empirically accessible (cf. Haßler / Neis 2009: I, 471).

We have already demonstrated that the language-acquisition process of infants was considered as a plausible model for the genesis of language of the whole species. Indeed, this model figures among the most recurrent *topoi* used by the participants in the origin-of-language question. It is to be remarked that the hypothesis that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny was uncritically adopted by the scholars of the eighteenth century. The firm belief that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny is still today widespread (cf. the critical remarks on this subject in Aitchison 1995). The experiment of Psammetichos explicitly shows that this hypothesis had even been considered as consistent a long time before. However, one might have refrained from the execution of an “experiment of Psammetichos” because it obviously contradicted basic ethical tenets. Fortunately, there was a comfortable way out in this situation: the case of the so-called *feral children*.

3. The problem of feral children in the Berlin text series and in texts of reference

In contrast to the “ordinary” newborn child, feral children stood outside the sphere of daily life. They were described as a curious kind of creature oscillating between the realm of beasts and the world of humankind. These strange creatures had been found in several forests of Europe and caused a sensation wherever they appeared. But it was not only in the *journalle* that information on feral children was accessible. The phenomenon seemed to be of such importance that it was even integrated within the taxonomic classification of Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) (cf. Gessinger 1994). In his *Systema naturae* of 1753, Linnaeus establishes an astonishing relationship between the feral child and other human creatures. Linnaeus writes:

I. HOMO. Nosce te ipsum.
Sapiens. H[omo] diurnus; *varians cultura, loco.*
Ferus. Tetrapus, mutus, hirsutus.
Juvenis Ursinus lithuanus. 1661.
Juvenis Lupinus hessensis. 1544.
Juvenis Ovinus hibernus. Tulp. Obs. IV: 9.
Juvenis Bovinus bambergensis. Camerar.
Juvenis Hannoveranus. 1724.
Pueri 2 Pyrenaici. 1719.
Puella Transisalana. 1717.
Puella Campanica. 1731.
Johannes Leodicensis. Boerhaav.
(Linné [1753]1766: 28)

It is to be remarked that Linnaeus asks man to recognize himself, which means that man has to be conscious of his place in the chain of being (cf. Lovejoy 1950) and of the particular endowment and limits of this species. After evoking the intellectual capacity of *homo sapiens* to recognize himself, Linnaeus turns to *homo ferus*, the “wild man” who is conceived as an aberration from *homo sapiens*. The “wild man” is characterized as four-legged, dumb and shaggy (“tetrapus, mutus, hirsutus”). Due to his muteness and to his exclusion from all acquisitions of civilization, *homo ferus* represents a mutational variant of *homo sapiens*. It is noteworthy that Linnaeus does not clarify *homo ferus* within the category of *Simia*, of apes. This classification makes clear that he conceived the “wild man” as a degenerated specimen of *homo sapiens* but not as belonging to a species of animals closely related to humankind.

Although feral children represented only a small minority in comparison with *homo sapiens*, their appearance in the forests of several European countries seems to have contributed to their integration in the taxonomy of Linnaeus. His classification also demonstrates that feral children had already been observed and described for centuries. However, the majority of the cases cited by Linnaeus were discovered in the first third of the eighteenth century, thus gaining a maximum of topicality. Among the examples cited, especially the case of the *Juvenis ursinus Lithuanus*, the “bear-boy” discovered in Lithuania, was again and again referred to by prominent writers such as Condillac (cf. *Essai*, I, section IV, chap. 2 §. 23) and Rousseau (*Discours* 1992 [1755]: 170). This case had been illustrated in Bernard Connor’s (1666-1698) *Evangelium medici: medicina mystica* which served as text of reference for Condillac, Rousseau, Christian Wolff (1679-1754) (*Psychologia rationalis* §. 461) and Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon (1707-1788) (*De l’homme* 1971 [1749]: 297). The fact that Linnaeus is not sure about the date of the discovery of the *Juvenis ursinus Lithuanus* – he falters between the years 1344 and 1544 – shows once more that the *homo ferus* belonged to a kind of intermediate world between man and beasts and between fact and fiction.

