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Socialization and Language Acquisition in “Enfants Sauvages”

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C'est une idée désormais conquise que l'homme n'a point de nature mais qu'il a – ou plutôt qu'il *est* – une histoire. (Malson 1964, 7; emphasis in original)

Abstract: Until the eighteenth century, it was believed that the ability to speak is inscribed in human genetic inheritance. The study of so-called “enfants sauvages” from anthropological, medical, and other points of view questions the traditional myths and theories about the “miracle” of language learning, like essentialism with its myth of innate ideas from Plato to Descartes. My proposal is to analyse the case of Victor de l'Aveyron as documented in Jean Itard's report and in Truffaut's film *L'Enfant sauvage*, and as studied in a book by Harlan Lane. The dialogue between different languages, when approaching the question of language itself, will show how language acquisition depends on socialization at an early age, and how human nature is also a socialized nature, or how “mankind, more than having a nature, has/is a history.”

Keywords: “enfants sauvages,” essentialism, François Truffaut, Harlan Lane, Jean Itard, language myths

1 Introduction: The essentialist myth

In the context of the ICCLA's proposals for the 2016 congress in Vienna, this article questions the belief that the ability to speak is inscribed in human genetic inheritance, implicitly discussing essentialism as the myth of innate ideas from Plato to Descartes, and the assumption of a mental language which is inherent in human beings.¹

Essentialism sees human nature as *logos*, language, word, rationality, and defines humanity in terms of the intrinsic relationship between human nature and language. Plato explains how that which is innate and that which is acquired

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to Martin Neumann for his suggestions on this article and to extend my appreciation to Susan Ward for the revision of the text in British English.

are related in human beings, resorting to images and allegories rather than discourse. We find the explanation of what is innate in mankind in *Phaedrus*, when Plato describes the pre-existence of immortal souls in the mythical setting of the heavenly procession, at the feast and banquet of divine and human souls, and in the contemplation of ideas, knowledge, and other eternal verities in the divine view of the super-heavenly realm. Life is the result of the soul falling and passing from the superior into a material body. But the fallen soul still remembers the time when it beheld the truth: “For a human being must understand a general conception formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being” (Plato 1960, 481).

The soul for Plato is not a *tabula rasa*; it possesses to a certain degree a memory of the absolute, atemporal, and archaic idealities that it used to contemplate when travelling with the gods. In the intimate depths of the human *psyche*’s primordial small “book,” as on a tablet of soft wax, is engraved this primeval writing, on an eternal and secret matrix that is almost inarticulate and witnesses an ancient familiarity of the soul with the supracelestial abode, a remote landscape of origins: this archaic, original wisdom inscribed in the soul’s internal *biblion* can be recalled by *anamnesis* (Santos 1998, 146–148): knowledge is always reminiscence, recollection. The transcendental idealities – contemplated in their full glorious, exuberant light by the souls of the gods – nevertheless also nourished human souls “with nectar and ambrosia” and lingered in their memory after the human fall into physical manifestation.

Plato lived at the centre of a revolution leading from an oral culture in Homer’s oral tradition (which is also Socrates’) to the culture of the written word, of the book (Santos 1998, 157). But for him, neither the oral nor the written word can really convey the inexpressible, ineffable original contents of the soul, since language, oral or written, belongs to the realm of sensible realities and is therefore limited: *logos* cannot be reduced to, or really be expressed by, *phone* (Santos 1998, 155–158). Foucault’s complaint in *Les mots et les choses* about language being constrained to dwell on the same side as the world can be understood in this context (Santos 1998, 141).²

² Nowadays, cognitive linguistics holds that knowledge or thought are not possible without language.

2 Passage to language

Nowadays, the young child's ability to acquire language is acknowledged as depending on the child's relationship to society: it is an acquisition, a learning that takes place within the community. The study of so-called wild children (“enfants sauvages”), which had started in France by the end of the eighteenth century, helped to put into perspective the relationship of humanity to language and brought a new understanding of the infant's learning to speak, while at the same time reviewing what it really means to be human.

It is a common belief today that humans possess an ability to acquire articulated language and that without language neither abstract thought nor values could have developed. It is also known that learning depends on imitation, and that environment plays a fundamental role in the development of instinct. Other animals possess an innate nature which corresponds to an acquired nature in human beings, so that humankind diversifies according to historical time and geographic space (Malson 1964, 8–9). Consequently, the problem of defining human nature can be summed up with psychological heredity: if biological heredity is a clear fact, nothing more polemic than the transmission of qualities of knowledge and affectivity, i. e. of action, which are characteristic of humankind, heredity is then what is natural in humans, and inheritance what is cultural, fixing limits which are difficult to define at times (Malson 1964, 8–9).

