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Feral Children and the Origin of Language Debate: the Case of the Puella Trans-Isalana or the Kranenburg Girl (1717)

La parole distingue l'homme entre les animaux:
le langage distingue les nations entre elles; on ne
connoit d'où est un homme qu'après qu'il a
parlé.

(J.J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*,
ed. Ch. Porset, Paris 1969: 26; p.1 of *Essai*)

1. Introduction

When, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the brilliant young scholar Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) presented his early linguistic ideas, he did not fail to give his view on the origin of language.¹ He maintained that both languages and nation states, the two bonds of human society, were born at the same time. Language was a human product, resulting from the need to have a language; the possibility of a divine gift is not even mentioned. Grotius was not the only one at the time who discussed the origin of language and his view on the matter was not new. The view that language is a product of human ingenuity and related to the development of societies is found as early as in Plato's *Protagoras*. The origin of language debate, in which Grotius was involved, had been going on for centuries, and interest in the subject did not wane in the eighteenth century.

1) These ideas are to be found in his Latin treatise *Parallelon Rerum Publicarum*. Cf. Van der Wal (1997) and Van der Wal (forthcoming).

In the eighteenth century, the origin of language question was strongly linked with other 'origin of' questions, examined in contemporary philosophical publications such as Condillac's *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines* (1746) and Rousseau's *Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes* (1754).² It was against this general background and after publication of Johann Peter Süssmilch's *Versuch eines Beweises, dass die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (1766) that in 1769 the Berlin Academy invited scholars to submit their essays dealing with the question "En supposant les hommes abandonnés à leurs facultés naturelles, sont-ils en état d'inventer le langage?"³ Apart from Johann Gottfried Herder's prize-winning essay, others were submitted, most of which remained unpublished. In her stimulating paper presented at ICHoLS VII, Professor Gerda Hassler focussed on the prize topics of the Berlin Academy, quoting extensively from the rich unpublished material. It was a quotation from an essay written in Latin that struck me in particular (cf. Hassler 1996). The (unknown) author of the manuscript⁴ referred to several cases of children who had lived in isolation for a long time and managed to survive. After having listed five boys (a boy found among wolves in Hesse and another one found in Wetterau, both in the fourteenth century, a boy caught among wild sheep in Ireland and another one discovered living among bears in the woods on the border of Lithuania and Poland, both in the seventeenth century, and an eighteenth-century instance of a boy found near Hameln),⁵ he describes the case of a girl as follows: *puella insuper in silva Granenburgensi prope Zwollam provinciae Ultrajectinae oppidum a rusticis capta anno 1717* 'a girl who was caught by farmers in the Kranenburg wood near the town of Zwolle in the province of Overijssel in 1717'.⁶ This girl, discovered in the eastern part of the

- 2) The second part of Condillac's *Essai*, titled "du langage et de la méthode", is largely devoted to the origin and development of language (cf. Condillac 1973: 193-289, 193-267 in particular). The relevance of Condillac's publication in the origin of language debate is convincingly demonstrated in Aarsleff (1982).
- 3) This prize topic, set for 1771, was further specified as follows: "Et par quels moyens parviendront-ils d'eux-mêmes à cette invention? On demanderoit une hypothèse qui expliquât la chose clairement, et qui satisfît à toutes les difficultés".
- 4) Manuscript I 666, Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- 5) Cf. the Latin quotation: "[...] puer in Hassio inter lupos repertus anno 1344; alius item annorum 12; eodem anno inventus in Weteravia; alius annorum 16 in Hibernia inter oves silvestres deprehensus circa dimidium seculi XVII; alius novennis inter ursos correptus in Lituano-Prodneznisibus [sic! Lituano-Grodneznisibus M.v.d.W] silvis anno 1662; alius prope Hameliam inventus hoc ipso saeculo". The last example, the boy captured in Hameln, a town near Hanover, in 1724, is known as wild Peter of Hanover. For more information on the latter cf. Tinland (1968: 67-68).
- 6) The name of the wood "Grandenburgensi" is not correct: the "G" is either a transcription mistake for "C" or a mistake made by the unknown author. It may be observed that the author adds one more female case to his list: a girl found near Châlons (sur Saône) ("puella etiam, quam omnes novunt non multis ab hinc annis prope Cabilonum fuisse inventam"). She was caught in 1731 and became known as Mademoiselle Marie-Angélique Le Blanc (cf. Tinland 1968: 68-71).