Another wild child who caused a sensation was the *Juvenis ovinus hibernus*, a wild boy who had grown up in the company of the sheep on the pastures of Ireland. His case is reported by the Dutch physician Nicolaes Tulp (Nicolaus Tulpius) (1593-1674) who had personally examined this “wild boy”. Tulpius’ *Observationes medicae* served as a text of reference for the Danish alchemist Oluf Borch (Olaus Borrichius) (1626-1690). Borch referred to Tulpius’ observations in his *De causis diversitatis linguarum dissertatio*. After illustrating the importance of the experiment of Psammetichos, Borch describes the *Juvenis ovinus hibernus*:
Validiùs idem persuadet apud *Tulpium Observ. Med. I. IV. c. IX.* visus publicè Amstelredami paucis abhinc annis *Juvenis balans*, qui inter sylvestres in Hyberniâ oves ab infantiâ enutritus naturam prorsus & vocem induerat ovillam, quadrupedante etiam cursu venatores celerrimè effugiens, de re nullâ, nisi gramine, foeno, aquâ sollicitus, qui tandem post XVI aetatis annum captus, & humanâ paulatim conservatione mitigatus feritatem deditic. (Borrichius 1675: 1/2).

Borch describes the “Irish sheep-boy” as a bleating, four-legged vegetarian who had perfectly adapted himself to the animals with whom he lived. However, this wild boy is said to have been tamed after being caught by man.

Apart from the “Irish sheep-boy” the case of the *puella transisalana* or the *Kranenburg girl* also attracted the particular attention of the scholars. As Marijke van der Wal has made a very instructive investigation on this subject (cf. van der Wal 1999) we shall confine ourselves to singling out the somewhat peculiar case of the *puella campanica*. This young girl who was discovered in Champagne in 1731 fascinated a large number of prominent authors and philosophers of the eighteenth century. You will find more or less detailed reports of this case in the writings of Charles-Marie de la Condamine (1701-1774), Buffon, Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, James Burnet Lord Monboddo (1714-1799) and Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794).

The story of the *puella campanica* profoundly influenced certain participants in the Berlin essay-contest who had heard of it by means of the *Mercure de France*, a journal that was much read by men of learning. Among the participants in the Berlin essay-contest who referred to feral children it is especially the Italian pedagogue and philosopher Francesco Soave (1743-1806) who deserves our attention. At the very beginning of his *Dissertatio* (I-M-666), Soave adopts the hypothesis of Mandeville and Condillac: he imagines two children of different sexes abandoned in a desert before knowing the use of language. His hypothesis is based on the idea that one individual living in isolation from human society would never have been able to invent language:

Id ergo primum certissimum, Hominem unicum, ac solitarium nullam plane linguam instituere posse. [...] Necessario ergo requiritur, ut duo saltem Homines simul communicent, simul vivant. Ut vero quid ipsi valeant videamus, requiritur item, ut eos ab omni prorsus reliquorum Hominum consortio removeamus. (I-M-666: 3/4)

To make sure that the two children who are the protagonists of Soave's hypothesis have invented language, they must necessarily live in complete isolation from society. It is obvious that the arrangement of Soave's hypothesis follows the pace traced by Herodotus and the *experiment of Psammetichos*. However, Soave is eager to find a basis for his hypothetical experiment which corresponds more to the requirements of probability than Herodotus'. It is in this context that his observations on feral children are to be considered. Feral children whose existence seems to be more reliable than that of the children of Psammetichos are the object of Soave's analysis. The cause Soave pleads for is fact, not fiction.

He attempts to attain a maximum of probability and reliability by referring to several feral children already mentioned by Linnaeus:

Quod si quis etiam quaerat, quānam fieri possit, ut tenella adhuc aetate absque ullo subsidio destituti diu vivant, atque adolescent; eadem inquam ratione, qua vixit **puer in Hassia inter lupos repertus anno 1344**; alius item annorum 12. eodem anno inventus in Weteravia; **alius annorum 16. in Hibernia inter oves silvestres deprehensus circa dimidium seculi XVII**; alius novennis inter ursos correptus in Lituano-Grodnensibus silvis anno **1662**; **alius prope Hameliam inventus hoc ipso saeculo**; **puella insuper in silva Cranenburgensi prope Zwollam provinciae Ultrajectinae oppidum a rusticis capta anno 1717**; aliique de quibus fusé disserit Henricus Conradus Koenig Schediasmate suo de Hominum inter feras educatorum statu naturali solitario; quibus addenda est **puella etiam, quam omnes novunt non multis ab hinc (2.) annis prope Cabilonum fuisse inventam.** (I-M-666: 4/5)