With the development of the human sciences, the idea that the human species possesses instincts that may develop by themselves has been discussed, accentuating the role of environment in the development of each individual. What humankind has in common is “une structure de possibilités, voire de probabilités qui ne peut passer à l'être sans contexte social, quel qu'il soit. Avant la rencontre d'autrui, et du groupe, l'homme n'est rien que des virtualités aussi légères qu'une transparente vapeur. Toute condensation suppose un milieu, c'est-à-dire le monde des autres.” Evolution's theories and psychosociology invite us to consider “qu'*aujourd'hui*, se trouve au monde un 'être qui n'est pas, comme la totalité des autres êtres, un 'système de montages' mais qui doit tout recevoir et tout apprendre et chez qui l'endogène – ce qu'on peut imputer à ses seules puissances et natives dispositions – a la consistance [...] d'une nuée” (Malson 1964, 8–9; emphasis in original).

The decline of the notion of “human nature” is linked to the objective and scientific appreciation of both individual and specific (of the species, of humanity in general) hereditary determinism. The study of individual psychological heredity is less problematic to established truths than the study of specific psychological heredity, which shakes the prejudices of the past and dissolves more radically the notion of “human nature” (Malson 1964, 11). The criticism of individual psycho-

logical heredity has developed in two distinct ways, which are, however, linked together: the sociology of families, and the study of twins. The criticism of specific psychological heredity has also followed two different paths: cultural anthropology, and the study of cases of extreme isolation. One can say with Lucien Malson that “the human nature” of “wild children” has always escaped the critics’ notice, because it only appears after social existence (1964, 12). In other words, the study of “human nature” as the nature of “wild children” would necessarily lead to a post-critical reformulation of what this “human nature” is, sending the ancient notion – as Malson formulates it – “dans le musée des légendes et des mythes” (1964, 11).

The attempt to situate the problem of “enfants sauvages” within the opposition between nature and culture/society has been discussed by previous scholars. Lévi-Strauss writes in 1949 that the distinction between “état de nature” and “état de société” is the most contested among all the principles of sociology: “On ne peut, en effet, se référer sans contradiction à une phase de l’évolution de l’humanité au cours de laquelle celle-ci, en l’absence de toute organisation sociale, n’en aurait pas moins développé des formes d’activité qui sont partie intégrante de la culture” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 1). “Wild children” cannot be considered, in his opinion, as a symbol for any “state of first humanity,” a kind of fossil of humankind: “il n’existe pas de comportement naturel de l’espèce auquel l’individu isolé puisse revenir par régression” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 4). And so one cannot expect to find in humankind a behaviour of a pre-cultural type: “On ne peut donc espérer trouver chez l’homme l’illustration de types de comportement de caractère pré-culturel” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 6).

Lévi-Strauss sees in the opposition between humans and animals the best example of the antinomy of culture/nature: “C’est l’opposition entre le comportement humaine et le comportement animal qui fournit la plus frappante illustration de l’antinomie de la culture et de la nature” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 5). Only the human species, he concludes, possesses what he calls the “modèle culturel universel”: “Aucune place, dans ces structures collectives, même pour une esquisse de ce qu’on pourrait appeler le modèle culturel universel: langage, outils, institutions sociales, et système de valeurs esthétiques, morales ou religieuses” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 5). Language permeates the whole universal cultural model: it gives sense to things and to the organization of the whole social group. It makes the conquest of the abstract and of values possible. Other animal species may live in groups and have a social structure, but they lack conscience and the sense of the whole. As we say in my native Portuguese, “All animals speak, but none has a language.” They communicate but do not convey concepts, values, ideas, sense. They do not have the abstract level of ideas and values that constitute sense.