Netherlands, appears to be a female equivalent of her male predecessors, all so-called feral children, in which eighteenth-century authors were particularly interested.⁷ These children, abandoned at an early age and discovered leading an isolated existence in the wild, were supposed to reveal the original state of man and his abilities.

It goes without saying that the feral children or 'wolf children' were interesting within the context of the debate on the origin of language too. They could be expected to serve as evidence for the original pre-linguistic state of man and possibly for the origin and development of language as well.⁸ It has yet to be established if they did indeed play such a major role in the contemporary linguistic discussion. I must note that in most cases there is a serious lack of information about these children and that extensive reports such as those on Victor of Aveyron, a wolf child discovered in 1799, are exceptional.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the history of the Dutch girl is still to a large extent unknown. In order to remedy this situation, I have traced down the details of this case, which will be presented in the sections 2 and 3.¹⁰ Apart from being referred to in the contest manuscript, the so-called Puella Trans-Isalana or the Kranenburg girl must have figured in several eighteenth-century publications, three of which I will examine more closely in section 4.

2. Details of the case: two periodicals

If a feral child really was discovered in the Netherlands in 1717, it must have been a remarkable news item which could not pass unnoticed. Indeed, the discovery drew the attention of the press, more precisely of the *Mercure historique et politique*, a French periodical, published by the brothers Van Dole in the Hague. According to its subtitle, this periodical aimed at giving information on Europe, on royal events and intrigues and on all kind of curious things. In the *Mercure* of January 1718 a report on a heavy storm with serious flood-

7) Rousseau, for instance, mentions four instances in his *Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité*: the wolf-child of Hesse, a bear-child of 1694, Peter of Hanover and two savages from the Pyrenees (Rousseau 1964: 134; 196 and Malson 1972: 38).

8) Schreyer (1994: 73) points out that also the babbling of babies and the communication of the deaf and dumb were "handy analogues of the unobserved and perhaps unobservable, speechless savage that was natural man". In a yet unpublished manuscript on eighteenth-century language theories Schreyer devotes a chapter to "feral man as evidence of a natural origin of language". When the present article was almost ready for publication, I received this chapter in which special attention is paid to the Lithuanian bear children, wild Peter of Hanover, Mademoiselle Le Blanc and Victor of Aveyron.

9) For more information about Victor of Aveyron, cf. Tinland (1968: 71-78). For the contemporary reports, cf. Itard (1962) and Malson (1972).

10) I am very grateful to Mr. W.A. Huijsmans of the Municipal Archive of Zwolle, who was most helpful and gave some vital information on the Kranenburg girl. I would also like to thank Ms. Cathy Jager and Mr. H. Bordewijk of the Public Records Office of Overijssel for their useful suggestions.

ing, is followed by a letter dated 15 January and written from the town of Zwolle. It is said to comprise "un fait assez extra ordinaire".

A girl, about eighteen years old, who was considered to be a savage ("qui peut passer pour une Sauvage"), had been found in a wood near Kranenburg.¹¹ The farmers who had discovered her, caught her and brought her into Zwolle, where the people were very keen to see this nine days' wonder. The girl was nearly all naked; she had a dark and rough skin and had lived on grass and leaves. She did speak, but no one was able to understand what she said ("Elle parle, mais on n'entend rien à son jargon"). The 'reporter' concludes that more of her amazing story may be revealed if she learns to speak our language. The report ends with the remark that the magistrate of Zwolle had placed the girl into the care of a local woman.

