Abstract

The following essay takes its cue from the importance that Soemmerring attributes to the sense of hearing in the Über das Organ der Seele (1796), a text published with a comment by Kant. First, I point out that the idea of a primacy of the sense of hearing is shared by Soemmerring with Heinse, a famous writer of the time (and by Heinse with Herder). Second, I compare these ideas with Kant's growing interest for the close connection between the sense of hearing, language and thought, giving due attention to his theses on deafness. Finally, I propose the hypothesis that not a late and tacit agreement with Herder, but Soemmerring’s statement that hearing is the most important of our senses, might be the reason for the strengthening of Kant’s conviction that “thinking is speaking and the latter is hearing”, testified by the Opus Postumum.

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The organ for hearing sound is the ear. It is one of the most complex and useful organs in our body. Hearing sounds is all about vibrations. Vibrations cause sound waves. For instance, if you knock on your table, sound is produced as a result of vibrations from the impact. But the sound alone means nothing until we hear it, and our brains interpret what sound it is. The ear canal has wax in it that helps trap infections and particles from getting deeper into the more sensitive parts of the organ. Sound waves travelling through the ear canal reach the eardrum and bounces off, setting the eardrum to vibrate too. This sets off more vibrations of the ossicles (the three small bones called Hammer, Anvil and Stirrup) inside of the middle ear. The ossicles are connected to the cochlea. Soemmerring received his doctorate in medicine on 7 April 1778 with a dissertation on the anatomy of the base of the brain and the origin of the cranial nerves (and including his own illustrations), and then undertook a year-long academic tour (May 1778 to April 1779), visiting Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, and Franeker, where he met the anatomist Peter Camper (1722-89), and. The acquaintance with George Forster was to grow into an exceptionally close friendship and was also of importance to his early career. Forster, who was only two months older than Soemmerring, had just published his Voyage around the World (London, 1777) and would soon receive a professorship in natural science at Kassel (16 December 1778).