Lévi-Strauss explains the majority of cases of “wild children” as being congenitally abnormal, and sees in the “imbécillité” (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 3) the cause, not the result, of their having been abandoned. Merleau-Ponty answers Lévi-Strauss’s general explanation in “Les relations avec autrui chez l’enfant” (1958), saying that one cannot deduce constitutional oligophreny from the delayed absence of language: “Il y a une période où l’enfant est sensible à l’égard du langage, où il est capable d’apprendre à parler. On a pu montrer que si l’enfant [...] ne se trouve pas dans un milieu où l’on parle, il ne parlera jamais comme ceux qui ont acquis le langage dans la période en question” (quoted in Malson 1964, 64). Merleau-Ponty sees in the muteness of “wild children” the consequence of an affective frustration and of a deprivation of social contacts: “C’est le cas des enfants qu’on appelle sauvages, qui avaient été élevés par des animaux, ou loin du contact des sujets parlants. Ces enfants n’ont jamais appris à parler” (quoted in Malson 1964, 64). The importance of the child’s relationship with its mother is decisive, hence the designation “mother tongue”:

[Il existe] entre l’acquisition du langage ... et l’insertion de l’enfant dans le milieu familial un lien profond ... Les enfants séparés inopinément et durablement de leur mère montrent toujours des phénomènes de *régression* linguistique. Au fond ce n’est pas seulement le mot maman qui est le premier que l’enfant prononce, c’est tout le langage qui est, pour ainsi dire, maternel ... L’acquisition du langage serait un phénomène de même style que la relation avec la mère: une relation d’identification. Apprendre à parler c’est apprendre à jouer une série de rôles. (Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Malson 1964, 64–65; emphasis in Merleau-Ponty)

It is after all what psychologists call “maturation” and the linguists “age factor.”

The study of cases of “wild children” (Malson registered fifty-two in his book) shows that these children suffer from oligophreny by lack of human contact, and the progress they made in their socialization suggests what scholars call *dementia ex separatione* (Malson 1964, 71), that is, madness/wildness caused by separation from human society. Malson thus proposes for our reflection three types of “enfants sauvages,” illustrating the three aspects of “sauvagerie”: “l’enfant reclus,” “l’enfant animalisé,” and finally “l’enfant solitaire,” taking as examples respectively Kaspar Hauser, Kamala, and Victor de l’Aveyron³ (Malson 1964, 71). “Wild children” have inspired literature and art since ancient times, from the Roman legend of the twins Romulus and Remus raised by wolves, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, and Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, to E. R. Burroughs’s

3 “L’isolement le plus net, et le plus radical, semble [...] avoir été le lot de Victor” (Malson 1964, 88).

Tarzan. Many cases of “wild children” are well documented and have inspired literature and film, like the case of Kaspar Hauser of Nuremberg, on which Werner Herzog’s 1974 film *Das Geheimnis von Kaspar Hauser* (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*) is based.⁴

Lucien Malson’s study on “enfants sauvages,” published in 1964, reprints the two reports written by Jean Itard (the doctor who took care of the education of the “wild boy of Aveyron”), which had been unavailable for a long time – “Mémoire et rapport sur Victor de l’Aveyron” (1801) and “Rapport sur les nouveaux développements de Victor de l’Aveyron” (1806). This probably prepared the way for the work of François Truffaut, who studied the reports and was inspired by them for his film *L’Enfant sauvage* (1969). He follows Itard’s text quite closely and shows his commitment to the theme by playing the role of the young doctor himself in the film. So I would like to pause here and comment on Truffaut; doing so is also an *hommage* to cinema as a form of language and accomplishment par excellence of comparative literature.

Although Truffaut’s film, as part of a trilogy on childhood, may raise questions of other orders, like the meaning of childhood or the loss of paradise, the question of language is central to *L’Enfant sauvage*. In the manner of a documentary, it follows Itard’s progression in the education of young Victor. It is no wonder that, only a year after May 1968 in France, Truffaut should be questioning whether the acquisition of language by the “wild boy” is a matter of mere rationality and rules, and his socialization a matter of the repression of his primitive “innocence.” And although both Truffaut and Itard are heirs to the *Siècle des Lumières* and its ontological optimism and generosity, they themselves question the legitimacy of trying to educate and socialize young Victor (“*L’Enfant sauvage*” 2001). This time was also Lacan’s era in France, and his proposal of a return to Freud is mediated through Saussure’s research on linguistics and Lévi-Strauss’s cultural anthropology, highlighting the importance of language in human sciences. Truffaut follows in the opening scenes the “rêverie” of the “enfant sauvage” flying from tree to tree in the forest before being caught by woodsmen, and reinforces Itard’s questioning of the legitimacy of taking the child away from his habitat. Childhood may symbolize authenticity and innocence, and the acquisition of language may mean submission to rules and rationality, but language also frees the imagination and thought and becomes the base for all that is playful, creative, and aesthetic. On the other hand, one could argue that childhood is not equivalent to the state of mankind before the biblical Fall,

⁴ Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the story of King Kong, and the legend of the Abominable Snowman probably belong to the same group.

nor is nature equivalent to Paradise lost. In any case, Truffaut’s *L’Enfant sauvage* was a huge international success.