The *Mercure* undoubtedly had both Dutch and foreign readers. The news spread quickly and became known in Germany too. The *Sammlung von Natur- und Medicin- Wie auch hierzu gehoerigen Kunst- und Literatur-Geschichten* of January 1718 includes an article bearing the title "Von einem vermeyntlich wilden Maegdlein in Holland" (pp. 546-550). This more or less scientific periodical presents the story of the "Maegdlein" not just as an interesting news item but as part of a scholarly discussion about the question "ob es ausser dem ordentlichen Geschlechte der Menschen auch einige andere Gattungen von selbigen gebe, die entweder in den grossen Wildnissen, als Wald-menschen oder Satyri oder Sylvani, oder in See-Tiefen, als Meer-menschen, oder anderwaerts, lebten" (546). It is stressed that possibly a new example could be added to the list of savage people. The information on this new case came from Zwolle and is almost identical to the previous report in the *Mercure*. The description of the girl's language ability is very similar too: "sie redet zwar/ aber stammellend/ und weisz kein Mensch/ was es heissen soll".

The *Sammlungen* edition of January 1718, which was not published before 1719 (i.e. later than the *Mercure*), also covers the follow-up of the extraordinary story, offering additional details. The girl is said to have been kidnapped at the age of sixteen months in Antwerp on 5 May 1700 and her discovery in the Kranenburg wood is dated August 1717. According to the *Sammlungen*, reports in Dutch newspapers had drawn the attention of the girl's mother in Antwerp, who at last found her lost daughter in Zwolle. The editor of the *Sammlungen* concludes that the girl may not be an instance of a truly wild human being. Since she had not been found in the company of animals, she could not be compared with, for example, the seventeenth-century Irish sheep boy, who had lived among wild sheep from a very early age on and had adapted

11) Kranenburg or Cranenberg (in the eighteenth-century orthography) was the name of a manor. The second part of the latter name (-berg 'mountain') possibly explains why a mountain is mentioned in some of the reports (cf. "dans une Montagne" in the *Mercure*).

himself to his companions in such a way that he even bleated and ate only grass and hay.¹²

3. Other sources: pamphlets printed and distributed in Antwerp

More details, such as the name of the girl, Anna Maria Jennaert or Gennaert, are disclosed in other contemporary sources, two Dutch pamphlets, both printed in Antwerp, one by the widow of the printer Petrus Jacobs, the other by the printer Cornelis van den Bruck.¹³ The readers of the first, undated pamphlet, *Cort verhael van de geboorte neminghe ende vindinghe van Anna Maria Jennaert* (Short story of the birth, kidnapping and discovery of Anna Maria Jennaert) learn that a girl by the name of Anna Maria Jennaert, daughter of Johannes Jennaert and Anna du Chatel, was born in Antwerp on 18 October 1698. She was very beautiful and had a few distinctive marks such as two toes of her left foot grown together, a dimple in her chin and a scar on her left eyebrow. Being one and a half years old, she was kidnapped. Although her parents went to great lengths to find her and even put a notice in a newspaper, their efforts did not lead to any information about the whereabouts of their child.

In the pamphlet, the story of the girl's discovery differs at some points from the reports in the periodicals. The place of discovery, for instance, is described in more detail.¹⁴ Moreover, the name of the Amsterdam *Gazette* is mentioned, the Dutch newspaper which published the report on her discovery and so revealed the girl's existence to her relatives. We also learn that the magistrate of Antwerp checked the information with their colleagues in Zwolle before the girl's mother left Antwerp on 16 March 1718. The result was satisfactory: upon her arrival at Zwolle, on 22 March, she is said to have recognized the distinctive marks of her lost child on the Kranenburg girl.

Some information is given on the mental and physical state of the girl. She needed not only time to get used to human food, but she was also particularly fond of salad and other green vegetables. Because of her lacking linguistic skills – she stammered only meaningless, inarticulate words – it was assumed that she had lived alone in the wood (cf. page 4 of the undated pamphlet). On several occasions she showed good common sense: on their journey back to

12) The Dutch doctor Nicolaes Tulp (1593-1674) investigated the Irish sheep boy in Amsterdam (Cf. Tulp 1991: 363-366).

13) The first pamphlet is to be found in the University Library of Leiden (shelf-mark 13725), the second one in the Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv Göttingen (shelf-mark 6460 OSA). I am grateful to Dr. P. Verkruyse who provided a xerox of the latter one at the time that I needed it most urgently. I also thank Dr. K. Bostoen for giving the bibliographical clue which led to the second pamphlet.

