e-ISSN 2723-9640

JoLMA
Vol. 7 – Num. 1 – June 2026

Ordo et connexio verborum Spinoza on the Genesis and Nature of Human Language

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Abstract Spinoza's remarks on language are often treated as fragmentary and inconsistent with his philosophy. This paper argues that they become intelligible when situated within his account of the imaginative origin of language. Drawing on Part II of the Ethics, it shows how linguistic signs arise from stabilized associations among ideas and develops a unified account of universals, linguistic custom (*usus*, *consuetudo*), and the limits of *cognitio ex signis*, explaining both the emergence of meaning and its epistemic instability.

Keywords Spinoza. Language. Signs. Words. Knowledge.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 The Semiotic Physiology of Perception in *Ethics* II. – 3 Association and Meaning: the Genesis of Words (*Verba*). – 4 From Denotation to Convention: the Analogical Use of Language. – 5 Exceeding the Limits of Reason: Spinoza's Critique of *Cognitio ex signis*. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The ongoing renaissance of Spinoza studies has brought renewed attention to aspects of his thought that had long remained in the

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2026-05-06
Accepted 2026-07-06
Published 2026-09-17

DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2026/01/006

background, including his remarks on signs and language.[1] Although Spinoza does not develop a systematic philosophy of language, his works contain scattered indications of an underlying conception that calls for reconstruction. Yet a part of the literature has approached these remarks in isolation, treating them as independent claims rather than as moments of a broader account of human language. As a result, they have often been taken to be fragmentary, or even in tension with his broader philosophical project.[2]

This paper argues, by contrast, that Spinoza's remarks on language become fully intelligible only when situated within his broader account of the imaginative origin and nature of human language. Far from being a marginal concern, from the TdIE to the *Ethics* Spinoza consistently stresses the need to understand the genesis of language in order to guard against its potentially misleading character. Viewed in this light, his scattered remarks no longer appear as isolated observations, but as integral to his account of cognition and its limits. On this basis, the paper reconstructs Spinoza's theory of the genesis and nature of linguistic signs through a close reading of his texts, in dialogue with the relevant scholarship.

An important first step in this direction was taken by Parkinson (1969), who first pointed to the connection between Spinoza's theory of language and his physiology of imagination, and was further developed by Moreau (1994) in his account of experience. Building on these insights, Vinciguerra's study of the semiotic character of imagination (2005) offers one of the first systematic discussions of the internal logic of imaginative processes, thereby providing a framework for a more comprehensive reconstruction, later taken up in studies such as Vinciguerra (2006), Hervet (2012), and Martinet (2014).

The article develops this argument in four steps. It first offers a semiotic reading of the physical digression in the *Ethics*, following Vinciguerra's interpretation (§ 2). It then examines how words acquire semantic content through the stabilization of associative mechanisms that render certain features of experience salient and recallable (§ 3). The discussion then turns to the customary dimension of language

1 I include here a selective – though not exhaustive – bibliography on the subject, arranged in chronological order: Kaufmann 1940; Savan 1958; Zac 1965; Parkinson 1969; Gueroult 1974; Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; Zac 1977; Dominguez 1978; Robinet 1978; Gruntfest 1979; Giannetto 1980; Kaye 1980; Vinti 1984; Klijnsmit 1989; Dascal 1990; Bove 1991; Moreau 1994; Diodato 1995; Harvey 2002; Zourabichvili 2002; Vinciguerra 2005; Totaro 2006; Vinciguerra 2006; Narváez 2008; Dobbs-Weinstein 2009; Lærke 2009; Licata 2009; Hervet 2012; Martinet 2013; Lærke 2014; Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, Totaro 2019; Leblanc 2021; Hübner 2024.

2 Such is the case with Savan 1959; Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; 1990. Five objections to these interpretations can be found in Parkinson 1969; Zac 1977; Moreau 1994; Narváez 2010; Lærke 2014.

and the role of *usus* and *consuetudo* in shaping linguistic practices (§ 4). Finally, it addresses the epistemological implications of this account through Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis* (§ 5). The article thus shows that Spinoza's scattered remarks on language can be reconstructed as a coherent account grounded in the dynamics of imagination, which explains both the emergence of linguistic meaning and its ambivalent nature.