3 How Itard and the “enfant sauvage” met in Paris: Answers to the central question of the Enlightenment, “what is the nature of man?”

When Jean Itard took charge of the education of the “sauvage de l’Aveyron” in 1801, he was twenty-six years old and had recently been appointed resident physician at the Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris. The wild boy had been captured by woodsmen in 1797 and in 1800. He had run naked through the woods and had lived on acorns and roots, and potatoes that peasants had occasionally given him. The government commissioner for Saint-Sermin, Constans Saint-Estève, was the first to write down his impressions of the boy, and on 9 January 1800 sent him to the orphanage at Saint-Affrique, where he was also thoroughly studied. The case spread rapidly, and several newspapers and the intelligentsia discussed the story of the “enfant sauvage de l’Aveyron.” The designation was to cause confusion: the child was an adolescent, he was from Tarn and not Aveyron, and the label “sauvage” was normally used to designate wild animals, primitive people like the Tahitians, and original man (such as Rousseau’s Noble Savage). The boy evidently could not be identified with any of these (Lane 1976, 11).

Abbé Bonnaterre, professor of natural history at the Central School of Aveyron in Rodez, and Abbé Sicard, the famous director of the Institute for Deaf-Mutes, asked to meet the boy, offering to examine him, and wrote learned papers on the case. Finally the “sauvage” was taken to Rodez and then to Paris on 20 July, but arrived only eighteen days later because he had contracted smallpox. The newspapers published a sketch of the boy’s appearance and hinted at the complicated philosophical issues surrounding his capture (e. g. *Gazette de France*, quoted in Lane 1976, 18–19). The story of the “enfant sauvage de l’Aveyron” touched upon the central question of the Enlightenment: “What is the nature of man?”

There were three main answers. Linnaeus in his *Systema naturae* (1735) placed man and the primates in the same order. This was a scandal at the time: although man appeared at the top of the list because of his privileged position in the animal kingdom, his animal nature was accepted. The Enlightenment philosophers did not like the idea of the continuity of species and the affirmation of man’s animal nature. Charles Darwin would later, in 1859, inflict this second narcissistic wound on humanity with *The Origins of Species by Means of Natural*

Selection.⁵ Linnaeus' taxonomy included in the same group "l'homme, les bêtes sauvages, les sauvages," and "les enfants sauvages" (Lane 1976, 19). And although this humanoid diversity was disquieting, people felt it might be the key to the understanding of their own humanity (Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, quoted in Lane 1976, 20). The first anthropological society was formed, while expeditions were organized to Africa, Indonesia, and the New World, returning with flora, fauna, and inhabitants: Pygmies and Hottentots, and orang-utans,⁶ as well as gorillas and chimpanzees. In this context, "wild children" were studied with great zeal. Linnaeus quotes three cases of "wild children," and Rousseau five. Recently, another child had appeared from the woods in France, the girl of Sogny, Angélique Le Blanc (1731). A school of philosophers and doctors called *Idéologie* appeared around the turn of the eighteenth century carrying out studies in what would later become physical and cultural anthropology. They dominated the newly formed Institut de France and founded the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme (Lane 1976, 21).

The behaviour of "wild children," which proved critical in the controversy, tended to undermine the traditional criteria for humanhood: human appearance, vertical stance, and speech (Lane 1976, 21). Rousseau's myth of the Noble Savage appears in the context of Europe's contacts with the New World and its inhabitants. Columbus had described America as an earthly paradise, creating the idea that other human beings, different from Europeans, lived in a "state of nature," not yet civilized and without the abjections of civilization. These ideas had spread in European utopian thought through Thomas More and Erasmus of Rotterdam, and are where the discussion of human nature as essentially bad (Hobbes) or good (Rousseau) originated. The status of the American "savages" discovered by Columbus was decided in 1537 by papal bull, declaring them human (Lane 1976, 22). New human sciences like anthropology and ethnology would try to understand the myth of the Noble Savage and to integrate the differences of "human nature" meanwhile evident in other peoples and cultures by using new concepts like alterity and cultural relativism instead of the essentialist conception of "human nature."

