German Enlightenment

The German Enlightenment aimed to spread the ideas of Rationalism among a large educated public. The most important representatives of the movement (in the specific sense) in Germany were *Leibniz, *Lambert, *Lessing, and *Wolff.

Concurrently, Herder and Hamann were developing their ideas on education and progress, which sought to overcome the divisions between sense (*Sinnlichkeit*) and understanding (*Verstand*) as well as between nature and *history. They regarded natural human *language *competence as an instance where this division is overcome, since it manifests itself simultaneously as a divine and a natural principle, both making human reason visible and at the same time being a product of nature. The semiotics of *German Romanticism was based on this tradition. The critical transcendentalism of *Kant gave a new turn to the Enlightenment: namely towards a reflection on the conditions which make subjective knowledge and *action possible; it thereby became critical in a new sense, in that it pointed to the limitations of human knowledge.

In the history of *philosophy, the German Enlightenment undoubtedly formulated the most optimistic position with regard to the epistemological achievements of semiotics. Its conception of semiotics draws on two approaches: (1) *Descartes' *Mathesis Universalis*, a methodological ideal including, by taking *mathematics as its model, the four rules of the *Discours sur la Méthode* and the supposition that the simplest basic terms can be completely enumerated; and (2) Raimund *Lull's *Ars magna*, a doctrine on the generation of all notions proceeding from nine simple basic *terms through the combination of its *signs (Arndt 1971a; Engfer 1976; Hubig 1979c). Signs are therefore a necessary element of knowledge. Their constitutive *function is based on their quality of being in isomorphic relation to things; for that reason knowledge is guaranteed merely by the recognition of the *rules by which they are connected, using the algebra or the geometrical axiomatic as model. The *ars characteristica universalis*, conceived in such a

way, can be realized either as *ars iudicandi* or as *ars inveniendi*. The former is to eliminate the sources of mistakes and the anomalies of natural languages, the latter shows the way to acquire new knowledge (*ars combinatoria*).

Such an artificial sign language is regarded as being in a different relation to natural languages. It is either conceived as a complete system of representation, inaccessible to human understanding which, for this reason, is only able to outline characteristics of limited areas (Leibniz). Or, it may be considered as an ideal into which natural language must be transformed through the elimination of its mistakes and misunderstandings (Wolff), a position that presupposes a comprehensive lexicography of all concepts relevant to *epistemology. Under the postulate of Mathesis, it also may be considered as an "*organon*" – tool – the validity of which is limited by the use of natural language (Lambert). As part philosophical *aesthetics, it may constitute a philosophical approach to poetic effects (Lessing).

All these positions have in common a double use of the concept of sign. First, signs, through the isomorphy (or similarity) or their *structure, refer to things and represent them. Second , they achieve this by means of the notions of the ideas of the things which constitute the connection. Signs are either natural (which are clear per se – i.e., through sensation) or conventional. Furthermore, signs serve as instruments of imagination which, otherwise, would be only unclear in memory. Judgments about objects thus can be only justified through the handling of signs. In the history of this double function of signs, the latter aspect successively grew more important until the Kantian revolution.   C. H.