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THE DISPARITY OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION:

DENIS DIDEROT AS A CRITIC OF LANGUAGE

By

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B.A., Carroll College, 1970

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

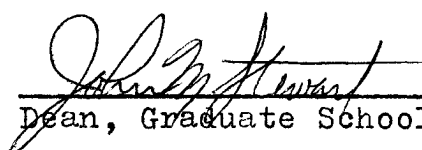
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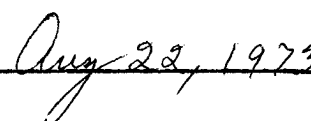
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PREFACE

Few thinkers of Enlightenment France were as attuned to their era as was Denis Diderot. While taking a place as one of the foremost philosophes, he realized the vanity of his position, and even though he had an important centralizing role as editor of the Encyclopédie, he differed from his contemporaries in two very significant ways.

First, he was of an independent nature, cautiously avoiding the pitfalls of overly systematized thinking. Secondly, and consequently, he lacked the omniscient tendencies of many eighteenth-century thinkers who were frequently interested in phenomena only insofar as they "proved" certain preconceived notions. Thus, Diderot brought a fresh viewpoint to all his endeavors, and his comments are even more valuable because of their relatively minor burden of common eighteenth-century prejudices.

Diderot's thoughts on language reflect these non-conformist attitudes. His criticism of language shows his concern with many eighteenth-century philosophic currents, but it also shows that he tempered the popular notions with his own variations, based on personal observation. Moreover, his language criticism clearly demonstrates the inner struggle which accounts for Diderot's unique independence. The

discussion of the thought-language relationship is an excellent illustration of his uneasy intellectual confederation of reason and sentiment. It is the bilateral approach of the scientist on one hand and the artist on the other which gives genuine significance to Diderot's language criticism.

The first chapter of this paper contains background information and tries to situate Diderot in terms of his predecessors and contemporaries. The second and third chapters are concerned with Diderot's two major works on language: Lettre sur les sourds et muets and the article, "Encyclopédie." The former views language from the artist's standpoint; the latter reviews the necessities of scientific language. The final chapter presents an interpretation of Diderot's criticism by reconciling it to his fundamental philosophic position.

In Le Neveu de Rameau Diderot wrote: "Rien ne dissemble plus de lui que lui-même." There is no better description of Diderot himself; his intellectual wanderings involved him in tangles of contradiction, and his personal philosophy underwent nearly constant change. Yet, in his adherence to the belief that there is nothing precise in nature and that the universe is in unceasing flux, he often came near the true meaning of "enlightenment."

Furthermore, his faith in nature, his philosophy of dynamic interdependence, and his distrust of systematization gives Diderot a very modern appeal. All of these qualities seem to be evident in his language criticism; the goal of this paper is to so demonstrate.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

As far as can be known, man has always been fascinated by language. The origin, structure, and various uses of language, whether artistic or practical, have been a source of endless speculation. Its origin has led to extravagant myth-making, its nature to countless methods of imposing a grammar, and its uses have generated diverse tracts attacking, defending, or otherwise offering opinions as to the relative suitability of a given language for a given purpose. The myths range from the giving-of-names episode in Genesis to the linguistic magic practiced by primitive peoples around the world; the grammars extend from the traditional normative to the current transformational; finally, the actual use of language has given rise to such controversy as Du Bellay's Défense et illustration de la langue française and the eighteenth-century Querelle des bouffons.

The earliest conception of language, that of primitive man, was characterized by the identification of word and thing. This fusion of symbol and object is the basis of word-magic. Since the essence of the object is contained within the word, the control or skillful use of that word

connotes control over the corresponding physical object. The system assumes that the world of material beings and that of names comprise a single, unified reality; this, in turn, leads to the conception of language as a source of divine power. Apart from and perhaps overshadowing its communicative function, the language of primitive man was a tool of the priest and physician.

The Greek philosophers significantly altered the primitive view by submitting it to the body of laws which they believed governed the workings of the universe. Heraclitus gave particular attention to the phenomenon of language, reconciling it to his general notion of continuous "becoming." Here, language became involved in the endless controversy of the "one" and the "many", for it was seen as the agency which could unite the opposing forces. Heraclitus concluded that words tend to delimit the objects signified by fixing to them a specific definition, yet in the very process of achieving such precision language falsifies the representation by lifting it out of the unceasing stream of "becoming." Therefore, to know the true nature of a thing one must search beyond the definition, in order to compensate for the crystallization of language. An adequate expression of reality must correct this distortion by defining words in terms of their opposites. Through the use of contradiction, language creates and maintains opposing tension and thus reflects the invisible harmony of the universe.

Heraclitus' concept was an important contribution to the understanding of the thought-language relationship, since it demonstrated that human language is both faulty and misleading in its creation of a static situation by which the dynamism of reality is reduced to a fixed and rigid system of expression.¹ This conflict forms the basis of Diderot's language criticism and is the principal concern of the entire Lettre sur les sourds et muets. Diderot's own philosophy displays many similarities to that of Heraclitus, particularly with regard to the idea of constant change.

With the arrival of Christianity also came a change in emphasis in the area of language theory. The ideas of Greece gave way to theological explanations, which tended to inhibit much linguistic speculation. Nevertheless, the Middle Ages produced important language study in regard to biblical textual criticism, and the medieval scholastic philosophy provided the basis for the grammaire raisonnée of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1660, Arnauld and Lancelot published their Grammaire générale et raisonnée contenant les fondements de l'art de parler, expliqués d'une manière claire et naturelle. Referring to its publication, Charles Bruneau

¹Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. by Ralph Manhiem, Vol. I: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 117-21.

states: "Toutefois, la Grammaire générale et raisonnée ... inaugure une science nouvelle. Oeuvre de Lancelot et d'Arnauld, elle introduit la logique dans le système de la langue."¹ Bruneau's dispassionate remark accurately describes the intent and purpose of the Grammaire, which was to promote a purely rational view of language.

The Grammaire de Port-Royal, as it was called, served as a model for nearly all the eighteenth century philosophes. They were intrigued by its assertion of the essential relationship between reason and the structure of language, based on the identification of logic and grammar. A great number of subsequent grammar studies were founded on the principles of logic rather than on common usage.

Diderot was attracted to the ideas of Port-Royal, perhaps due in part to his passion for accuracy in the Encyclopédie. Like his fellow philosophes, he was disturbed by the highly unreliable relationship which exists between thought and its vocalization. The resultant problem of imprecise definition, especially regarding abstract terminology, was of crucial importance for the editor of the Encyclopédie. He felt that the precision of language must be a primary concern of the encyclopedists:

Mais la connaissance de la langue est le fondement de toutes ces grandes espérances; elles resteront incertaines, si la langue n'est fixée et transmise à la posterité dans toute sa perfection; et cet objet

¹Charles Bruneau, Petite histoire de la langue française, Vol. I (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969), p. 184.

est le premier de ceux dont il convenait à des encyclopédistes de s'occuper profondément.¹

For those concerned with the accurate transmission of knowledge, the grammaire raisonnée seemed to offer the possibility of a more precise language, but it also made a significant contribution in the area of language origin. In emphasizing the rationality of language, Lancelot and Arnauld treated it as an invention of man, not as a gift of God. This secular view of language must have appealed to Diderot, whose personal philosophy was firmly materialistic and who disliked the search for extrinsic causes of natural phenomena.