14) Cf.: "[...] de Heerelijckheyt van *Craenenborgh* ontrent een uer van de Stadt *Swol* [...] in een bosch, den welcken in de ronde groot is een ure en half" [the manor of Craenenborgh, at the distance of one hour from the town of Zwolle, in a wood, which has a circumference of one and a half hour (walking)].

Antwerp, for instance, she asked, by means of gestures, which way they had to take at a fork in the road (cf. page 8 of the undated pamphlet). Her modesty when changing clothes is particularly stressed; it is seen as a characteristic of a real human being. After several months her black colour changed and her skin became softer. She learnt to bow and kiss and did the things she was indicated to do. All these facts led the author of the first pamphlet to the conclusion that she proved to be able to learn – and I would add: therefore proved to be a reasonable human being.

In the other pamphlet, published in 1721, even more details are to be found, such as information about the progress that the girl made. According to this source, she learnt spinning and spoke a few words (cf. page 12 and 13 respectively). To convince the reader of the veracity of the case, particular evidence is brought forward: both the notice about the kidnapping as it was put in the *Antwerpse Posttydinge* of 13 May 1700 and a letter from the magistrate of Zwolle to the magistrate of Antwerp are printed in full in the pamphlet.¹⁵

The two pamphlets are the most detailed sources so far. I must note that the undated pamphlet shows some elements which go beyond the characteristics of a news report. On the front page it is stated that Anna Maria Jennaert had been lost for seventeen and a half years during which time she was nourished in the wilderness through the miraculous providence of God.¹⁶ Her parents are introduced as faithful Roman Catholics. Her mother, who used to go to mass every day, was said to have commended her lost daughter to God and Saint Anna, the saint after whom both she and her daughter had been named. The discovery of the lost girl would have taken place on the feast-day of Saint Anna in July 1717 and the mother's arrival in Zwolle on 22 March, the feast-day of Saint Joachim, Saint Anna's husband. Moreover, the girl must have been mysteriously taught the Roman Catholic faith, since she made the sign of the cross whenever she ate something. Finally, the pamphlet ends with the author's belief that both God and Saint Anna saved Anna Maria Jennaert.

The religious elements in this pamphlet, which lack altogether in the one of 1721, give the impression of a medieval miracle story. The reports on other feral children likewise often show a mixture of historical facts and myth, which has raised doubt about the authenticity of the cases described. Knowing this, we may wonder whether the story of the Kranenburg girl may be taken on trust. However, in this case, evidence is to be found in the municipal archives of Zwolle which reveal that on 6 February 1718 a certain widow van Orten received 31 guilders and 18 pence ("stuivers"), i.e. 27 guilders for lodging the woman (the "vrouw-mensch") that had been found in the Kranenburg wood and 4 guilders and 18 pence for her clothing and underwear. The widow van

15) So far, I have not had the opportunity to check this evidence in the Municipal Archives of Antwerp, where, if anywhere, the letter and notice should be found.

16) Cf.: "Verloren 17. jaeren an half, en gespyst in de wildernisse door de wonderlijcke voorzienigheyt Gods den welcken segt: Overpeyst de raeven want sy en saeyen nocte maeyen, sy en hebben noch hutteken nocte schuere ende Godt spyst hun hoe veel meer zyt gyliden. Lucae cap. 12. v. 24."

Orten lived in a house by the "Ossenmarkt" (Ox Market), where she is known to have conducted a modest lodging-house. On 29 March the magistrate paid her again 7 guilders for the last seven weeks of the girl's stay.¹⁷ It is worth noting that this date fits in with the date of arrival of the girl's mother on 22 March. The financial data from the archives thus prove beyond doubt the historical reality of the Kranenburg girl.