2 The Semiotic Physiology of Perception in *Ethics* II

To understand Spinoza's account of the origin and nature of human language, one must first clarify his theory of imagination and perception, which presupposes the semiotic physiology developed in *Ethics* II. In this part, Spinoza analyses the operations of the human mind to account for its specificity, laying the groundwork for his later explanation of human bondage to the affects (Parts III-IV) as well as the possibility of freedom grounded in adequate knowledge (Part V). The physiological account of bodies constitutes the first step in this explanatory strategy, tracing first the dynamics of extended things (Props. 13-19) and then those of thought (Props. 20-40).

Within this framework, Spinoza develops a purely physical account of bodily nature, describing bodies from the simplest to the most complex without invoking any external or immaterial agency.[3] As scholarship has emphasized,[4] the aim is not to contribute to contemporary natural philosophy in a technical sense, but to articulate a general explanatory schema[5] capable of withstanding shifts within the Cartesian paradigm[6] while reworking its metaphysical assumptions from within.[7]

The physical digression of *Ethics* II gives this schema its most explicit formulation. Here Spinoza grounds the complexity of bodies and minds in their structural composition, rejecting any appeal to

3 In this respect, Spinoza is undoubtedly indebted to Descartes's account of human physiology, as presented in the posthumous work *Traité de l'homme*, first published in Latin in 1662 and in French in 1664. The early circulation of manuscript copies of these treatises within the Leiden *milieu* surrounding Adriaan Heereboord and Johannes de Raey can scarcely be doubted, as has recently been argued by Andrea Strazzoni (2025, 5-24). This circulation coincides with the period in which Spinoza moved from Amsterdam to Rijnsburg, while several of his friends were attending courses in philosophy and medicine at the University of Leiden (see Bordoli 2001).

4 See Adler 1996, 253-76; Andrault 2019, 214-43.

5 See Adler 1996, 260-1.

6 See Andrault 2019.

7 The most conspicuous absence concerns the animal spirits, already called into question by Niels Stensen, see Andrault 2019, 11-2.

intrinsic properties of underlying substances. Insofar as they are modes rather than substances in the proper sense, simple bodies are distinguished solely by the ratio of motion and rest that characterizes them.[8] Individuals, that is, composite bodies, differ instead in their capacity to preserve the same degree of motion and the same overall ratio among their parts,[9] even in cases where internal variations do not affect the general structure of the individual.[10] In this way, Spinoza arrives at a functionally oriented description of the relations among bodies without having to rely on supposed intrinsic properties of organs and systems, as was largely the case in the preceding tradition.

The human body is no exception to this framework. It is conceived as an aggregate of individual components, each of which in turn possesses a composite nature.[11] It is precisely by virtue of the complexity and contiguity of the parts constituting these individuals that complex bodies such as the human body can exist – bodies whose parts exhibit hard, soft, or fluid surfaces[12] and are therefore susceptible to modification.[13] In simple bodies, variations of this kind would in fact radically alter the proportion of motion and rest that defines them; likewise, in composite individuals there would be no room for changes that do not preserve their equilibrium. Only highly complex structures, such as the human body, can undergo modifications both at the level of their individual components and in the arrangement of these parts with respect to the whole, provided that the distinctive individual ratio is preserved. This, then, is the complexity that Spinoza attributes to the human body and that allows him to distinguish it from less articulated organisms without appealing to a difference of substance.

Corresponding to this complexity is a perceptual capacity of equal degree.[14] When the soft components undergo modifications that temporarily alter the surfaces of that body, the internal proportion of the individual component is thereby changed, while its relation to the entire human body remains unchanged. In this way, although

8 See E II, DigPhy, L1 (G II,97,25-6) and ax2 (G II,99,23-5).

9 See E II, DigPhy, def (G II,99,26–100,5).

10 See E II, DigPhy, L4-6 (G II,100,16–101,12).

11 See E II DigPhy, post 1 (G II,102,20-2).

12 See E II DigPhy, post 2 (G II,102,23-5).

13 See E II DigPhy, post 3 (G II,102,26-8).

14 In this sense, Spinoza states in Part III that differences in affects correspond to differences in essence. Hence, the affects of non-human animals differ from human ones insofar as their nature differs. Even when the same terms (e.g., desire or pleasure) are used, they express fundamentally different modes of existence across species, see E III, p57s (G II,187,6-23).

the part is in a certain sense estranged from its previous nature, its modification (*affectio*) is absorbed and preserved by the whole in the form of a trace (*vestigium*).[15] Starting from this physiological receptivity, Spinoza lays the groundwork for his theory of perception.

