

## Leibniz and the English Language

Nicholas Rescher, University of Pittsburgh

### *Abstract*

The only extensive study that Leibniz ever made of an English-language book, his *New Essays* on John Locke's 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was based not on the English original, but on a French translation. And his correspondence with English scholars and political figures was invariably written in Latin or French. In consequence the impression is widespread among Anglophone Leibnizians that he did not know English. However, considerable evidence has come to light in recent years that Leibniz did somehow manage to acquire a capacity to handle the language in its written form.

There is no question that Leibniz had strong motivation for coming to terms with the English language. To be sure, it was not indispensably necessary for access to England's contributions to matters of scholarship and science, where much of the needful was afforded via Latin and French.<sup>1</sup> But for many years Leibniz was the principal political advisor to the Electress Sophia, heiress presumptive to the British crown, and was virtually the only person in her Hanoverian proximity who had interest in and knowledge about English affairs. In the circumstances a detailed knowledge of English doings and dealings at the court, in Parliament, and in the press was of importance for him, and English was virtually essential here.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Thomas Burnett, Leibniz observed that: "Les Francois ont tort d'apprendre seulement l'Espagnol et l'Italien et de negliger l'Anglois avec les autres langues du Nord."<sup>3</sup> He doubtless viewed this advice as not irrelevant to himself.

Let us begin with some of Leibniz's own statements in this regard. (I quote them in the original; it would be anomalous to have him deplore the insufficiency of his English in that language itself.)

In January of 1696 Leibniz wrote to Thomas Burnett:

Vous aurés recue ma reponse à vos precedentes avec celle de Madame l'Electrice; cependant il m'est venu une autre lettre de vostre part avec une seconde lettre pour cette princesse à qui je n'ay pas manqué de la donner d'abord et Elle l'a receue avec sa bonté ordinaire. Mais comme cette lettre estoit écrite en Anglois, je ne pouvois pas la lui lire d'abord. Cependant l'ayant parcourue, j'ai remarqué entre autres choses ce que vous dites des Sociniens d'Angleterre.<sup>4</sup>

And in fact, Leibniz's own discussion of his knowledge of English is most developed in his extensive correspondence (in French) with the Scottish nobleman Thomas Burnett, laird of Kemney (ca. 1660-1725). He was a well-connected and much-traveled politician, scholar, and philosophe. A strong supporter of the Hanoverian succession and of the Electress Sophia, with whom he corresponded extensively, Burnett was well informed in matters of English scholarship and politics, and was one of Leibniz's principal informants in these matters.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter of February 1689 Leibniz told Burnett: "Je ne possède pas assez votre belle langue pour en connoître toutes les beautés."<sup>6</sup> And on 11 February 1711 Leibniz wrote to Hutton that "Je suis fâché . . . que je ne suis point capable l'écrire en cette langue [i.e. English]."<sup>7</sup>

In their correspondence Burnett touched repeatedly on language learning and encouraged Leibniz to develop his English. Thus in a letter of June of 1691 he wrote:

Je vous communique la pensée de Mr. Baile [i.e. Bayle] à l'égard de votre style en françois quand je la trouvois si belle principalement dans un étranger et qui ne avoit point appris par règle mais par routine comme vous m'aviez conté et je le disois . . . Je voudrois que vous cultivassiez la notre [i.e. Anglais] au même point parceque elle est plus savante et de plus d'affinité avec la vôtre maternelle.<sup>8</sup>

Somewhat later on, in a letter to Burnett of 27 July 1696, Leibniz wrote:

Je souhaiterois d'avoir la même connoissance de la langue Angloise [que celle de Francoise], mais n'en ayant point eu l'occasion, tout ce que je puis, est d'entendre passablement les livres écrits en cette langue. Et à l'âge où je suis [i.e., 50] je doute si j'en pourrai jamais apprendre d'avantage.<sup>9</sup>

There yet remain various annotations by Leibniz to books written in English. For example in his own copy of *The Sea-man's Kalendar* by A. Philipps (London, 1672) he made (in May 1672) six of his usual pencil underlinings of emphasis in a brief text of 25 lines. (See A VIII 1, pp. 104-9). In his bibliographic notes of the middle 1680s on the writings of Thomas Hobbes, Leibniz noted with respect to various tracts on English that: *Dieses habe ich übersetzen lassen.* (A VI 4B, pp. 1207-1211.) But already in 1685 Leibniz wrote to the polymath and Brandenburg statesman Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff that "Nuper legi missum ad Serenissimam nostram libellum vel potius Schediasma Ducis Buckinghamii pro veritate Religionis, Anglica lingua scriptum cuius illa est intelligentissima."<sup>10</sup> And, in the late 1670s Leibniz copied out a passage from William Marshall's *Answers upon Several Heads in Philosophy* (London, 1670), adjoining the comment: *Habeo librum* (A I 4B, p.

1012). And in commenting on Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London 1678), Leibniz quotes and discusses a passage of the English text. (See A VI 4B, p. 1950).