Soave's enumeration of the cases of feral children partly corresponds to the list of Linnaeus. Just like the great biologist, Soave mentions the cases of the Hessian "wolf-boy", of Peter the Wild Boy ("Peter von Hameln"), of the Irish "sheep-boy" and the Lithuanian "bear-boy". He finally refers to the "Kranenburg girl" and the girl found in Champagne ("puella prope Cabilonum inventam") which is of major interest to our investigation. Despite the apparent similarities of the examples chosen by both authors, we tend not to consider Linnaeus as a text of reference for Soave because Soave used to cite authorities and sources meticulously. A large number of precise quotations are to be found in his manuscript sent to the Berlin Academy but there is not a single reference to Linnaeus.

In his dissertation, Soave wonders how feral children could have grown up with the only company of wolves, sheep and other beasts. For his argumentation, he chiefly focuses on the case of the *puella campanica*. This case is particularly useful for him to contradict Rousseau's vision of the state of nature. Contrary to Rousseau, Soave is convinced that natural man was endowed with social skills and thus rather tended to associate with his fellows than to live wandering around. As Soave tells us, the girl from Champagne had a friend with whom she had a violent dispute. The girl friend of the *puella campanica* is even supposed to have died as a consequence of this fight: Neque etiam velim eo aliquem commoveri, quod de Puella Cabilonum prope reperta traditum est. Ea enim postmodum narasse dicitur se Sociam antea habuisse, nata autem inter eas contentione, hanc fustis ictu mulctatam abiisse, quo etiam vulnere interiisse postmodum credita est. (I-M-666: 10)

By referring to this fact, Soave makes clear that Rousseau's vision of natural man is basically inconsistent. Although Rousseau imagined natural man as a solitary vagabond in the first part of his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, he made him appear as a *zoón politikón* in the second part without giving any reason for this substantial change of his conception: Quae quidem omnia si celeberrimus Genevensis Philosophus paullo accuratius perpendisset, haud ita fortasse universaliter dubitasset, utrum silvestres Homines vel ipsam familiae societatem per se instituere possint. (Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les Hommes; 1.re partie). Quanquam idem ipse quod in priori orationis sua parte negare visus est, in posteriori denique concedendum putavit. (I-M-666: 10)

Contrary to Rousseau the case of the *puella campanica* clearly demonstrates that natural man would have associated with his fellow human beings:

Ab hoc potius exemplo eruendum est, silvestres Homines facile posse consociari, quia Puellas hasce, silvestres quidem omnino societatem iniisse constat, quam quidem fortasse jugiter tenuissent, nisi casus prorsus fortuitus jurgii caussam [sic] objecisset. (I-M-666: 10)

The relevance of this case for the contestable nature of Rousseau's vision of the natural state seems even more significant in the 10th entry sent to the Berlin Academy, the manuscript I-M-669. In this manuscript we get some important information about the texts of reference used by the author to refer to the *fille de Songi*, the *puella campanica*: On the one hand, the *Mercure de France* reported the case in an issue of December 1731; on the other hand, a book was published in 1755 containing the biography of *Mlle Le Blanc* as she was called after having been caught by the inhabitants of Songi:

Le *Mercure de France* (Décembre 1731) fait mention d'une jeune fille sauvage trouvée dans les bois de Songi près Chalons en Champagne. On en a donné une histoire plus détaillée en 1755. On voit dans cette histoire le caractère et les ressources de l'homme sortant des mains de la nature (I-M-669: 10).

The book mentioned here was Charles Marie de La Condamine's *Histoire d'une jeune fille sauvage, trouvée dans les Bois à l'âge de dix ans*. La Condamine was the much-admired author of a *Relation abrégée d'un voyage fait dans l'intérieur de l'Amérique méridionale* and was well-known for his portrait of wild tribes living on the Amazon River. In his *Histoire*, La Condamine tells us that he personally knew the *fille de Songi* and that his book is the result of numerous questions he asked her after she had learned to speak (cf. La Condamine 1755, *Avertissement*). La Condamine gives a very vivid description of the arrival of the girl in the village of Sogny in September 1731:

