

Debating Language: Academic Discourse and Public Controversy at the Berlin Academy under Frederick the Great

Avi Lifschitz
(Lincoln College, Oxford)

This research project regards the Berlin Academy of Sciences and Belles Lettres as an exemplary venue of the eighteenth-century debate on the origin of language. One of my main claims is that the debate was not restricted to linguistic conjectures, but had much to do with contemporary social, epistemological, and aesthetic theories.

The thinkers who took part in the lively debate were interested in the question of the origin of language as an integral part of their attempts to draw the fine line between the 'natural' and 'artificial' (or socially developed) traits of man. By applying Locke's genetic method of enquiry to the traditional General Grammar scheme of a strict correspondence between language and mind, participants in the debate treated linguistic development as parallel to the evolution of both reason and society. Among the crucial problems these authors tackled were the question of linguistic abstraction and that of the formative role of language in human cognition. In essays on the origin of language, such questions were usually associated with other notions of 'origins', like the birth of the imitative arts and the emergence of social institutions. As treatises on this subject constituted a net of scholarly discussions and correspondence which was spread all over Europe, a close examination of the debate may supply us with valuable insights into the characteristics of the cross-national public sphere of the Enlightenment.

The Berlin Academy seems an appropriate locus for such an enquiry, since it played a pivotal role in both the French and the Prussian Enlightenments. Frederick the Great managed to attract to his capital significant scientists and philosophers of the European Republic of Letters. The prominence of French thought at the royal court did not, however, exclude German authors from participation in the Academy's activities. The Academy was an important centre of Prussian intellectual life, and the tension embedded within that institution initiated several debates which touched upon fundamental issues of the local *Aufklärung*, first and foremost the status of Leibnizean-Wolffian philosophy. Although most of Prussia's university professors considered the institution to be a stronghold of foreign intellectual influence in Prussia, they submitted entries for the Academy's prize contests and generated public debates regarding its policies, decisions, and scientific endeavours. The occasional presence of prominent French *philosophes* at Frederick's court and the works published during their sojourn in Potsdam invigorated the tensions between court, Academy, universities, and the press. On the international scale, the appointment of foreign academicians and their previous institutional background linked Berlin to other centres of research, from St Petersburg to London.

Controversies on language and its origin within the Berlin Academy may therefore be considered a distinctive case of exchange and transmission of ideas between various centres of Enlightenment Europe, particularly Paris and Berlin. By concentrating my research on one philosophical thread and a single institution, I hope to be able to examine the debates on language at the Berlin Academy through a complex though well-defined prism.