4. Scientific interest in the Puella Trans-Isalana

The editor of the *Sammlungen* doubted whether the Kranenburg girl was an instance of a wild human being, since she had not lived among animals. Other scholars and scientists did not share this point of view. Long-term isolation was a sufficient criterion to identify the girl as a feral child.¹⁸ Consequently, in several eighteenth-century publications the Kranenburg girl is considered as an instance of the 'wild man' or *homo ferus*. Three examples will illustrate this.

In a Latin treatise on the natural lonely state of people who are reared among wild animals, *De Hominum inter feras educatorum statu naturali solitario*, written by H. C. Koenig and published in Hanover in 1730, the "puella in silva Cranenburgensi a rusticis capta" is one of the cases described. The author relies on both the *Mercure* and the *Sammlungen*, and gives a fairly accurate survey of the report from the *Sammlungen*, without any further details. He also discusses the discovery of two boys in 1661 in "sylvis Grodnensibus" who had lived among bears and afterwards proved unable to learn the Polish language.¹⁹

The Puella Trans-Isalana was also known to the taxonomy expert Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778). In the early editions of his *Systema Naturae* (first edition 1735) Linnaeus classified humans as one species, characterized as "Homo. Nosce te ipsum", with four variations, e.g. the white European, the red American, the brown Asian and the black African. In later editions the distinction between *homo sapiens* and *homo ferus* is added.²⁰ Linnaeus' *homo ferus* was four-footed (*tetrapus*), mute (*mutus*) and hairy (*hirsutus*). To the six examples listed in the tenth edition of 1758, three more are added in the twelfth edition

17) Cf. the Municipal Archives of Zwolle, monthly accounts of 1718, pages 5 and 35 (number AAZ01-2046), and the two receipts (AAZ01-3197). I owe this information to Mr. W.A. Huijsmans (Municipal Archives of Zwolle).

18) Both criteria are accepted in twentieth-century psychological literature, in which three main types of feral children are distinguished: the child in confinement, the child among animals and the child in isolation (Malson 1972: 61).

19) On pages 61 and 62 Koenig gives a summary from the *Sammlungen* from which the girl's characteristic "nichts redend" fails. Furthermore, the text differs at some minor points from the original version. For the bear-children cf. Koenig (1730: section 7, pp 10-11). One of the bear children is also mentioned by the author of the Latin prize essay (cf. footnote 5), who refers to Koenig for more information.

20) The tenth edition of 1758 (Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius) is the first edition that shows this distinction, not yet made in the ninth edition (Leiden: Theodorus Haak 1756).

of 1766, among which the Dutch Puella.²¹ It is clear that feral children are part of Linnaeus' system of nature. The biologist *avant la lettre* Johann Christian Daniel von Schreber (1739-1810) goes beyond this by asking whether the feral children could give any evidence as to the original state of man.

A few years after the contest of the Berlin Academy, von Schreber raised the following question in his *Die Säugethiere in Abbildungen nach der Natur* (1774):²²

Wie ist aber der natürliche Zustand des Menschen beschaffen? Ist derselbe [...] von Natur wild? Vierfüßig, mit Haaren bedeckt, **ohne Sprache und Vernunft**, [...] [bold M.v.d.W.].

That very picture of misery, von Schreber maintains, has been given on the evidence of wolf children. It is therefore important, he argues, to pay attention to these unhappy creatures and their experiences. In his description of ten cases, among which we find the Kranenburg girl, von Schreber goes into the language abilities of the children. The second Lithuanian bear-child of 1694, "[...] hat wenig Merkmale der Vernunft, keine Sprache, auch nicht einmahl eine menschliche Stimme gehabt [...] auch endlich, wiewohl mit heiserer und nicht sehr menschlicher Stimme, reden gelernt" (pp. 32-33). The Irish sheep-child of 1672 "[hat] nicht geredet, sondern wie die Schaafte geblöcket". The boy from Hanover of 1724 had a very thick, wrongly shaped tongue; "Um deswillen war er sprachlos; doch lallte er, wenn er beleidigt wurde". He was educated in London and learnt so much "dass er die nöthigsten Dinge in englischer Sprache fordern konnte" (p. 35). The Sogny girl (Champagne) of 1731, was "sprachlos", "lernte die französische Sprache, wobey offenbar ward, dass es ihr an Verstande nicht fehlte" (p. 36). We already know from other sources that at her discovery the Puella Trans-Isalana stammered and spoke unintelligible words. According to von Schreber, she had considerably improved: half a year later she understood the signs given to her and she "[hat] sich Mühe gegeben zu reden, auch zur Arbeit gewöhnt, wie sie denn sehr gut spinnen gelernt hat". For this information von Schreber must have relied on the pamphlet of 1721, the only source known so far that mentions her spinning activity and her ability to speak words.