Just as traces (*vestigia*) depend both on the nature of the modifying body (*afficiens*) and on that of the modified body (*affectum*),[16] so, under the attribute of thought, the idea of a modification (*idea affectionis*)[17] involves (*involvit*) both the nature of the perceiving human body and that of the external body perceived.[18] The pair *vestigia-idea affectionis* thus makes it possible to clarify, *in nuce*, the functioning of human perception: whatever leaves a trace is thereby perceived as present or actually existing, insofar as it implies (*involvendo*) the nature of an external body, until a new modification of the body alters that imprint.[19]

From this description it follows that the idea we have of an external object, when obtained in this way, is intrinsically confused – an *experientia vaga*[20] – which remains in the foreground until it is replaced by another modification. Unlike other forms of experience,[21] this perceptual modality is characterized by contingency, instability, and self-referentiality, and is therefore unsuited to provide adequate knowledge of the body that has produced it.[22]

The same holds when traces persist beyond the duration of the immediate action of external bodies, giving rise to the phenomenon of imagination.[23] When the soft parts of the body are frequently (*saepe*) imprinted by external bodies so that their surfaces are modified in a more lasting way, the body acquires the capacity to relive that perception through a spontaneous motion (*suo spontaneo motu*) of the

15 See E II, DigPhy, post 5 (G II,102,32–103,3). For a discussion upon Spinoza's theory of *vestigia*, see Vinciguerra 2005, 93-6.

16 See E II, DigPhy, ax1, post L3c (G II,99,9-14).

17 This type of idea is discussed by Moreau (1994, 319-27) and Vinciguerra (2005, 171-83), who refers to it as *idée de trace or idée du signe*. As shown by the latter, his interpretation differs from those of Gueroult and Macherey.

18 See E II, p16 (G II,103,27-30). For the relation between causality and the ideas of affections see Vinciguerra 2005, 20-2 and 179-83.

19 See E II, p17 (G II,104,18-22).

20 Namely one of the four modes of cognition outlined in TdIE §19 (G II,10,10-11) and E II, p40s2 (G II,122,2-11).

21 A form of knowledge which, as Moreau (1994) has shown at length, plays a crucial role in Spinoza's philosophy.

22 In this sense, Messeri, Leblanc, and Vinciguerra agree in treating the idea of the *affectio* as an imperfect sign of an underlying causal process (see Messeri 1990, 195; Leblanc 2023, 133-4). Spinoza himself describes the ideas of affections as consequences without premises in E II, p38d (G II,118,14-8).

23 See E II, p17c (G II,105,2-4). See also Vinciguerra 2005, 165-95 and particularly 185-95.

fluid parts across the new enduring surfaces (*novis planis*) produced by the modification.[24]

In this sense, making a concession to the vocabulary of his time, Spinoza calls these ideas of the body's modifications (*ideae affectionum*) "images of things" (*rerum imagines*), insofar as they in part represent (*repraesentant*) external bodies as if they were present; nevertheless, he firmly maintains that they bear no resemblance whatsoever to the thing represented.[25] In this way, even the ideas of affections arising from imagination are reduced to being signs of the things that have generated them, since, as already in perception, they imply their objects rather than depict their essence. Thus, making a further concession to the vocabulary of the period, Spinoza designates this first kind of knowledge by the term 'imagination'; yet, had he possessed Locke's knowledge of Greek and the inclination to innovate the philosophical lexicon of his time, he could just as well have spoken of semiotics, insofar he appears to describe these ideas of the body's modifications as signs of things rather than as faint mental likenesses of them.[26]

3 Association and Meaning: the Genesis of Words (*Verba*)

The account developed so far allows us to move beyond a merely semiotic characterization of imagination and to explain the emergence of linguistic meaning. For Spinoza, language does not introduce a new order of signs, but rather arises from a duplication of the very mechanisms that govern imaginative cognition.[27] Words are not simply arbitrary conventions superimposed on experience; they are second-order signs generated within the same associative processes that structure the first-order signification of bodily affections.