Elle avoit les pieds nus, le corps couvert de haillons & de peaux, les cheveux sous une calotte dealebasse, le visage & les mains noirs comme une Nègresse. Elle étoit armée d'un bâton court & gros par le bout en forme de massue. Les premiers qui l'aperçurent s'enfuirent en criant, *voilà le Diable*; en effet, son ajustement & sa couleur pouvoient bien donner cette idée à des Païsans. Ce fut à qui fermeroit le plus vite sa porte & ses fenêtres. (La Condamine 1755: 3/4)

This description clearly shows that feral children were considered as creatures occupying a somewhat strange position in the chain of being: an intermediate position between the realm of humankind and the realm of beasts. Due to their terrifying appearance they were even equated with the devil. It is not surprising that La Condamine's *Histoire* served as a major text of reference to the author of the 10th entry (I-M-669). In this manuscript, we find a precise description of the violent fight between the *fille de Songi* and her friend:

[...] on apprit d'elle par la suite qu'elle avoit eu autrefois une compagne, mais que tout dans les terres, elle aperçut un chapelet qu'elle voulut ramasser pour s'en faire un bracelet, et que sa camarade qui désiroit aussi l'avoir, lui avoit donné un coup de masse sur la main, mais que celle-ci lui avoit donné à l'instant un pareil coup de masse au front, et l'avoit renversée noyée dans son sang. touchée de compassion, elle courut chercher des grenouilles, en écorcha une; lui colla la peau sur le front, et banda la playe avec une lanière d'écorche d'arbre qu'elle avoit arrachée avec ses ongles; la blessée prit le chemin de la rivière, et disparut sans qu'on ait su depuis ce qu'elle est devenue. (I-M-669: 10)

The *fille de Songi* tries to help the bleeding girl by putting a piece of bark on her injury, thus demonstrating her feelings of compassion. It is plain from this example that feral children are capable of competent social behaviour. They are even endowed with certain linguistic skills because *Mlle le Blanc* and her friend are said to have invented a kind of language of their own:

[...] ces deux sauvages avoient probablement inventé un langage, puisque lorsque *Mlle le Blanc* fut arrêtée; elle formoit des sons articulés. (I-M-669: 10)

It is noteworthy that the author of manuscript I-M-669 does not agree with Rousseau who considered feral children as creatures comparable to primitive men (cf. Rousseau 1992 [1755]: 170):

Mr. Rousseau confirme son sentiment, de l'entier abrutissement de l'homme abandonné à ses facultés naturelles, par l'état de plusieurs hommes sauvages trouvés dans les forêts de différents pays, qui n'avoient rien d'humain que la figure de sorte qu'à peine pouvoit-on les distinguer des animaux, auxquels ils s'étoient associés. Il rapporte plusieurs exemples de ces hommes sauvages, et prétend conclure du particulier au général, que tous les hommes, étant abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, ressembleroient parfaitement à ces hommes sauvages. mais c'est en quoi son raisonnement est defectueux; car le sort des hommes dans l'état de pure nature, s'unissant quelquefois à leurs semblables, se choisissant presque toujours une compagne, tel enfin que je les ai représentés, leur sort, dis-je, seroit bien différent, de celui d'un homme abandonné à ses facultés naturelles, vivant avec des animaux d'une espèce bien différente, avec lesquels il ne pourroit jamais perfectionner son être, en inventant des sons articulés, puisqu'il ne seroit pas compris. ainsi tout homme placé dans cet état d'inertie pour ses facultés doit différer de très peu de choses des autres brutes avec lesquelles il vit, il doit même n'imiter que leurs cris, pour en être secouru dans ses besoins. (I-M-669: 9)

In contrast to Rousseau, manuscript I-M-669 presents a vision of a natural state characterized by mutual affection of the members of the different families which is supposed to have existed since the

beginning of the whole species. Due to his growing-up within the family, the individual is from the very beginning endowed with the capacity of *perfectibilité* and is therefore subjected to a permanent evolution. Whereas natural man can thus carry his faculties to perfection, feral children are to be considered as a deprived species. Lacking a normal linguistic environment, they are unable to develop their hypothetical linguistic capacities. Given this substantial form of deprivation, the example of feral children can in no way be applied as a representative model of the genesis of human language.

In the light of these considerations we must ask ourselves whether the case of the *fille de Songi* can be regarded as a trustworthy representative of *feral children*. Although she could not avail of a familiar environment permitting a normal process of language-acquisition, she benefited from the company of her friend. The two girls invented a kind of language. There is another objection which seems even more evident and which appears in the text of reference cited, the *Histoire* de Charles-Marie de la Condamine.