After Port-Royal, perhaps the most direct and substantial influence on Diderot was that of the empiricists. Whereas the Port-Royal grammarians had attempted to explain language in terms of an ideal logical relationship, John Locke and his followers concentrated their efforts on observing the psychological reality of language. Since their primary goal was the analysis of ideas, the study of language was conducted with this end in mind. Diderot examined the thought-language relationship with much the same intent. His interest was focused on the link between the development of language ability and the sophistication of thought. As will be seen in the Lettre sur les sourds et muets, he

¹Denis Diderot, "Encyclopédie," Oeuvres complètes, ed. by J. Assézat, XIV (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875-77), pp. 429-30.

considered language to be the indispensable element in the evolution of human consciousness.

An important point of agreement between Locke and Diderot pertained to the individuality of expression. Both philosophers believed that the manner of expressing even a simple idea is extremely variable according to the individual speaker. A great many inconsistencies arise as each speaker forms his own variants of standard word-definitions and applies them at his discretion. As a result of these widely varying nuances, a complex idea requires very precise definition of terms. Much needless confusion is generated by superficial agreement on terminology.¹ Diderot became very interested in the individuality of expression as it affects general communication:

Les mots réveillent des idées, des images si diverses selon les têtes, qu'ils produisent quelquefois deux effets opposés, ou de mettre les hommes en contradiction quand ils sont d'accord, ou de les mettre d'accord quand ils sont en contradiction. Viennent-ils à s'expliquer, ils ne s'entendent plus. 2

The same theme is evident with regard to artistic expression:

Sur cette analyse, j'ai cru pouvoir assurer qu'il était impossible de rendre un poète dans une autre langue; et qu'il était plus commun de bien entendre un géometre qu'un poète. 3

¹Pierre Juliard, Philosophies of Language in Eighteenth-Century France (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 17-18.

²Diderot quoted in Jacques Proust, "Diderot et les problèmes du langage," Romanische Forschungen, 79 (1967), p. 21.

³Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 391.

Characteristically, Diderot maintains an interest in both the practical and artistic aspects of the question. Being a scientist, albeit amateur, he is aware of the necessity for common conventional formulas essential to effective communication. He is equally appreciative of the fatality of such pragmatism when applied to poetry.

The preceding paragraphs have attempted to provide a very abbreviated review of language speculation up to the time of Diderot. Obviously, they represent but a minute portion of the great body of language study which existed prior to the Enlightenment. I have tried to include those theories with which Diderot was most acquainted and which probably exerted the greatest influence on him. Having introduced these predecessors, it would be helpful to examine briefly their apparent effect, as shown in specific works.

It is difficult to assess the impact of Heraclitus on Diderot, but if we might accept the Rêve de d'Alembert as an indication, it would seem that the influence is substantial. The Rêve contains repeated references to the conflict of the "one" and the "many," as well as to the Heraclitian idea of constant becoming or universal flux. These concepts are the foundation of Diderot's materialistic philosophy:

Tout change, tout passe, il n'y a que le tout qui reste. Le monde commence et finit sans cesse; il est à chaque instant à son commencement et à sa fin; il n'en a jamais eu d'autre, et n'en aura jamais d'autre.

Dans cet immense océan de matière, pas une molécule qui ressemble à une molécule, pas une molécule qui ressemble à elle-même un instant: 'Rerum novus nascitur ordo,' voilà son inscription éternelle. 1

The dialogue which comprises the Rêve reveals a consistent materialistic and naturalistic philosophy that is far more comprehensive than the sundry famous determinisms and materialistic approaches of the following century. No matter what label one cares to apply to his philosophy, it is apparent that Diderot embraces a vitalized world-view in which the existence of the individual is an integrated, but distinct fragment of the incessantly evolving universal "all." This cosmic notion preserves the individuality of all beings by attributing to each of them a certain segment of the infinite variety of the universe.²

The importance of these ideas to Diderot's criticism of language cannot be underestimated. Man is treated as a whole; the intellectual, sensitive, moral, and social aspects are all accounted for. Language is dealt with in the context of the indivisible whole. Man's language, no less than his own existence, is but an imperfect reflection of an indescribably animated universe.

The influence of Lancelot and Arnauld is more immediate, but less profound than that of Heraclitus. As

¹Diderot, Rêve de d'Alembert, Oeuvres, II, p. 132.

²Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time, trans. by Elliott Coleman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 188-94.

previously mentioned, his dual role as scientist and artist created a certain ambiguity in his feelings on the logical aspect of language. Nevertheless, Diderot's contemplation of the inadequacies of language frequently caused him to endorse the theories of Arnauld and Lancelot. His acute esprit critique would not allow him to overlook the folly of philosophizing on the basis of elusive and occasionally meaningless terminology.

La logique est l'art de penser juste, ou de faire un usage légitime de ses sens et de sa raison, de s'assurer de la vérité des connaissances qu'on a reçues, de bien conduire son esprit dans la recherche de la vérité, et de démêler les erreurs de l'ignorance ou les sophismes de l'intrê et des passions: art sans lequel toutes les connaissances sont peut-être plus nuisibles qu'utiles à l'homme ... Les éléments de la logique et de la critique conduisent à l'étude de l'histoire et des belles-lettres; et la grammaire générale raisonnée est l'introduction à l'étude de toutes les langues particulières. Quelque variété apparente qu'il y ait entre les langues, ... on s'apercevra bientôt que c'est une même machine soumise à des règles générales ... Le traité de ces règles générales s'appelle grammaire générale raisonnée.¹

This reference to the Port-Royal system contains a valuable aid to the understanding of Diderot's entire thought process. Ordinarily, and in the instance just quoted, la logique signifies the usual process of intellectual organization, but Diderot gave this term another, almost contrary meaning. Within his dynamic naturalistic framework, la logique is simply the natural unrestrained progression of ideas as they develop in the mind. This is a legitimate extension of his ideas on change, motion, and the interrelatedness

¹Diderot, Plan d'une université, Oeuvres, III, pp. 464-65.

of the universe. Diderot's style of thought is one of anarchism, that is, free association of ideas with no attempt to impose systematic succession. As a result, there frequently appears to be little, if any, unity in his thought. His "art de penser" consists of contemplating the natural order of ideas, as they progress according to the liberty of his mind's proper pace and tendencies.

This quality is transferred to his language by means of digressions which have become Diderot's trademark. The dialogues of Jacques le fataliste and the Rêve de d'Alembert are excellent examples of his natural "logic."

Although the Rêve represents Diderot's peculiar brand of Port-Royal logic, its psychological approach demonstrates his concern with empiricism. As the traditional metaphysical study of human nature gave way to psychological viewpoints, language theorists began to appreciate the role of individual mental predisposition in the process of thought vocalization. For the empiricists and for Diderot the individuality of language was the result of the speaker's particular apprehension of reality, as modified by the free activity of his own mind. Referring to this new emphasis, Cassirer indicates the importance of Diderot:

This is particularly evident in that thinker [Diderot] who, as no other empiricist, combined the sharpness and clarity of logical analysis with the keenest feeling for individuality, for the finest shadings and nuances of aesthetic expression. ¹

¹Cassirer, Symbolic Forms, I, p. 141.

