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Émile Benveniste and the

Rhuthmoi of Language - Part 1

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Linguistique et théorie du langage

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Rhuthmos

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In *Problems of General Linguistics Vol. I*, Benveniste famously claimed that "language is in the nature of man" ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 259). In this chapter, I would like to analyze the peculiar meaning he gave to this statement, to show how it resumed a reflection on the radical historicity of human beings already initiated by Humboldt and Saussure (see Michon 2010) and how it made thereby language itself susceptible of *rhuthmic* description.

In What Sense is Language in the Nature of Man?

In arguing that "language is in the nature of man," Benveniste at first glance seemed to blend in with the long philosophical lineage of Aristotle and the Stoics. Language would be a universal anthropological capacity, a nature that we would have in common and which would distinguish us from other animals: "»Ì³¿½ ´r ¼Ì½¿½ ½¸ÁÉÀ¿Â Çµ¹ Äö½ ¶ôÉ½ - lygon dè mynon ánthrôpos ékhei tôn zôiôn" (Aristot. Pol. 1.1253a 10). But the following phrases showed that he was not thinking about this substantialization of language. First of all, for him it was not so much a question of an essence of man, of a metaphysical definition of humanity, as of the universality of the conditions of observation given to us.

> We can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it. We shall never get back to man reduced to himself and exercising his wits to conceive of the existence of another. It is a speaking man whom we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 259)

So he joined Humboldt, who wrote for his part:

> *Wir haben es historisch nur immer mit dem wirklich sprechenden Menschen zu thun* - Historically, we have to deal only with the man actually speaking. (W. von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (1836), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. VII, p. 43 - my trans.)

For both of them, language constituted the necessary and universal condition for any empirical approach to man and society. However, as we know, such a proposition could itself be interpreted in very different ways. To better

understand its meaning, I will therefore first go through these various interpretations, then I will propose one that seems to me more adequate to Benveniste's project.

Is Language a Transcendental Condition For Man?

First of all, Benveniste did not seek, as Kantian criticism did, to go back, through a transcendental analysis, to internal linguistic forms *(innere Sprachformen)* which would constitute the *a priori* conditions of all thought (Ernst Cassirer, 1874-1945), or, to take a more recent example, to universal norms of rational argumentation, which would be essential to any activity of intercomprehension (Karl-Otto Apel, 1922-2017). In general, it did not seek to establish the legitimacy of an ideal of cognitive or communicative transparency which would found a universal anthropology and a universal history.

 Of course, language is indeed, for Benveniste, the first condition of possibility of humanity, but it is not so much because it would constitute the transcendental *guarantee* of knowledge and human freedom, as because it is the *effective place* of the *"signifiance."* The anthropological scope of language derives less from *a priori* and anhistoric forms that it would presuppose, than from the "semantic" operations which constitute it, in its radical historicity, as language.

> If we posit that in the absence of language, there would be neither the possibility of society, nor the possibility of humanity, it is because the characteristic of language *[le propre du langage]* is first of all to signify. ("Form and Meaning in Language," 1966/1974, p. 217, my trans.)

Contrary to Kantian interpretations, Benveniste therefore associated the universality of language with its historicity, however, he did not interpret this historicity as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). For him, it had nothing to do with the universality of the hermeneutical condition of the *Dasein* and therefore of its facticity.

Is Language a Hermeneutical Medium For the Being?

Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed, based on Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein* and Being, to harden traditional hermeneutics, thereby depriving anthropology of any firm support (for a detailed analysis of Gadamer's philosophy, see Michon, 2000). According to *Truth and Method* (1960, Eng. trans. 2004), language is not a means by which man could adapt and overcome conflicting conditions. It is above all a collective and traditional practice aimed at interpreting the world, which entirely submits to its specific order and history human beings who wrongly believe that they can progress towards freedom and truth through meticulous and critical use of language. Against all instrumental conceptions, whether naive or sophisticated, Gadamer argued that, by virtue of their very use of language, human beings are in fact embedded in a particular history and culture that shape them. *Die Überlieferung* - the Lore or Tradition (etymologically over-delivery) constitutes "a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding" (Palmer, 1969, p. 177). Therefore language appears only as a medium of a collective and erratic *Wirkungsgeschichte* - effective history, which provides inescapable forms of pre-comprehension to human beings and thereby dissolves any autonomous subjectivity into a large and anonymous stream of meanings and interpretations which actually reflects in language Heidegger's concept of "Sending of the Being." In short, language and, therefore, Man and Subjectivity are only fragile media through which the mysterious history of the Being unfolds.