In his *Histoire*, La Condamine tells us that the *fille de Songi* presumably was an Eskimo girl coming from the Labrador area. She was obviously well acquainted with this culture – a fact which clearly reveals that she had not always lived in the monotony of the forest of Champagne. La Condamine gives us even more details: Mlle Le Blanc travelled to South America, but in order to avoid slavery she crossed the ocean as a blind passenger together with her friend. La Condamine's *Histoire* is full of exotic elements of this kind and numerous peripeteia make the story partly implausible.

Starting from these premises, Mlle le Blanc does not seem to represent a trustworthy witness of the *homo ferus*. However, her case is frequently cited as a typical model of this "species". In his *De l'homme* (1971 [1749]: 297), Buffon makes only a very concise reference to "la petite fille trouvée dans les bois en France". More detailed information can be found in La Mettrie's *Traite de l'âme*:

On parloit beaucoup à Paris, quand j'y publiai la première édition de cet ouvrage, d'une fille sauvage qui avoit mangé sa sœur, et qui étoit alors au Couvent à Châlons en Champagne. Mgr. le Maréchal de Saxe m'a fait l'honneur de me raconter bien des particularités de l'histoire de cette fille. Mais elles sont plus curieuses, que nécessaires pour comprendre et expliquer ce qu'il y a de plus surprenant dans tous ces faits. Un seul suffit pour donner la clé de tous les autres; au fond ils se ressemblent tous; comme toutes nos observations de Médecine sur un même sujet, dont une bonne Théorie facilite beaucoup mieux l'intelligence, que tous les livres de ces Docteurs Cliniques et bornés. (La Mettrie 1987, *Œuvres* I: 240)

In La Mettrie's version of the story, the friend of the *fille de Songi* has undergone a mutation: she is now presented as her sister. And this sister is not supposed to have died as a consequence of the fight mentioned before. The *fille de Songi* is said to have eaten her!

To conclude our observations concerning the *fille de Songi* we shall briefly consider what James Burnet Lord Monbodo tells us on this subject in his *Origin and Progress of Language* (1773):

The savage girl whom I have so often mentioned, entertained me with several such cries belonging to her nation; and she told me, that while she was travelling through the woods with the negro girl who had escaped the shipwreck with her, as they did not understand one another's language, they conversed together by signs and cries; and in that way they understood each other so well, that they made a shift to live upon what they could catch hunting together. (Monbodo 1967 [1773-1792]: I, Chap. IV., 319)

Just like La Condamine, Monbodo pretends to have personally known the *fille de Songi*. In his version of the story, the girl friend is a Negro girl with whom the *fille de Songi* conversed quite successfully using a kind of *langage d'action*. Monbodo is convinced that 'articulation is not natural to Man' (Monbodo 1967 [1773-1792]: Title of *Chapter XIV*). For him, articulation is 'altogether the work of art, at least of a habit acquired by custom and exercise' (Monbodo 1967 [1773-1792]: I, 171). To prove that man is by nature the 'mutum et turpe pecus' of Horace (Horace, *Satires*, Book I, Satire 3, 99-105), he refers to Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* and to the feral children mentioned here:

[...] of all those savages which have been caught in different parts of Europe, not one had the use of speech, though they had all the organs of pronunciation such as we have them [...] (Monbodo 1967 [1773-1792]: I, 172/ 173)

This quotation shows that for Monbodo, just as for Rousseau, language is a human faculty basically dependent on the existence of a human society. A solitary creature like the deprived feral child is by no means able to develop articulate sounds, but can only utter cries and use gestures as rudiments of communication.

4. Conclusion

It is plain from these examples that in eighteenth-century discussions on the origin of language feral children played a decisive role to reflect the crucial importance of society for the acquisition of language. Being socially deprived creatures, they represented a quite reliable model for the reconstruction of the genesis of language, a state of poverty and deprivation. Given the firm belief of the eighteenth-century scholars that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, feral children provided the model for the reconstruction of the scanty

origins of language. Since the eighteenth century, feral children have been considered as objects of curiosity: the case of *Victor de l'Aveyron* and his portrait in François Truffaut's (1932-1984) film *L'enfant sauvage* have contributed to maintain this curiosity until today.

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