That Leibniz could indeed cope with English is further indicated by the fact that several of his English correspondents who could well have used Latin did not hesitate to communicate with him in their language. For example the English heraldist and antiquarian Samuel Stebbing (ca. 1650-1719) always wrote to Leibniz in English (see eg. Tr. 1715: letters of 27 July 1715 [no. 229, pp. 304-05] and so did the scholar Andrew Fountaine (see, for example, various of his 1702 letters: A I 20, pp. 731-32 and 748-49; and A I 21, pp. 289-90). Moreover, on various occasions Leibniz used English expressions in his French correspondence.<sup>11</sup> Yet while some of his many English correspondents wrote in their native language, Leibniz invariably replied in some other language. His many letters to English mathematicians (e.g. John Wallis) were in Latin, to English philosophers (e.g. Samuel Clarke) in French. So while Leibniz could manage to read the language to at least some extent, it is clear that he never felt altogether comfortable about his English. Unlike Italian he made no active use of it in correspondence.

We do, nevertheless, have indications that on occasion English speakers addressed Leibniz in their language. Regarding the conveyance of the Act of Settlement to Hanover (from Berlin on 28 Oct 1701) Leibniz wrote to Caspar Florenz v. Cronsbruch that "Als ich zu Hanover zeit der Englischen Ambassade [war] . . . hat mir der Gesandte, Graf von Maclesfield . . . [ein Papier] mit gegeben darinn, so wohl als in dem so er mir mündlich zu sagen aufgetragen . . . er gemeldet etc."<sup>12</sup> On this occasion Leibniz saw a good deal of Andrew Fountaine who was a member of Maclesfield's delegation, and who thereupon assured James Tyrrell of Leibniz's ability to read English.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Leibniz's frequent informant about English affairs, Dr. John Hutton M.D. (d. 1712), sometime personal physician to King William III, said in an English letter to Leibniz of 5 February 1703 that "I know you understand English perfectly well."<sup>14</sup> And in a polite French letter to Leibniz of September 1699, James Cresset, the English resident for several north-German states, imparted to him (in French) a piece of terminological information and then added "If I mistake not" in a manner suggesting that he thought Leibniz would understand.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that various people who had occasion to form an opinion on that subject ascribed to Leibniz at least some knowledge of English.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an entirely new and bright light was shed on Leibniz's knowledge of English by the archival researches of Georg Schnath,

NICHOLAS RESCHER

the master historian of Hanover. These revealed that it was Leibniz himself who both drafted and revised and elaborately redacted the petition of 1706 sent in the name of Sir Rowland Gwynne to Thomas Grey (2<sup>nd</sup> earl of Stamford (1654-1720; President of the Board of Trade, 1699-1711) regarding support for the Hanoverian succession in Britain.<sup>16</sup> The nature of these operations, all accounted for in Leibniz's own handwriting, leave little room for doubt that his autodidactic talents and his natural gift for languages enabled him to achieve a fair degree of competence in English, however modestly he himself was minded to assess it.

*Received 6 August 2013*

Nicholas Rescher  
Department of Philosophy  
1012 Cathedral of Learning  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh PA 15260  
rescher@pitt.edu

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Leibniz skimmed through Locke's 1690 *Essay* when it was published but studied it with care only after its translation into French published by Pierre Coste in 1700.

<sup>2</sup>Thus in writing to Burnett of Kemney in July of 1701, Leibniz remarked that "il n'y a ici que Madame l' Electrice et moy qui entendent quelque chose de cette langue [i.e. Anglais]." (A I 20, p. 279). [Citations to the great Academy edition are by Series (roman) and Volume (arabic).] It is rather odd that the one and only systematic study devoted to Leibniz's relationship with the English-speaking world should totally ignore the obviously relevant question of the extent to which Leibniz knew English. See Pauline Phemister and Stuart Brown, *Leibniz and the English-Speaking World* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>A I 20, p. 814.

<sup>4</sup>A I 12, p. 367.

<sup>5</sup>On Burnet see Georg Schnath, *Geschichte Hannovers*, Vol. IV. (Hildesheim: August Lax, 1982), pp. 38-39 and passim.

<sup>6</sup>Onno Klopp, *Die Werke von G.W. Leibniz*, 11 vols. (Hannover, Klindworth, 1864-84). Vol. VIII, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup>Klopp, *Werke*, Vol. IX, p. 323.

<sup>8</sup>A I 12, pp. 645-46. In an encouraging manner, Burnett goes on to mention (p. 49) other foreigners who have mastered English efficiently.

<sup>9</sup>A I 12, p 731.

<sup>10</sup>A I 4, p. 517. Also see *ibid.*, p. 518 and A IV 4B, p. 995. The book (or pamphlet) at issue is George Villiers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Buckingham, *A Short Discussion upon the Reasonableness of Men's Having a Religion, or Worship of God* (2nd ed., London 1685).

<sup>11</sup>For example “settlement” to Electress Sophia in relation to English politics (A I 19, p. 27) and “table-talk” (A I 14, p. 38). Or again “self-conscious” [or rather “self-conscientious”] to Thomas Burnett in relation to minds.

<sup>12</sup>A I 20, p. 526. This is one of those rather infrequent letters where Leibniz signs himself as *von Leibniz*

<sup>13</sup> See A I 21, p. 771 (24 Dec. 1702) and cf. 802-03. In the P.S. of his letter Tyrrell wrote that Fountaine had assured him that “you (Leibniz) understand our language very well in writing.”

<sup>14</sup>A I 23, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>A I, 17, p. 489

<sup>16</sup>For full detail see Georg Schnath, *Geschichte Hannovers*, Vol. IV (Hildesheim: August Lax, 1982), pp. 122-136.