Cassirer also states that Diderot's style in Sur les sourds is evidence that every original spiritual form creates its proper linguistic form.¹ Because Diderot's spiritual form is based on mobility this judgement seems especially relevant to the dialogues of Jacques and the Rêve de d'Alembert.

It is pointless to attempt categorical correlation between Diderot and the men who most likely influenced him. His thoughts on language are never simply defined or systematized, as shown by such deviations as his apparent endorsement of Port-Royal logic while simultaneously striving for the contrary goal of expressive individuality. These contradictions are the most enlightening aspects of Diderot's language criticism, since they illustrate the constant interplay of reason and sentiment. He invariably maintains a flexible manner of thought, revelling in possibilities, and always pursuing a dynamic view of nature unencumbered by the rigidity of definitive philosophic systems.

Before proceeding with Diderot's two major works on language it is necessary to mention at least two of his prominent contemporaries; their mutual influences gave direction to much of Diderot's inquiry.

One of the most important figures in eighteenth century language study was the Abbé de Condillac. As an empiricist, his fundamental goal was to account for the origin of reflective thought. Thus, the primary need was to explain how man

¹Cassirer, Symbolic Forms, I, p. 141.

developed the ability to refer to past events and absent objects and what factors enabled him to combine ideas into complex logical relationships. Condillac designated language as the crucial element in the evolution of these powers. By means of language, he believed, man began to organize his ideas; the use of linguistic symbols gave him the capacity to recall past sensations, and the combination of such symbols signalled the beginning of reflective thought. The civilizing process was therefore launched with the emergence of language.¹

Diderot shared this belief in the critical role of language, both in regard to the development of the human mind and in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. The latter function, essential to the Encyclopédie, was closely linked to the eighteenth-century notion of progress. Condillac and Diderot, in common with most of the philosophes, felt that past intellectual progress had been largely the story of past linguistic progress and that all future progress would greatly depend on parallel advancement in both fields.²

Contrarily, one must not overlook Condillac's emotional counterpart, Rousseau. Condillac's philosophy, though basically empirical, retained many aspects of Cartesian

¹Charles Frankel, The Faith of Reason, (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), pp. 51-2.

²Juliard, Philosophies of Language, pp. 63-5.

rationalism.¹ Rousseau frequently emphasized the non-rational by promoting the role of human passions and emotions. His interest in language reflected these predispositions, being less concerned about the development of reflective power and much more intrigued by the link between language and the evolution of social institutions. Like Diderot, he contradicted himself numerous times, first suggesting that language preceded society, then explaining that language was developed because society required it. Also like Diderot, he was not able to reach conclusive decisions about language. Despite repeated efforts in Discours sur l'inégalité and Essai sur l'origine des langues Rousseau failed to answer his own questions on language.²

Diderot and Rousseau agreed on several fundamental points. Both philosophes felt that as society progressed language tended to regress. Rousseau believed that the original purpose of language was to communicate passions and was, therefore, primarily artistic in its origins. They both concluded that primitive language was naturally harmonious and melodious, but that "civilized" language required an evolution away from this natural expressiveness towards a conventionally regulated and characterless idiom.³

¹Frankel, Faith of Reason, p. 50.

²Juliard, Philosophies of Language, pp. 26-7.

³Juliard, Philosophies of Language, p. 67.

Diderot, whether purposefully or not, tried to mediate the differences between the rational approach to language expressed by Condillac and the emotional viewpoint preferred by Rousseau. In Lettre sur les sourds et muets he considered the problem of artistic language, displaying considerable similarity to Rousseau, while in the article "Encyclopédie" he discussed practical language and incorporated many of Condillac's ideas.

CHAPTER II

ARTISTIC LANGUAGE: LETTRE SUR LES SOURDS ET MUETS

According to Diderot, the historical development of language has included many inevitable concessions to efficiency, but has not demonstrated similar concern for the non-utilitarian aspect of expressive accuracy. Although this situation alone presents serious difficulties for the poet, Diderot was able to see around the immediate obstacle, recognizing it as the manifestation of more extensive and fundamental problems.

The difficulty, as he perceived it, is based on the duality of human existence which assigns man a role in his own rational society, while simultaneously including him within the structure of the non-rational material universe. As one facet of the duality, society requires order, cooperation, and communication, all of which demand a certain prerequisite stability. Human society is, therefore, to a great extent statically inclined. Contrarily, the material universe knows no order except that guaranteed by the certainty of unceasing change. Man, and his language as well, are participants in the conflict between the restraints of society and the dynamism of matter. The mind of man, as a

creation of matter, has no limits; the language of man, as a creation of society, can only function within the limits of conventionality. For Diderot, the animation of thought, through its identification with the mobility of matter, is beyond the expressive capability of language. Sur les sourds attempts the resolution of this discrepancy.

Although now considered one of Diderot's major works, the Lettre sur les sourds et muets has been often neglected. Perhaps this has been due to its apparently disjointed style or to its lack of well-ordered progression, of the kind revealed in the more widely-known Lettre sur les aveugles. Whatever the reasons for its relative obscurity, Sur les sourds is of importance in understanding Diderot's later work and contains the substance of his language theory. Its unusual style, accompanied by ideas on linguistic inversion, language origin, and the "hiéroglyphe" comprises a unique example of his linguistic speculation.

It appeared in 1751, at nearly the same time as the first volume of the Encyclopédie. The Lettre sur les aveugles had been published in 1749 and led to Diderot's imprisonment at Vincennes. Sur les sourds may have been begun during that period of detainment.

According to its preface, Sur les sourds was intended as a critical reply to a work by Abbé Batteux entitled les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe. The discussion of Batteux's thesis gives a vague plot to Sur les sourds, but its real significance is found in the disconnected comments

on the role of language in aesthetic expression.

The prefatory note indicates the goal of Sur les sources to be the consideration of "inversions" in language, the existence of harmony in style, the evidence attesting to the superiority of French, and the statement of some thoughts on expression in the fine arts. The goal is ambitious and includes a typical eighteenth-century apologetic for the French language.

The first section of the work deals with the question of inversions, by which Diderot means a lack of consistency between the "natural order" of thought and the order in which language translates thought into words. The phrase "natural order of thought" is misleading, since he intends to signify "the natural order of sensory perception," that is, the order in which the sensible qualities of an object affect the senses of man. He believed that the syntax of language not only fails to correspond to such natural order, but that it frequently inverts it. For example, he reasons that adjectives should precede the noun because they are perceived first, yet French syntax generally demands that adjectives follow the noun. This issue involved Diderot in a ridiculous and naive discussion of the relative merits of various national languages, based on their adherence to or deviation from the so-called natural order.