At the most basic level, imaginative cognition is already semiotic. As we have seen, ideas of affections (*ideae affectionum*) function as signs insofar as they involve both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting body. However, this first-order signification remains tied to the immediate or remembered presence of bodily traces (*vestigia*). The transition to language occurs when this

24 See E II, p17c,d (G II,105,6-20). See on this topic also Vinciguerra 2005, 97-108.

25 See E II, p17s (G II,106,6-11). On the non-mimetic character of Spinoza's *imagines* see Vinciguerra 2005, 189-90.

26 As Vinciguerra (2005, 190-3, 234) observes, in this text *vestigium*, *signum*, and *imago* are largely interchangeable, insofar as they refer to the same object. On the possibility that Locke coined the term σημειωτική to describe a theory of representation encompassing both ideas and words, see Leblanc 2023, 136-47.

27 Here I partially follow some of the insights of Vinciguerra 2006, 262-5 and Hervet 2012, 89-110.

associative mechanism is iterated: one sign becomes the sign of another sign.

Spinoza describes this process in terms of association and habit. When two or more traces are impressed simultaneously (*simul*) upon the body, the idea of one recalls the others by virtue of memory.[28] In itself, this mechanism explains only the passage from one image to another. Yet through repeated associations governed by *consuetudo*, a further step is taken: an acoustic or graphic image, already linked to a bodily affection, becomes stably associated with a cluster of images, and thus comes to function as a sign of their *experientia vaga*.

The well-known example of the Roman who passes from the sound '*pomum*' to the image of a fruit illustrates precisely this point.[29] The sound bears no resemblance to the object, nor does it possess any intrinsic connection to it; its signifying function is entirely grounded in the contingent history of bodily affections that have linked the two. Crucially, however, the sound is itself already an image – an affection of the body – and therefore already a sign. The linguistic sign emerges precisely at the point where this first-order sign is stabilized, through habitual association, as the sign of another sign, namely the perceptual image of the thing.[30] The same logic applies to proper names. A name such as 'Peter' does not refer to an individual as such, but to a feature or image that has most strongly affected the speaker and has been fixed through use, thereby functioning as a second-order sign within the associative laws of imagination.[31]

In this sense, it becomes clear why Spinoza defines dialogue as an exchange of concepts between two individuals who communicate through their bodies.[32] When someone says "I understand", the listener understands that it is not merely the mouth that speaks, but the mind behind it.[33] When two people engage in dialogue, each understands the other by comparison with the way in which they themselves use language, in the first person, to express their thoughts. Although one has no direct access to the image associated in the mind of one's interlocutor, in most cases it is shared experience that makes mutual

28 See E II, p18 (G II,106,22-4). A similar thesis was already put forward by Descartes in *Principia*, Art. 74 (AT VIII 37-8).

29 See E II, p18s (G II,107,13-23).

30 As Moreau (1994, 322) rightly observes, a word can be defined as an "image d'une image". Vinciguerra (2005, 193-5) and Lærke (2014, 533) have emphasized the order and concatenation of affections within the linguistic phenomenon. The presence of confused ideas in the semantics of language is clearly highlighted by Licata (2009, 648).

31 The affective criterion in Spinoza is no longer Cartesian attention but *admiratio*, which suspends the normal course of the flow of thought and fixes it on a feature that is particularly salient for the perceiver's lived experience, see Vinciguerra 2005, 43-8.

32 See TTP 1 (G III,18,16-8).

33 See TTP 1 (G III,18,27-31).

understanding possible and prevents misunderstanding. Spinoza illustrates this point with his example of the hen:

> Indeed, most errors consist simply in our not applying names correctly to things. For when someone says that the lines drawn from the centre of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he at least understands by 'circle', at that moment, something different from what mathematicians understand by it. Likewise, when people make a mistake in calculation, they have in mind numbers different from those written on the page. From their own point of view, therefore, they are not in error; they merely appear to be so, because we assume that they have in mind the same numbers that are on the page. If this were not the case, we would not regard them as mistaken at all – just as I did not consider mistaken a man whom I recently heard shouting, although his words were nonsensical, that his courtyard had flown into his neighbour's hen, since what he had in mind seemed sufficiently clear to me. Most controversies arise from this, namely, that people either fail to explain correctly what they have in mind or else misinterpret what others have in mind. For in fact, even when they are in the greatest disagreement, they are thinking either of the same things or of things that are entirely unrelated – so that what they take to be others' errors and absurdities may in fact be neither. (Author's translation; Spinoza, E II, p47s; G II,128,23–129,6)