Benveniste did not comment on Gadamer's hardened conception of hermeneutics, but it is not difficult to imagine what his position would have been, had he known about it. For him, there was no such thing as what Gadamer called Tradition. First, meanings or preunderstandings do not exist by themselves independently from linguistic and poetic supports. In his reflection on language, Gadamer never takes into account the signifier to use a Saussurian term he mentions only ideas and signified. Second, meanings do not constitute aggregates that impose their norms on speakers. Just as the language is not a normative structure which frames the words of the speakers but reinvents itself each time they speak, "Tradition," in other words cultural heritage, is not a set of indisputable meanings which could only be repeated as they are or only marginally altered. Third, if the subject is not a metaphysical entity which exists by itself and which instrumentalizes language, this does not mean that it does not exist at all. It simply implies that it emerges through the series or the *rhuthmic* chain of speech acts performed by the speaker.

Thus, the ontologization of language under the species of Tradition which Gadamer advocates and with him many philosophers influenced by Heidegger appears as a mere anthropological inversion. When he unilaterally identifies language with Tradition, he actually reifies it. For it is not Tradition which is the condition for the possibility of speech, but the other way around. It is Gadamer's discursive activity and the adventure of subjectivation that it allows, which gives him the possibility of constituting his specific tradition into an abstract concept of Tradition.

More broadly, Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics represents a clear case of metaphysical reasoning which promotes an anti-anthropology and a kind of mystical worldview, albeit devoid of the figure of God, close to Heidegger's and based on the disputable premise of the primacy of the "being" over the activity of language.

In a famous study, Benveniste dismissed this very hypothesis by convincingly showing that Greek and subsequently Western ontological categories, were directly linked with the particular categories of the Greek language and, more generally, of the Indo-European languages. This was the case for Aristotle's table of categories.

> In working out this table of "categories," Aristotle [...] thought he was defining the attributes of objects but he was really setting up linguistic entities; it is the language which, thanks to its own categories, makes them to be recognized and specified. [...] It follows that what Aristotle gave us as a table of general and permanent conditions is only a conceptual projection of a given linguistic state. ("Categories of Thought and Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 60-61).

But this was equally true with the most abstract of all these categories, that of Being. Although it has usually been considered by Western philosophers as a sheer datum, independent of thought and language, the category of Being has been actually derived by the first Greek philosophers mainly from three specific characteristics of their language: the existence of a verb *to be* "which is by no means a necessity in every language"; the possibility to use it as a "logic copula"; and the possibility to transform the verb into "a nominal notion, treated as a thing" which "gave rise to varieties."

 This remark can be elaborated further. Beyond the Aristotelian terms, above that categorization, there is the notion of "being" which envelops everything. Without being a predicate itself, "being" is the condition of all predicates. All the varieties of "being-such," of "state," all the possible views of "time," etc., depend on the notion of "being." Now here again, this concept reflects a very specific linguistic quality. Greek not only possesses a verb "to be" (which is by no means a necessity in every language), but it makes very peculiar uses of this verb. It gave it a logical function, that of the copula (Aristotle himself had remarked earlier that in that function the verb did not actually signify anything, that it operated simply as a synthesis), and consequently this verb received a larger extension than any other whatever. In addition, "to be" could become, thanks to the article, a nominal notion, treated as a thing; it gave rise to varieties, for example its present participle, which itself had been made a substantive, and in several kinds *(Äy D½; ¿1 D½ÄµÂ; Äp D½Ä±);* it could serve as a predicate itself, as in the locution *Äx Äv &½ µ6½±i* designating the conceptual essence of a thing, not to mention the astonishing diversity of particular predicates with which it could be construed, by means of case forms and prepositions.... ("Categories of Thought and Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 61).

To conclude on this point, Benveniste started certainly from the fact that language signifies, but man's signifying activity cannot be reduced to the understanding and interpretation of inherited significations. To the extent that it is radically historical, the *signifiance* is also, and always, *subjectivation* and if I may say so *sociation* and *humanitation*. Far from dealing only with the meaning of the *énoncés* (the statements independent of context), the *signifiance* produced in the *énonciation* (the act of stating as tied to context) has a historical-anthropological stake. As a result, it cannot be reduced to transcendental conditions of possibility, however transcendentally vanishing like those of hard hermeneutics. If the universality of language cannot guarantee human knowledge and freedom, it does not imply, as Gadamer claimed, dissolving them into an "effective history" *(Wirkungsgeschichte)*. Language is neither the transcendental *foundation* of a universal anthropology and a universal History, nor the *milieu* of the enslavement of man and subject to a local Fate.

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