The explanation of inversions is based on a brief examination of the origin of language patterns and a proposal that human language is founded on the need to name specific

sensations and to distinguish them from one another. Thus, in a theoretical situation he believes that adjectives would account for the first words, due to their descriptive function. Since, in Diderot's opinion, the natural order of thought requires that language describe an object in terms of those physical attributes which impress the senses, the differentiation and designation of the object itself is relegated to secondary importance. That is, the adjectives are all-important, but the noun is a helpless abstraction; only by the comparison and subsequent abstraction of common, sensible qualities are nouns and general terms brought into existence.¹

He further concludes that, in time, nouns came to be regarded as completely representative of the object, while the essential adjectives were reduced to a subordinate position. Such a development is objectionable to Diderot on the grounds that an object can be accurately identified only by its attributes; the abstract quality of nouns is useful and necessary, but it destroys individuality in descriptive language. However, as primitive language evolved away from expressiveness and towards communicative efficiency, nouns became increasingly prevalent and also began to occupy the foremost position in the sentence.

Diderot uses the example of "une substance étendue, impénétrable, figurée, colorée, et mobile,"² saying that

¹Juliard, Philosophies of Language, pp. 39-40.

²Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 350.

despite the emphasis and primary importance of the first word (the noun), if the adjectives were removed the definition would be rendered useless. The natural order of thought, according to Diderot, would reverse the normal French syntax by placing the modifiers at the beginning of the phrase, in the order in which the qualities struck the various senses. He proposes "colorée, figurée, étendue, impénétrable, mobile substance";¹ the eye being struck first, then the tactile sense, followed by their combined perception of mobile.

Diderot obviously tailored the example to fit his need, but the psychological or physiological correctness of the proposition is not critical for present purposes. It does illustrate an empirically oriented approach.

The discussion of "natural" versus "scientific" (syntactic) order establishes the departure point for Diderot's digressive analysis of the thought-language relationship. His goal seems to be an attempt to bring together the frequently conflicting rational and aesthetic considerations of artistic creativity. Rationality demands the jurisdiction of reason and logic in the area of language structure, while the aesthetic concerns the use of that structure in the expression of complex feelings or ideas which are often alien to both reason and logic. Thus, the primary problem confronting Diderot is that of determining a method of communication that releases man from the ra-

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 350.

tionalistic conventionality of language, enabling him to effectively express and comprehend things beyond the capability of ordinary verbal language.¹

Diderot approaches the problem by briefly examining the origin of conventional language, in order to trace the evolution of the thought-language connection. With regard to this relationship, it was generally accepted by the philosophes that language is as aggravatingly imperfect as human nature itself, and is consequently unable to represent many ideas and nuances which do not conform to general patterns. Always appreciating a paradox, Diderot felt the situation to be frustrating, yet advantageous:

Combien les hommes sont peu d'accord? Combien ils s'accorderaient moins encore si la langue suffisait à toute la variété de leurs sensations; mais heureusement elle est pauvre; et en sentant tout diversement, ils parlent à peu près de même.²

For purposes of analyzing the thought-language structure, Diderot imagines a "theoretical deaf-mute," someone who must rely entirely on gesture to express himself. This deaf-mute is intended to represent the situation of primitive, pre-articulate man. As questionable as the analogy might be, it provides Diderot with a reasonable justification for his notion of inversions and supplies a vehicle

¹James Doolittle, Hieroglyph and Emblem in Diderot's Lettre sur les sourds et muets, Diderot Studies, II, ed. by Fellows and Torrey, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1952), pp. 160-61.

²Diderot quoted in Proust, "Diderot et les problèmes du langage," p. 21.

for emphasizing the importance of gesture in language development.

The senses of the deaf-mute, minus that of hearing, are struck by the qualities of an object just as those of a normal person would be. He is constrained, however, to communicate, in gesture form, the principal idea (i.e. the noun) first and to elaborate as best he can from there. Diderot feels that only by emphasizing the main idea will the deaf-mute be able to communicate effectively. Since the principal idea is the noun, the deaf-mute's language is destined to be inverted. Thus, if as Diderot believes, gesture language was the predecessor of verbal expression, then inversion through simple necessity was present at the inception of articulated language.

There is certainly reason to question Diderot's assumption that the deaf-mute must communicate the principal idea first, particularly in the case of absent objects. Also, there appears to be a contradiction in his theory: he had previously proposed the natural order, whereas he now suggests that language was inverted from its very beginning. Diderot removes the difficulty by explaining that the natural order is an ideal intellectual one which would exist only in an environment free from complicating factors. This order could never have been put into use if the exigencies of gesture language are held to be valid.

In accepting the natural order as a universal ideal Diderot betrays his empirical method and is forced to admit

that the thought-language relationship began its existence on dubious ground. Within this seemingly inane matter of inversions Diderot perceives one of the basic flaws which he believes prompted disparity in the vital idea-word connection. For the philosophe, it exemplifies the clash between thought and conventionality.

Going beyond the inversions, Diderot considers the larger problem of progressive order in language as opposed to the extreme agility of thought. It is no longer a question of arbitrary syntax conflicting with natural mental order, but rather of the physical limitations of articulation in contrast with the ephemeral, instantaneous nature of an idea.

This relationship is of critical importance for the poet, whose effort to communicate complex ideas is brought into disastrous contact with the plodding, deficient symbolism of human language. The mind is capable of experiencing a great multitude of sensations simultaneously, or at least nearly so, yet language requires that an entire network of sensations be analyzed, broken down, and assigned an order compatible with established word-order. The physical limitations of the vocal apparatus leave no other choice and the social demands of communication allow little flexibility. The net effect of this process is the disintegration of the unified whole of an idea for the sake of admittedly inadequate communication. Diderot states his case

in the following terms:

L'état de l'âme dans un instant indivisible fut représenté par une foule de termes que la précision du langage exigea, & qui distribuèrent une impression totale en parties; & parce que ces termes se prononçaient successivement, & ne s'entendaient qu'à mesure qu'ils se prononçaient, on fut porté à croire que les affections de l'âme qu'ils représentaient avaient la même succession. Mais il n'en est rien. Autre chose est l'état de notre âme, autre chose le compte que nous en rendons, soit à nous-mêmes, soit aux autres, autre chose la sensation totale et instantanée de cet état, autre chose l'attention successive et détaillée que nous sommes forcés d'y donner pour l'analyser, la manifester & nous faire entendre.¹

This fragmentary nature of language is a fundamental concern in Diderot's critique of artistic expression. The poetic shading and delicacy of nuance required by the artist are frequently thwarted by the conceptual fragmentation of words. He provides a very effective explanation of this disjunctive difficulty:

Notre âme est un tableau mouvant, d'après lequel nous peignons sans cesse: nous employons bien du temps à le rendre avec fidélité; mais il existe en entier, et tout à la fois; l'esprit ne va pas à pas comptés comme l'expression. Le pinceau n'exécute qu'à la longue ce que l'oeil du peintre embrasse tout d'un coup. ... Ah!, monsieur, combien notre entendement est modifié par les signes; et que la diction la plus vive est encore une froide copie de ce qui s'y passe! 2

The confrontation of a vital tableau mouvant with the static nature morte offered by conventional language is the basic issue of Diderot's language criticism, again reflecting

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 369.

²Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 369.

the distinction of dynamic reality from analytic expression.

Within the two preceding quotations one can readily perceive the apparently irresolvable discrepancy which Diderot believes exists between the rational and aesthetic aspects of artistic creation. The artist possesses a vision which must be communicated to be fulfilled; the need and passion to create is a refined manifestation of the ancient urge which brought about language itself. Yet, the very means of expression can severely damage his vision. In his In Defence of Poetry, Shelley referred to the same problem, observing that to analyze a work of art is no more effective than throwing a violet into a crucible. For Diderot, language is the "crucible" which receives and analyzes the contents of the poet's soul.

The aesthetic, according to Sur les sourds, demands only beauty of the artist, but the rational requires that the truth of art be understandable. Even if the poet should succeed in adequately expressing himself through the medium of words, he risks being labelled "in poor taste" on the one hand, or being misunderstood on the other. Diderot's purpose is not to invent a new mode of communication, but rather to work with the resources available towards the optimal combination of both the rational and non-rational aspects of art.

These are some of the reasons for Diderot's dissatisfaction with conventional language, as well as the stimuli

which prompted him to search for an alternate approach. The effort of Sur les sourds is directed towards the pursuit of an artistic medium which would faithfully reproduce the integrity of the spirit. Within the context of Sur les sourds this pursuit takes two primary directions: that of primitive language (e.g. gesture) and that of the hièroglphe and emblème. The importance of gesture has already been examined. In returning to the theme of primitive language Diderot sought to retrieve the vividness of non-articulated communication and to recapture what he felt was the spontaneous expressiveness long since lost in arbitrary verbal language. He was convinced that: "Il y a des gestes sublimes que toute l'eloquence oratoire ne rendra jamais." ¹

The matter of hieroglyphs and emblems is of a much more complex nature. The hieroglyph can only be described as the manifestation of a certain esprit:

Il passe alors dans le discours du poète un esprit qui en meut et vivifie toutes les syllabes. Qu'est-ce que cet esprit? j'en ai quelquefois senti la présence; mais tout ce que je sais, c'est que c'est lui qui fait que les choses sont dites et représentées tout à la fois; que dans le même temps que l'entendement les saisit, l'âme en est émue, l'imagination les voit et l'oreille les entend, et que le discours n'est plus seulement un enchaînement de termes énergiques qui exposent la pensée avec force et noblesse, mais que c'est encore un tissu d'hiéroglyphes entassés les uns sur les autres qui la peignent. Je pourrais dire, en ce sens, que toute poésie est emblématique. ²

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 354.

²Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 374.

The hieroglyph is Diderot's proposed solution to the problems of linguistic fragmentation and deficient expressiveness. It is the medium through which, he believes, expression of the état d'âme is made possible. The poetic hieroglyph is not a mere theoretical solution to a very complex problem, but a workable combination of the ordinary resources of language, based on the manipulation of sound and rhythm. A series of inter-related hieroglyphs produces the emblem, or the poem in its entirety. The notions of hieroglyph and emblem have a historical development centuries long, and seem to warrant a brief comment here.

The etymological origin of "hieroglyph" signifies a sacred inscription, though in the eighteenth century the prevailing notion was that of William Warburton, who thought the hieroglyph to be a very special type of word-picture which combined prose and illustrations. As a verbal sign, it contained a multitude of meanings. Early hieroglyphs were probably intelligible only to a certain few persons possessing classified religious knowledge. In its religious function the hieroglyph represented some carefully guarded mystery.¹ A very thorough treatment of this matter may be found in James Doolittle's contribution to the Diderot Studies series. However, it is well to note that there appears to be a plausible basis for the hieroglyph in Diderot's own philosophy, without resorting to excessive historical

¹James Doolittle, Hieroglyph and Emblem, p. 152.

influence.

Diderot believed that natural cries, at the very source of primitive language, originated in man's powerful desire to communicate his needs and passions. This belief is especially evident throughout his theory on the drame bourgeois:

Les grands intérêts, les grands passions. Voilà la source des grands discours, des discours vrais. ... ce qui émeut toujours, ce sont des cris, des mots inarticulés, des voix rompues ... La violence du sentiment coupant la respiration et portant le trouble dans l'esprit, les syllabes des mots se séparent, l'homme passe d'une idée à une autre; il commence une multitude de discours; il n'en finit aucun. ¹

The instinctive cry is perhaps the most effective of all means of expressiveness, yet it contains no arbitrary symbols, images, or conventional meanings. Diderot concludes that its vividness is the result of particular qualities of sound alone, and perhaps in the case of pleasurable cries, of harmony as well. Through their conservation of words, use of natural harmony, and the poet's instinctive sense of rhythm the hieroglyph and emblem are modern elaborations of primitive cries. Furthermore, as the cry often represented a whole range of pain or pleasure, so the emblem expresses an entire lacework of ideas. Emblematic expression seems to be the culmination of Diderot's desire to return to the native eloquence of "uncivilized" language. Whatever the historical significance of the hieroglyph and

¹Diderot, Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, Oeuvres, VII, pp. 104-06.

emblem, Diderot imprinted them with his personal primitivist philosophy.

Perhaps the simplest definition of "hieroglyph" in Diderot's terms would be "une expression énergique," since he concluded that such terms are capable of approximately the same range of representation as early hieroglyphs and primitive cries. He explains the expression énergique as a highly versatile form of abstraction:

... mais la sensation n'a point dans l'âme ce développement successif du discours; et si elle pouvait commander à vingt bouches, chaque bouche disant son mot, toutes les idées précédentes seraient rendues à la fois: ... Mais au défaut de plusieurs bouches, voici ce qu'on a fait: on a attaché plusieurs idées à une seule expression. Si ces expressions énergiques étaient plus fréquentes, au lieu que la langue se traîne sans cesse après l'esprit, la quantité d'idées rendues à la fois pourrait être telle, que, la langue allant plus vite que l'esprit, il serait forcé de courir après elle. ¹

An integrated series of these expressions forms the basis for the hieroglyph and becomes the translator of the inner tableau mouvant. However, it must be taken one step further if the poet is to express a highly complex vision.

As Diderot previously stated: " ... c'est encore un tissu d'hiéroglyphes entassés les uns sur les autres qui la peignent."²

Thus, if hieroglyphs account for the images of a poem, the emblem denotes the entire poem. An emblem is the final synthesis which weaves together in fabric form the various elements of the poet's experience.

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 367.

²Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 374.

One must not be misled by this terminology into visualizing the hieroglyph and emblem as vastly complicated and ponderously structured mechanisms, bristling with adjectives, figurative devices, devious imagery, and contrived rhythmic patterns; nothing would destroy an emblem so thoroughly. The effectiveness of the emblem rests on its ability to maximize the use of expressions énergiques. Because they are capable of suggesting a great number of sensations with a minimum of terms they free the poet from a mind-clogging series of nearly synonymous words.