Linnaeus' criteria for *homo ferus* were the adjectives *tetrapus* "quadruped" and *mutus* "mute." But vertical stance as a criterion of humanhood was ques-

⁵ The three narcissistic wounds are Copernicus' discoveries about geocentric theories, Darwin's new ideas about the evolution of species, and Freud's discovery of the unconscious (see the opening sequence of the film *Freud* [1962] by director John Huston. The film's script is signed by Wolfgang Reinhardt, but it was originally begun by Jean-Paul Sartre).

⁶ Derived from a Malaysian noun meaning "man of the woods" (Blumenthal 2003, 20).

tioned by the new discoveries, being natural in orang-utans, and conversely some wild children were quadrupeds. Therefore, the last criterion for humanhood was language, as Aristotle and Descartes had believed.⁷ But, if language is innate to the human species, how was the muteness of almost all “wild children” to be explained? The boy of Aveyron seemed deaf, but he was only hard of hearing (Lane 1976, 24). In fact, he reacted to another set of sounds which did not coincide with ours and related to his needs, chiefly for food. If he had turned out to be deaf, as was originally thought, his case would have affected the discussion about human nature at the time to a lesser degree (Lane 1976, 24). A second controversy concerned the existence of innate ideas and is also associated with Descartes: “Some had hoped unreasonably to learn from these wild children, as [...] from deaf-mutes who later recovered their hearing, the secret of what man was like before language” (Lane 1976, 25). The girl from Sogny had spent several years in the wild with a companion and had later acquired language. Harlan Lane considers her case a rare exception, and regrets the lack of documentation, since the validity of the available documents is doubtful: “In any event, when asked, she revealed that she did not initially have an idea of the Supreme Being” (1976, 25). A scholar of the time, La Mettrie, “emphasized that these wild children and deaf-mutes, when interrogated, revealed that they had no prior notions, no innate ideas” (Lane 1976, 25). And, as Lane concludes: “Since these children could not reason until they acquired language, it seemed that language was the precursor and substratum of thought” (1976, 25).

The third great controversy of the Enlightenment concerning “wild children” stresses the influence of society on man, as Itard so beautifully writes at the opening of his first report on the education of a “wild man”:

Cast upon this globe without physical strength or innate ideas, incapable by himself of following the fundamental laws of nature which call him to the first rank of the animal kingdom, it is only in the heart of society that man can attain the preeminent position that nature has reserved for him. Without civilization he would be one of the feeblest and least intelligent of animals. (Itard, trans. Lane 1976, 26)

The opposite view emphasizes the ills contracted by man in the process of socialization. “Wild children” were able to survive naked in the woods, enjoying good health even in winter, free from the vices of society (Lane 1976, 26). The point was not to deny the influence of society, but rather to show that it might work for good or for evil. “Wild children” challenged the Enlightenment belief in human per-

⁷ Orang-utans cannot speak because of an obstruction in the larynx, but no impediment could be found in chimpanzees, and so the problem remained unresolved (Lane 1976, 24).

fectibility because they were so difficult to educate and slow to recover from their “state of nature.” Rousseau and Kant believed there had been an era in which “the state of culture necessary to family life did not exist,” although most of the philosophers rejected the concept of a “state of nature” (Lane 1976, 26). But, as Lane asks, “if society is not the natural end of man [...], then why should social isolation have such disastrous consequences? Why didn’t the ‘wild boy of Aveyron’ coincide with Rousseau’s model of the ‘Noble Savage’?” (1976, 27).

The case of the “wild boy of Aveyron” was already well documented in studies by Bonnaterre (*Notice historique sur le sauvage de l’Aveyron et sur quelques autres individus qu’on a trouvé dans les forêts à différentes époques* [Paris: Panckoucke, 1800]) and a colleague of Itard, J.-J. Virey (*Histoire naturelle du genre humain [avec une dissertation sur le sauvage de l’Aveyron]* [Paris: Dufart, 1800]), reflecting the age’s philosophical preoccupations even before the young doctor Itard took care of the child’s education (Lane 1976, 33). The meeting of Itard and the wild boy presented a challenge to the young doctor, since it might bring him public attention and fame, “or it might destroy his career right at its beginning” (Lane 1976, 3).