4 From Denotation to Convention: the Analogical Use of Language

From the genesis outlined so far, it would appear that the basic functioning of any language consists in assigning names to those features of experience that most strongly affect us. Traces of this primordial stage of language can be easily found in the onomatocentric syntax of Hebrew. According to Spinoza, Hebrew does not divide its parts of speech into eight categories, as Latin does, but instead organizes everything around the grammatical category of the noun.[34] The universe it describes is primarily composed of things and actions, to which adjectives, adverbs, and participles add only circumstantial specifications.[35] Proper names would thus appear to be the most representative case of the ordinary functioning of Hebrew, as they are the only instance in which a one-to-one correspondence between

34 The central role of the noun in the Hebrew of the CGLH is clearly brought out in Licata's account (2009, 646-53).

35 See CGLH 5 (G I,303,16–304,2).

word and thing is maintained.[36]

However, every natural language – including Hebrew – soon develops analogical usages which, while reducing its descriptive precision, enhance its practical efficiency.[37] This is the case with common nouns, which Spinoza, following the grammatical terminology of his time, refers to as *nomina appellativa*.[38] Such nouns can be applied to multiple individuals and allow speakers to economize on the imposition of names; unfortunately, the cost of this pragmatic choice is high.

> From similar causes arise those notions that are called *universals*, such as 'man', 'horse', 'dog', and the like. This happens because so many images – for example, of men – are formed simultaneously in the human body that they exceed the capacity of the imagination, not to the point of completely destroying it, but sufficiently to render the mind incapable of imagining the small differences among individuals (such as color, stature, and so on) and their determinate number. As a result, the mind distinctly imagines only what is common to all, insofar as the body is affected by them in the same way. For the body has been most affected by this, namely by what is common to each singular thing; and this it expresses by the name 'man', predicating it of infinitely many individuals, since, as we have said, it is unable to imagine a determinate number of them. It should be noted, however, that these notions are not formed in the same way by everyone, but vary in each individual according to the thing by which the body has most frequently been affected […]. For example, one who has most often been struck by the stature of human beings will understand by the name 'man' an animal of upright stature; whereas another, accustomed to noticing something else, will form a different common image of human beings – for instance, an animal capable of laughter, a featherless biped, or a rational animal. And so, with regard to other things, each person forms universal images according to the disposition of their own body. (Author's translation; Spinoza, E II, p40s1, G II,121,12-35)

Universal notions and common nouns operate according to the same associative mechanism that governs the formation of proper names; however, they can give rise to the illusion that the shared image

36 See CGLH 5 (G I,304,11-6).

37 On the use of linguistic analogy in the CGLH, see Licata 2009, 644-6. For an initial study of the more complex notion of metaphysical analogy, see Di Vona 1960-69. The interrelation between the two in Spinoza's thought cannot be explored here; in what follows, I limit myself to describing his use of them.

38 See CGLH 9 (G I,322,6-16).

(*imago communis*) applied to a plurality of individuals corresponds to a real ontological property.[39] The highest degree of confusion is reached with the transcendental notions, which lack even such a common image and, for this reason, are devoid of any distinct meaning.

> However, in order not to omit anything necessary for understanding this matter, I shall briefly add the causes from which the so-called *transcendental* terms – such as 'being', 'thing', and 'something' – originate. These terms arise from the fact that the human body, being limited, is capable of forming within itself only a certain number of images simultaneously and distinctly (what an image is I have explained in the scholium to Proposition 17 of this Part). If this number is exceeded, the images begin to become confused; and if it is exceeded by a large margin, all the images become completely confused with one another. Given this, it is clear from the Corollary to Proposition 17 and from Proposition 18 of this Part that the human mind can imagine simultaneously and distinctly as many bodies as there can be images formed simultaneously in its body. But when the images in the body are entirely confused, the mind also imagines all bodies in a confused manner, without any distinction, and comprehends them, as it were, under a single attribute – namely under the attribute of being, thing, and so on. This can also be inferred from the fact that images do not always possess the same vividness, as well as from other similar causes which it is not necessary to explain here; for, for the purposes at hand, it is sufficient to consider just one. All such terms ultimately come down to this: they signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree. (Author's translation; E II, p40s1, G II,120,27–121,12)