At this point an example of the hieroglyph seems necessary, in order to clarify its nature. Examples are interspersed throughout Sur les sourds, most of them being lines of verse from Homer, Virgil, or Boileau. They are, however, taken out of context and Diderot's attempt to explain their hieroglyphic nature leaves the reader cold. Moreover, his explanations tempt the reader to accuse him of merely restating, in unfamiliar terminology, the ordinary sub-conscious poetic process which takes place in the mind of the artist. Diderot was not a poet; his treatment of meter, rhythm, and harmony offer nothing revolutionary.

Nevertheless, Diderot himself provided at least one very sound example of hieroglyph and emblem, although it did not appear until some years after Sur les sourds.

Le Neveu de Rameau fulfills many aspects of Diderot's hope for uniting rational and non-rational art. The framework of the dialogue between Moi and Lui is carried out

through Rameau's diverse forms of expression, whether pantomime, music, dramatization, or conventional language. The interplay of rational communication and non-rational artistry takes place by means of Rameau's peculiar, eclectic "language." He describes the elements essential to it:

Il nous faut des exclamations, des interjections, des suspensions, des interruptions, des affirmations, des négations; nous appelons, nous invoquons, nous crions, nous gémissons, nous pleurons, nous rions franchement. Point d'esprit, point d'épigrammes, point de ces jolies pensées; cela est trop loin de la simple nature.¹

Communication is achieved, yet Rameau succeeds in breaking loose from conventionality, creating his own tableau mouvant.

Le Neveu de Rameau is emblematic, not only because Rameau communicates his individuality in his own terms, but also because he signifies different things to different readers, just as the ancient hieroglyph had various levels of interpretation. Thus, the role of the listener, or reader, can not be a passive one. Rameau, like the hieroglyph of Sur les sourds, proclaims nothing; it merely connotes and whispers possibilities. The reader must actively engage his imagination to combine the images offered. The power of Rameau is a function, not of explicit description, but of subtle allusion. Problems may arise due to this indeterminacy and Diderot cautions that not everyone will understand and appreciate emblematic writing: "Mais l'intelligence de l'emblème poétique n'est pas donnée à tout le monde;

¹Diderot, Le Neveu de Rameau, Oeuvres, V, p. 466.

il faut être presque en état de le créer pour le sentir fortement." ¹

As Rameau would later show, Sur les sourds was far from being a simple theoretical discussion of hopeless esoterics. Diderot's ideas are an early signal of an entirely new type of poetry in France. His statement of the inadequacies of language made the severe regulations of classicism seem pointless. Of what use are les trois unités or les bienséances when the very medium of their expression is defective and disunified? Moreover, his emphasis on the individual and the expressivity of personal experience was an antidote to the excessive intellectualism of the classicists.

He did not see art as something to be presented, but as something to be entered into by both the artist and the audience. His entire notion of hieroglyph rests on the importance of an actively engaged reader. Passivity only augments the already damaging stagnancy of language. By advocating a kind of poetry which suggests rather than expounds, Diderot hoped to bring the reader into the poetic experience. Although he did not establish a new poetic, he asked the sort of probing questions which the romanticism and symbolism of the following century would try to answer. To that extent, Diderot's language criticism contributed significantly to the artistic revolution of the nineteenth century.

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, p. 374.

Finally, one other hieroglyph deserves mention, that of Sur les sourds itself. This work is an example of Diderot's mind pursuing one of its innumerable quests. The style of the work has nothing which might endear it to literary critics and some of the psychological assumptions might be questioned, but these shortcomings of form are compensated by its exceptional expressiveness. It is very nearly a hieroglyphic representation of the author's mode of thought. Diderot warns his readers:

Quant à la multitude des objets sur lesquels je me plais à voltiger, sachez, et apprenez à ceux qui vous conseillent que ce n'est point un défaut dans une lettre ... ou le dernier mot d'une phrase est une transition suffisante. ¹

To that end, he combines in one brief work, ideas on language development, grammatical structure, the art of poetry, music, painting, acting, and diverse comments on the fine arts in general. The entire span of subjects is not arranged with a view towards appearing logical or well-planned, rather the arrangement is nearly natural, with one idea evoking and blending with the next. The transitions are sometimes abrupt, but such is the case of the human mind as it suddenly becomes sidetracked on a subordinate issue, only to become just as suddenly aware of its wandering and return to the original question. The fabric of Sur les sourds is composed of an interwoven series of such mental meanders. To a great extent it reveals itself as an emblem of the author's inquisitive intellect, a printed representation of mobility.

¹Diderot, Sur les sourds, Oeuvres, I, pp. 347-48.

CHAPTER III

SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE: "ENCYCLOPEDIE"

In Sur les sourds Diderot examined language from an artistic viewpoint, with the goal of illustrating the creative potential of language. Although Sur les sourds is the longest and most speculative of his comments on this subject, it represents only one aspect of a many-faceted genius. The oscillating quality of his mind always seems eager to strike a balance, never permitting a single point of view to attain a permanently dominant role. Thus, the artistic claims and proposals of Sur les sourds are in need of a moderating and complementary acknowledgement from the more scientifically rational side of their author. There is certainly no more appropriate place for such a rebuttal than in the distinctly rational framework of the Encyclopédie.

The article entitled "Encyclopédie" was composed by Diderot for the fifth volume of the Encyclopédie. In it he clarifies the intent, purpose, and duty of the grand work which was to transmit the accumulated knowledge of centuries. In its treatment of these topics the article reflects Diderot's basic attitude of the inherent inter-relatedness of all areas of thought. Language was considered the most

important single element in the understanding of this interdependence.

To those involved in its production, the linguistic significance of the Encyclopédie was intimately associated with the goal of the project. The science of language was a natural concern to men who were attempting the presentation of a vast and unwieldy body of knowledge; linguistic accuracy was accepted as one of the basic problems in accomplishing this purpose. The situation illustrates one of the principal ulterior motives expressed by the encyclopedists:

En effet, quoique l'Encyclopédie fut un dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, et non point un dictionnaire de la langue à proprement parler, l'ambition de ses promoteurs était bien de remettre la philosophie sur ses pieds, en même temps que la langue ... Dans l'esprit de Bacon, et mieux encore de Locke, il s'agissait de purger la philosophie de toute survivance 'essentialiste' en ramenant les mots, et par conséquent la pensée, au plus près des données sensibles du réel. ¹

The way to a philosopher's mind was, and is, thought to be through his language. In becoming a tool of empiricism, language was assigned the task of philosophic reform. The concern for language here, then, is not artistic, but scientific and philosophical. The effort of the article is directed towards a search for the accuracy and precision necessary for the successful communication of substantial scientific and philosophic knowledge.

¹Proust, "Diderot et les problèmes du langage," p.3.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to that communication is the intrinsic dissimilarity of individual human minds. How is it possible to explain the "facts" of a situation, when each person perceives those "facts" in his own way? General agreement might often be obtained, but the infinite nuances generated by each individual prevent really effective communication. In Sur les sourds these nuances were the invaluable elements of poetic expression, since for Diderot the very poetry of an experience is greatly dependent on its originality for both the poet and the listener. The active role of the latter in creating his own nuances accounts for the success of hieroglyphic writing. When applied to purely rational communication, these same nuances become a major source of confusion in word definition.