4 Itard’s pioneering spirit

The young doctor Itard had to defend the possibility of educating the wild boy against the opinion of philosophers and colleagues who were convinced “that the boy was left in the wild because he was an idiot, not an idiot because he was left in the wild” (Lane 1976, 5).⁸ Among those who so opined was Abbé Sicard, Director of the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, who despaired of the possibility of educating the boy, considering him a case of oligophreny. But Sicard had “contracted an obligation – to the boy [...] and to the government,” and so Itard “took up the training of the *enfant sauvage*” (Lane 1976, 53). Philippe Pinel, the leading authority on mental disorder of the time and medical director of the Paris asylum for the insane, in his long report to the Société des Observateurs de l’Homme, also

⁸ The young man had twenty-three scars, for Itard “indices d’une vie entièrement isolée, précaire et vagabonde” (quoted in Malson 1964, 137). But the boy’s neck was “disfigured by a thick scar slashed across his voice box” (Lane 1976, 4). This scar, larger and more profound than the others on his body, might have told the child’s story: he might have been abandoned at the age of four or five, probably because he was illegitimate, and the person who left him in the forest might have wanted to kill him. It is almost a miracle that he survived thanks to nature’s help, and that the muscular and cartilaginous parts of his voice had not been cut through in the attack (Malson 1964, 164).

considered the boy to be a hopeless case and a “fake savage” (Lane 1976, 56). Itard was prepared for this challenging mission because he “had formed opinions on the metaphysical questions of the Enlightenment” (Lane 1976, 53), and in particular on the sensualist philosophy of Condillac. In his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), Condillac argued that, without language, a human being depends on his senses to form the corresponding ideas and cannot imagine them in their absence, recall them, or contemplate their properties and relations, and therefore cannot create new and abstract ideas (Lane 1976, 54). Humans owe the majority of ideas to contact with their fellow humans.⁹

Thus, Itard concluded that the “wild boy of Aveyron” needed language in order to perform higher mental processes, and he needed acquired drives, that is, occasions to trouble himself with the “things that occupy us”:

If it were proposed to solve the following problem of metaphysics, to “determine what would be the degree of intelligence and the nature of the ideas of an adolescent who, deprived since infancy of any education, had lived entirely separated from individuals of his own species,” then unless I am greatly mistaken, the solution of the problem would be as follows: There should first be assigned to that individual nothing but an intelligence relative to the small number of his needs and one deprived by isolation of all the simple and complex ideas we receive from education, which combine in our mind in so many ways solely by means of our knowledge of signs. Well, the mental status of this adolescent would be that of the wild boy of Aveyron, and the solution of the problem would consist in exhibiting the extent and the cause of his intellectual state. (Itard, trans. Lane 1976, 54–55)

Itard stood almost alone in his understanding of the wild boy as a product of his story and of his isolation from society and human contact, and he was contradicted by virtually every colleague of the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme (Lane 1976, 55). Nowadays, his view would be widely confirmed by environmental theories.¹⁰ The drama of the encounter of doctor Itard and the wild boy shaped the

⁹ Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* connects the philosophy of the seventeenth century (Descartes) and of the eighteenth century (Kant). Lane acknowledges Locke's important influence chiefly through Condillac, and so does Malson: “Itard [...] grand lecteur de Locke et de Condillac, convaincu que l'homme n'est pas ‘né’, mais ‘construit’” (Malson 1964, 89). Itard considers Locke together with Condillac: “On doit aux travaux de Locke et de Condillac, d'avoir apprécié l'influence puissante qu'a sur la formation et le développement de nos idées, l'action isolée et simultanée de nos sens” (quoted in Malson 1964, 194).

¹⁰ See Kellog and Kellog (1967, 6–7): “Instead of supposing that the ‘wild’ children were inherently feeble-minded, as is usually done, the proponent of the environmental doctrine would hold that originally such children were probably normal. [...] On the strength of this supposition, it might be maintained that the ‘wild’ children had made natural and adequate adjustments to their environment.”

lives of countless children, and Harlan Lane imagines “the excitement of another time when men affirmed, ‘Yes, the deaf *can* speak, the retarded *can* learn,’ when they believed that the only sure limit to a child’s knowledge is his society’s ignorance, when they were convinced, as I am, of the perfectibility of man” (emphasis in original; Lane 1976, 5–6). The education of Victor de l’Aveyron was “a test of the new science of mental medicine and a proof of philosophy’s new empiricist theory of knowledge” (Lane 1976, 5). Its contribution to the education of profoundly deaf and special-needs children is invaluable: “in his efforts to train him, Itard created a whole new approach to education, centered on the pupil, closely adapted to his developing needs and abilities, seconded by instructional devices – an approach we have accepted so thoroughly that we scarcely imagine any other or credit anyone with its discovery” (Lane 1976, 5).

5 Conclusion

Chiefly, we have witnessed the end of the essentialist myth about language in extensive reflections on the most varied and important possibilities of what nowadays we would call “being human.”

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