In addition to semantics, the principle of analogical use also shapes the codification of a language's syntax. Everyday usage shapes language to such an extent that, as in the case of Hebrew, not only are genders attributed to inanimate objects, but nature and lifeless entities are also spoken of through personification.[40] In natural languages, it is therefore *usus*, rather than any original referential function for which they originally emerged, that ultimately governs

39 The nature of the common images (*imagines communes*) has been emphasized by Gueroult 1974, 590-2 and Vinciguerra 2005, 213-8.

40 See CGLH 5 (G I,304,17-23).

the life of linguistic signs.[41] Not even scholars, however much they might wish to do so, are able to guide speakers or to alter the historical development of proverbial expressions and fixed phrases.[42] It follows that understanding a language cannot be reduced to a dictionary knowledge of its vocabulary, but also requires the reconstruction of the syntactic forms (*eloquentia – syntaxis*) through which a population expresses itself.[43]

In order to clarify the characteristic phraseology of a language, one must therefore possess knowledge of the history of the people who speak it, of the material conditions in which they live and have lived, and undertake an examination of the *corpus* of texts they have produced, through a methodical comparison (*collatio orationum*) of the documents that have come down to us.[44] In short, as in the CGLH, it is only through a *cognitio universalis*, or rather an *integra cognitio*, of a language and its uses that its functioning can truly be understood.[45]

5 Exceeding the Limits of Reason: Spinoza's Critique of *Cognitio ex signis*

Having seen his account of the origin and nature of human language, we can easily understand Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis*. Spinoza employs this expression in his expositions of the theory of knowledge to designate one of the four modes of perception characteristic of human beings: knowledge mediated by linguistic signs, whether they be written signs or acquired through hearsay.[46]

41 Despite Harvey's claims (2002, 110), the impermeability of Spinoza's thought to the myth of a universal language has been stressed by Licata (2009, 639) and Lærke (2014, 534-5), who also underline his opposition to the Kabbalistic model. Spinoza's distance from projects of a universal language is further illustrated by an episode reported by Tschirnhaus to Leibniz (LSSB R 3 B 2, April/May 1679, 717-19, n. 301). When shown Descartes' letter concerning a philosophical language capable of enabling even a peasant to advance in the search for truth (now in AT 1.76-82: Letter 15), Spinoza reportedly replied: "Do you believe, my friend, that everything Descartes said is true?", adding a laugh as if the matter did not concern him further.

42 See TTP 7 (G III,105,27–106,8).

43 See CGLH 5 (G I,303,3-10). An eloquent example of such an approach is the methodical reconstruction of the semantics of the biblical phrases *Spiritus Dei* and *Spiritus Jehovae* in TTP 1 (G III,27,15-33) and ATTP III (G III,252,3-12).

44 Something that, unfortunately, due to the lack of documentation, is impossible for Biblical Hebrew to do, see TTP 7 (G III,109,3-13), and which is reconstructed on a theoretical basis by grammatical analogy in CGLH, see Licata 2009, 630-40.

45 The significance and implications of this complete reconstruction of a language in the CGLH have been emphasized by Licata 2009, 629.

46 See TdIE §19 (G II,10,9-10), KV II 1(2) (G I,54,10-2) and E II, p40s2 (G II,122,2-11).

As is already evident from the TdIE, the order and connection of these signs are primarily tied to those of the affections of the body.

> Moreover, since words are part of the imagination – that is, since, insofar as they are composed (*componuntur*) in memory in a vague way from some disposition of the body, we fabricate (*fingamus*) many concepts – there is no doubt that words, no less than the imagination, can be the cause of many and serious errors, unless we guard against them with the utmost care. Add to this that they are formed according to the arbitrariness and the capacity of understanding of the common people (*ad libitum et captum vulgi*), so that they are nothing but signs of things (*signa rerum*) as they are in the imagination, and not as they are in the intellect. This is clearly shown by the fact that names are often assigned in a negative form to things that exist only in the intellect and not in the imagination – such as 'incorporeal', 'infinite', and the like – and that many things which are in fact affirmative are nevertheless expressed negatively, and vice versa, such as 'uncreated', 'independent', 'infinite', 'immortal', and so on. For, in truth, their opposites are far more easily imagined and therefore first presented themselves to human beings, who accordingly used them as positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words allows us to affirm and deny, not because the nature of things does so; and thus, through this ignorance, we can easily take what is false to be true. (Author's translation; Spinoza, TdIE §§88-89; G II,33,8-24)