The article "Encyclopédie" proposes that the only worthwhile definition is that which compiles the basic attributes of the object signified: a word must only be defined in terms of sensible qualities. If mankind had been created with a perfectly and permanently adjusted set of senses, there would be no difficulty in implementing Diderot's suggestion. However, like the mind itself, no two sets of senses are identically attuned. For this reason, and realizing the extreme fallibility of even the most commonly accepted definitions, he admits the necessity of conventional agreement for the sake of simple communication.

Characteristically, he also sees a potential advantage contained within the defects of language; a similar

theme was evident in Sur les sourds.

Les caractères de l'écriture s'entendent à tout, mais ils sont d'institution; ils ne signifient rien par eux-mêmes. La clef des tableaux est dans la nature, et s'offre à tout le monde: celle des caractères alphabétiques et de leur combinaison est un pacte dont il faut que le mystère soit révélé; et il ne peut jamais l'être complètement, parce qu'il y a dans les expressions des nuances délicates qui restent nécessairement indéterminées. ¹

Therefore, the apparently adverse indeterminacy of language becomes the savior of conventionally static communication by preserving, to some extent, the vitality of the material universe. Were it possible to describe a given event or circumstance absolutely and with total precision, that description would destroy the essential animation of the event, and the description itself would prove to be of only momentary validity. The constant flux of the universe does not permit static description. According to Diderot, the retention of limited ambiguity and calculated uncertainty allows flexibility in language, while provoking the imagination to supply the critical ingredient of motion.

Diderot's admission of the incompatibility of animation and definition provides for the introduction of the parent problem, that of continuity in language. Here, he refers to the task of representing a continuous, uninterrupted stream of thought by means of quantified language.

The problems of animation and continuity are both

¹Diderot, "Encyclopédie," Oeuvres, XIV, p. 434.

based on the premise that all representations, whether artistic or practical, are a compromise of truth and efficiency, with truth making most of the concessions. Functional language is an arbitrary system which must confine itself to previously agreed-upon symbols; the truth of reality has no such limitations.

A particular language is composed of a finite number of words to which an established, controlled number of ideas are attached. All descriptions are constrained to abide by this framework. The universe, however, offers an infinite number of sensations; the possibilities are endless. A disparity therefore exists between the finite number of words and the infinite number of sensations and ideas which those words are called upon to express.

Also, apart from its great variety, reality is in constant motion, whereas language is able to supply only halting description. Diderot compares language to a series of numbers; they are whole and distinct, but between each known number lies an infinite quantity of smaller numbers. The words of a language correspond to the series of the numbers, both are arbitrary systems incapable of expressing unbroken continuity.

Similarly, all representations are stop-action operations which tend to crystallize the action portrayed. Consequently, even a simple physical movement is not translatable into language, since the movement itself is dependent on a transient quality. Diderot believes that no amount

of descriptive language can help the situation:

Il y a la même incommensurabilité entre tous les mouvements physiques et toutes les représentations réelles qu'entre certaines lignes et des suites de nombres. On a beau augmenter les termes, entre un terme donné et un autre, ces termes restant toujours isolés, ne se touchant point, laissant entre chacun d'eux un intervalle, ils ne peuvent jamais correspondre à certaines quantités continues. Comment mesurer toute quantité continue par une quantité discrète? ¹

The responsibility is again charged to the very nature of the thought-language relationship, for a structure which operates by combining isolated terms will inevitably produce a discontinuous representation of otherwise uninterrupted mental operations. For language, perhaps the most significant of these operations is that of abstraction.

As a word becomes abstract it moves away from the easily identified particularity of reality and consequently becomes increasingly difficult to define. Within Diderot's framework, a "radical" is a word which represents a simple, but abstract sensation.² The range of ideas attached to such a word precludes accurate definition, but in the process of abstraction it receives a certain useful universality.

For example, a word such as douleur can not be defined with any worthwhile accuracy. The term actually means nothing unless it is applied to a specific douleur, or unless the speaker himself experiences it. This type of expression is capable of representing an entire span of sensation, much

¹Diderot, "Encyclopédie," Oeuvres, XIV, p. 434.

²Diderot, "Encyclopédie," Oeuvres, XIV, pp. 433-36.

like the hieroglyph in Sur les sourds. The same difficulty also appears in Jacques le fataliste:

Ici Jacques s'embarrassa dans une métaphysique très subtile et peut-être très vraie. Il cherchait à faire concevoir à son maître que le mot douleur était sans idée, et qu'il ne commençait à signifier quelque chose qu'au moment où il rappelait à notre mémoire une sensation que nous avons éprouvée. ¹

Although Diderot does not pursue the idea, he might be expected to propose that these radicaux are the elements which fill the linguistic gaps between words, in the same way that fractions account for the space between whole numbers. Because these terms portray an infinite variety of the same sensation, they could provide the adaptability which concrete, individualized terms lack.

The usefulness of abstract terms, according to Diderot, is a function of their timelessness and flexibility. A highly individualized term is useful only as long as its model survives; the description of a passing sensation, a peculiar physical form, or even transient beauty will lose its true significance as soon as the sensation, form, or beauty passes into oblivion. Abstractions, on the contrary, refer to general forms and sensations which, since they do not exist materially, can never be destroyed.

Abstract terms can accommodate diverse interpretation, according to individual predisposition and current opinion. The radicaux of "Encyclopédie" seem to correspond to the expressions énergiques of Sur les sourds; both are able to

¹Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, Oeuvres, VI, p. 25.

denote a great variety of closely related ideas. The advantages of abstraction are clear, but there remains the problem of encyclopedic precision.

Sur les sourds illustrated the usefulness of ambiguous language to the poet; the article "Encyclopédie," while admitting their practicality, objects to the imprecision of abstractions when used to communicate knowledge rather than poetry. A passage from Le Neveu de Rameau clarifies the problem. During a discussion of music, Rameau replies to the question, "Qu'est-ce qu'un chant?"

Je vous avouerai que cette question est au-dessus de mes forces. Voilà comme nous sommes tous, nous n'avons dans la mémoire que des mots que nous croyons entendre par l'usage fréquent et l'application même juste que nous en faisons; dans l'esprit que des notions vagues. Quand je prononce le mot 'chant', je n'ai pas de notions plus nettes que vous et la plupart de vos semblables quand ils disent: Réputation, blâme, honneur, vice, vertu, pudeur, décence, honte, ridicule. ¹

In an attempt to delimit the meanings of such radicaux, Diderot settles on a method of historical comparison in which he proposes to examine them in the light of a dead language. This would, supposedly, establish an invariable model of comparison with all modern languages. A definition of a given radical could be obtained by accepting the validity of the ancient definition and applying it to the modern version of the word. The models would be found in the authors of antiquity.

¹Diderot, Le Neveu de Rameau, Oeuvres, V, p. 458.

Through this method Diderot sought to provide commonly acceptable definitions that would eliminate confusion in discussions of such abstract topics as morals, ethics, and logic. The greatest obstacle to his success in this project was the inevitable inconsistency with which classical authors used the so-called models for eighteenth-century radicaux. The proposal is also severely limited by the obvious necessity of redefining the entire vocabulary and of educating the reader with regard to the ancient definitions.