The question whether the feral children were evidence for the original pre-linguistic state of man, does not remain unanswered. Von Schreber concludes

21) The six previous examples are the "Juvenis ursinus Lithuanus 1661, Juvenis lupinus Hessensis 1544, Juvenis ovinus Hibernus. Tulp. obs. IV. 9., Juvenis Hanoveranus, Pueri Pyrenaici 1719, Johannes Leodicensis Boerhavii". The three added in Linnaeus (1766: 28) are the "Juvenis bovinus Bambergensis. Camerar., the Puella Transilana (Puella Transisilana) 1717 and the Puella Campanica 1731". Linnaeus sources were Tulp, Camerarius and Boerhaave. The addition "Boerhaavii" in the case of Jean of Liege may indicate that Linnaeus got this example from Hermannus Boerhaave whom he came to know well during his stay in the Netherlands. Cf. Tinland (1968: 63-64) for more information about Jean of Liege. Tinland (1968: 61) wrongly assumes that Linnaeus' list of feral children is the first one to be found.

22) I only had the edition of 1847 at my disposal. This edition, with the introduction of 1774, is probably an unchanged reprint of the edition of 1774.

that the instances of the deprived children cannot shed light on the original, natural state of man and that their lack of speech, for instance, could be the result of isolation. Some of the feral children learnt to speak later and others would have learnt to do so "wenn es die Beschaffenheit der Werkzeuge, oder der Kräfte ihrer Seele verstattet hätte" (Von Schreber 1774: 37). These children and their inadequacies, therefore, could not prove the imperfection of man in his original state. Von Schreber, not unlike many contemporaries and predecessors, stresses the relationship between language and society: "Die Sprache ist eine Folge der Gesellschaft. Wenn man Kinder mit einander aufwachsen lassen wollte, ohne ihnen eine Sprache bezubringen; so würden sie ohnfehlbar selbst eine erfinden" (page 36, footnote q). Man's linguistic ability is beyond doubt.

5. Conclusion

In the contest material of the Berlin Academy a mysterious reference occurred to an event which must have been all too well-known to the eighteenth-century contemporaries of the contestants. I have demonstrated that this was indeed the case and I have provided both the details and the context of the Dutch wild girl, who can, without any doubt, be ranked among better known feral children such as Victor of Aveyron. In the eighteenth century most scholars who were interested in the phenomenon of feral children did not focus on speech, language abilities or language acquisition. For our knowledge about the linguistic skills of the children involved, we have to rely on scarce, accidental information. It was on the basis of that limited information that von Schreber, who did pay attention to the linguistic aspect, drew his conclusions.²³ In modern language-acquisition research the so-called maturity hypothesis plays an important role. Whether later historical evidence such as the more extensive reports on Victor of Aveyron provide support for this hypothesis, remains to be established. Apart from this, the historiographer of linguistics who is well informed about the details and the context of the feral children issue still awaits further exploration of the contest material in order to discover what major or minor role this issue played in the origin of language debate within the Berlin Academy.

23) Von Schreber's conclusion is similar to that of twentieth-century psychologists and anthropologists, who focus in particular on the nature-nurture opposition. They maintain that the search for human nature among 'wild' children has always proved fruitless precisely because human nature can appear only when human existence has entered the social context. Cf. Malson (1972: 35): "When children are prematurely deprived of their human surroundings, either by accident or design, or when they are abandoned in the wild and left to survive by their own devices, they do, in fact, develop 'unnaturally'. It would be quite absurd to treat them as 'perfect examples of some earlier human stage', or as instances of natural and therefore pre-cultural man".

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