In light of what has emerged regarding the nature of verbal signs, it is possible to fully clarify the otherwise vague references contained in this text and similar claims.[47] Words are presented from the outset as an epiphenomenon of imagination (*pars imaginationis*), in the sense that their formation depends both on the memory of individual subjects and on shared linguistic usages. They are therefore signs of things not as they are in the intellect, but as they are perceived through imagination.

The example Spinoza provides illustrates the arbitrariness of linguistic usage: many concepts that are positive for the intellect are expressed through grammatically negative terms (incorporeal, infinite), while affirmatively characterized realities are designated by formally negative terms (uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal), since imagination more easily represents their opposites. It follows that our affirmations and negations reflect more the *natura verborum*,

47 See for example E II, p49s (G II,131,30–132,22).

that is, linguistic usage, than the *natura rerum*; hence we are easily led to mistake the false for the true.

For this reason, Spinoza frequently advances a critique of the *philosophi verbales*,[48] aimed at highlighting those cases in which the rules of usage and the combinatory structure of a historical language exceed the limits of adequate knowledge.[49] The *ordo et connexio verborum* is only partially coextensive with the *ordo et connexio causarum*: yet this is not a rejection of language as such, but an attempt to show that it does not necessarily mirror the order of things, while still affirming – most clearly in the TTP – the need for clarity of expression to better align the two.[50]

6 Conclusions

To summarize the main results of this inquiry, this paper reconstructs Spinoza's conception of the genesis and nature of human language within the dynamics of imagination. By outlining, in Section 2, his physiological theory of perception and emphasizing its intrinsically semiotic character, it shows how the imaginative mechanisms analysed in the Ethics ground the emergence of linguistic signs. Building on this account, Section 3 reconstructs the imaginative logic underlying the origin of language, arguing that words arise not as an autonomous system, but from a duplication of the associative processes structuring imaginative cognition. Sections 4 and 5 extend this framework to explain, respectively, the customary organization of linguistic practices and Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis*.

On this basis, the paper argues that words are best understood as second-order signs: they inherit both their expressive power and their epistemic limitations from the bodily processes on which they depend. This unified genetic account explains, within a single model, the emergence of semantic content, the formation of universals, and the role of *usus* and *consuetudo* in shaping language, while also accounting for systematic sources of error that affect sign-based cognition. Because the order and connection of words largely follow the contingent order of bodily affections rather than the causal order of things, language is both a powerful vehicle for expressing this order and a potentially unreliable guide to it.

48 See for example CM I,1 (G I,235,6-9).

49 A similar critique can be found in the account of prophetic knowledge, see TTP 1 (G II,28,21-5).

50 See TTP 7 (G III,111,8-24). On this point, see Vinciguerra 2006, 265-8; Hervet 2012, 151-224.

Spinoza's theory of language, so understood, is therefore not a marginal or merely critical component of his philosophy, but a necessary extension of his theory of imagination and a condition for assessing the first kind of knowledge. Clarifying the relation between the *ordo et connexio verborum* and the *ordo et connexio rerum* is essential not only for understanding the positive function of natural language, but also for grasping the limits that Spinoza assigns to *cognitio ex signis* within his broader epistemological project.

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes, R. (1964-74). *Œuvres*. Ed. by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 12 vols. Paris: Vrin/CNRS.
ATTP = *Annotations on the Theological-Political Treatise*.
CGLH = *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*.
CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts*.
E = *Ethics*.
G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlun.
LSSB = Leibniz, G.W. (1987-). *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Ed. by the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (later Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften). Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
TdIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.
TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise*.

For the individual parts:
ax = *Axioma.*
c = *Corollary*.
d = *Demonstratio*.
def = *Definitio*.
DigPhy = Physical Digression.
L = *Lemma*.
p = *Propositio.*
post = *Postulatum*.
s = *Scholium*.

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