The naive treatment of inversions in Sur les sourds finds its counterpart here, in the futile search for impossible definitions. In "Encyclopédie" Diderot is forced to an impasse in his pursuit of both expressiveness and precision.

CHAPTER IV

DIDEROT AS A CRITIC OF LANGUAGE

Any attempt to interpret Diderot's observations on language necessarily becomes involved with the preliminary problem of establishing an approach to such interpretation. On the surface, there is no novelty in the assertion that Diderot's erratic, but untiring genius enabled him to examine phenomena with a perpetually fresh point of view. The amazing mobility of his mind endowed his thought process with a certain quality of anarchy, allowing ideas to combine with complete freedom of association, unrestricted by conventional logic. He was not a consistently painstaking reasoner and certainly not a systematizer, but he did maintain an encyclopedic curiosity towards all that went on around him. The seemingly endless, though realistic digressions found in Diderot's works, such as Jacques, indicate how effectively this inquisitive mental quality is imprinted on his writing.

For a man so concerned with the various forms of human expression, from the technical skills described in the Encyclopédie to the artistic criticism of the Salons, it seems natural that one of his interests should be the study

of language. As the preceding chapters have tried to show, his observations are often characterized by a dual approach, combining the artistic and scientific viewpoints. As a result there exists an unavoidable ambiguity in the interpretation of his actual position on the subject. Nevertheless, three significant interpretive approaches seem to emerge. Although such generalities are obviously oversimplified, all three possibilities contain a measure of truth.

First, and most simply, it would be possible to assert that Diderot's interest in language is an accidental by-product of his other intellectual pursuits, and that his analysis is accordingly superficial and utilitarian. This view appears to be supported by the close association of empirical philosophy and language study. Secondly, and more logically, it might be claimed that as a loyal philosophe, Diderot was obliged to show an interest in language, a topic very much à la mode during the Enlightenment. The third approach gives the most credit to Diderot by casting him in the role of a serious investigator of linguistic problems. It is certainly not overly imaginative to see historically significant elements in his speculation.

In the final analysis, however, only a synthesis of all three approaches can adequately account for the diversity found in Diderot's language criticism. His interest in language does appear to be largely the result of an intense interest in the historical origins of ideas and the development of man's consciousness. This interest is, in

turn attributable to the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, which included a great deal of utilitarian language study. Diderot participated to a limited extent in the general attitudes towards language developed by his contemporaries, but his essential role must be seen as that of an independent and imaginative questioner, rather than a profound problem solver. More than anything else, Diderot's language criticism reflects his own very personal philosophy of nature. It would therefore be useful to examine his theories in that connection. The basic question becomes a matter of determining what place language occupies in his view of nature.

Diderot's adherence to empiricism has already been discussed; all ideas and all language are manifestations of sensual experience, and as such are subject to the limitations of the senses. However, the most important factor which should be taken into account is his particular form of materialism.

Diderot's materialistic outlook is based on the belief that natural phenomena have no extrinsic causes; that is, nature is a sufficient explanation for all things. Furthermore, as Heraclitus believed and as eighteenth-century science was beginning to prove, nature itself is in constant motion. Diderot was convinced of the inherent mobility of all matter: movement is an integral and absolutely essential characteristic of all material substance. This line of reasoning is more fully developed in the Rêve de

d'Alembert, where Diderot proposes that organic functions of plants and animals are the result of a certain organization of the energy contained in the matter of the plant or animal. For example, the ability to grow and reproduce might be derived from a complex coordination of the basic motion of a given organism. There is no appeal to supernatural intervention.

Thus, language could easily occupy one of these organizational niches. If motion is an inherent property of the material universe, and if human functions are the result of a particular organization of matter (i.e. a certain direction of its elemental motion), then language, like reproduction, could be regarded as one of the levels of that organization. Therefore, language might be an entirely natural phenomenon, accounted for as interaction between the senses, the mind, and the vocal apparatus. There is no contribution from immaterial sources.

Likewise, if language is the product of specific motive direction, then the natural ordering process of language should be derived from it. Diderot's special kind of linguistic logic is a function of the natural, organic arrangement of the human mind. The hieroglyph of Sur les sourds is the totally personal, untranslatable expression of an individual's thought, as conditioned and nuanced by the motive organization of his own mind.

The key to Diderot's search for expressiveness in Sur les sourds and the reason for the impasse of "Encyclo-

pédie" is contained in the implications of his dynamic materialism. The expressiveness sought in Sur les sourds is, in effect, the linguistic manifestation of an individual's exclusive psychological composition, or direction of his matter's energy. Diderot believes that this expressiveness is possible when the poet and his audience are joined in the experience of an emblème. However, the precision sought in "Encyclopédie" is frustrated by the individuality of men's minds and the imprecision which nature itself demands.

L'univers ne nous offre que des êtres particuliers, infinis en nombre, et sans presque aucune division fixe et déterminée; il n'y en a aucun qu'on puisse appeler ou le premier ou le dernier; tout s'y enchaîne et s'y succède par des nuances insensibles; et à travers cette uniforme immensité d'objets, s'il en paraît quelques-uns qui, comme des pointes de rochers, semblent percer la surface et la dominer, ils ne doivent cette prérogative qu'à des systèmes particuliers, qu'à des conventions vagues, qu'à certains événements étrangers, et non à l'arrangement physique des êtres et à l'intention de la nature. ¹

For Diderot, a dynamic universe of great variety is hopelessly beyond the meager capabilities of a finite and quantified system of linguistic symbols. His vision of material reality prevents the successful resolution of the language question. Sur les sourds reaches a partial solution by shifting a great deal of the responsibility to the reader. Yet the accuracy needed for the Encyclopédie remains unattainable. On final examination, the article "Encyclopédie" upholds the best experimental tradition by

¹Diderot, "Encyclopédie," Oeuvres, XIV, p. 451.

seeking to ask the right questions, rather than to provide hasty answers.

Conclusion

Diderot is, above all, a philosopher of liberty and mobility; perhaps more acutely than any other man of his time he perceived the true meaning of what is now called the "Enlightenment." Many of his contemporaries, including most of the illustrious ones, were dedicated to rigid systems or confining methods which blinded them to the realization that the Enlightenment itself was, and is, an on-going process and not simply the latest stage in a historical progression of philosophic leaps-forward.

Diderot seemed subtly aware that a healthy philosophic spirit does not depend on adherence to a consistent viewpoint. The real measure of its well-being is derived from its sensitivity to all issues and viewpoints. Thus, the only valid philosophic assumption must be that no theory is complete and that no question is ever answered with finality.

This dislike of absolutes rests principally on his appreciation of the contradictions which must exist between a dynamic, vital reality and the static, lifeless formulations of human creation. For Diderot, language is perhaps the most critical of all creations, if, as he believed, intellectual progress is impossible without parallel linguistic progress. In "Encyclopédie" he was forced to conclude

that language is incapable of keeping pace with reality. Yet Sur les sourds holds out the hope that where the philosopher fails, the artist may still succeed. Later works, such as Le Neveu de Rameau seem to justify that hope.

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