Émile Benveniste and the *Rhuthmoi* of Language – Part 2

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Is Language a Dialectical Medium For Man?

Benveniste was therefore foreign to any transcendental interpretation of the universality of language, whether the latter was seen from the a priori of validity and freedom, or from that of facticity and servitude. However, neither did he interpret the universality of language as Jürgen Habermas (1929-) and Jean-Marc Ferry (1946-) did by trying to reconcile the two previous positions within a pragmatic phenomenology of the world of life *(Lebenswelt)*.

Of course, for him language was indeed a universal in and through which human beings can construct themselves, form societies and constitute a historical world. But this anthropological-historical production does not follow the logic of a reappropriation of an alienated part of the subject, of society or of humanity, and of their overcoming in higher subjective, social and anthropological units.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (2 vol., 1981. Eng. trans. 1984 and 1987), Habermas argued that any discursive re-actualization of particular preunderstandings of the world, to which our facticity subjects us, necessarily takes place under the formal and universal conditions of the grammar of ordinary language. Thus, reason presupposed by language makes it possible to tear ourselves away from tradition and to transform human historicity into a process of emancipation. Therefore, the dialectical form of becoming gives a progressive meaning to history.

For Benveniste, nothing in the functioning of language itself allows us to affirm that such a dialectical development does indeed exist. If we observe, from the language, the relationships between general and particular, or between identity and otherness, in both cases we see a very different logic from that highlighted by Habermas on a basis which still remains Hegelian. Let us take two examples which will allow us to outline Benveniste's thought on this subject in broad outline: that of the relations between *la langue* and society, and that of the relations between individual and society.

First example: the relationship between language and society. We must of course take into account the fact that Benveniste here takes neither *la langue* – the language nor *la société* – the society simply in the sense of a particular empirical idiom and of a particular empirical collectivity, but in that of the general principles of all languages and all societies.

> On the one hand, there is society as an empirical, historical datum ; we are talking about Chinese society, French society, Assyrian society. On the other hand, there is society as a human collectivity, the basis and the first condition of human existence. In the same way there is language *[la langue]* as an empirical, historical idiom, the Chinese language, the French language, the Assyrian language; and there is language *[la langue]* as a system of signifying forms, the first condition of communication. ("Structure of Language and Structure of Society" 1968/1974, p. 94, my trans.)

We know that for Habermas, the relation of interpretation which goes from language to society is like a reflection. Language, put into action in the discourse, is what allows subjects to go beyond the particularities implied by their belonging to social world and tradition, and to build a common world in a movement articulating conservation, emancipation and self-subjectivation. Benveniste, for his part, describes a completely different relationship between language and society. He begins by criticizing the traditional sociological position which makes language one institution among many.

> The sociologist, and probably anyone who looks into the question in dimensional terms, will observe that language *[la langue]* functions within society, which encompasses it; he will therefore decide that society is the whole, and language *[la langue]*, the part. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 62, my trans.)

But, this sociological "interlocking relationship" *[relation d'emboîtement]* has a fixist, even metaphysical aspect: "Objectifying external dependencies, [it] similarly reifies language *[le langage]* and society" (p. 62). Relying on the primacy of society over language (whether this primacy is thought of in individualistic or holistic terms), sociologists and anthropologists cannot but consider language, and even more seriously, their own object, society, only in an ultimately anti-historical form. They take their constructions for things existing in themselves. Consequently, they cannot grasp their dynamic relations of internal dependencies, nor their transformations. This is why, Benveniste adds, if we want to grasp language and society in their full historicity, we must radically reverse this conception.

> The semiological consideration reverses this relationship, because only language *[seule la langue]* allows society. Language *[La langue]* is what holds people together, the foundation of all relationships which in turn form the foundation of society. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 62, my trans.)

Thus, we must say that it is *la langue* – the language, which, thanks to its semiological power of "interpretancy," *[interprétance* – a neologism in Fr.*]* encompasses or "contains" society—and not the other way around, as sociologists and anthropologists most often presuppose. Paradoxically, however, only such a reversal of perspective makes it possible to observe language and society in the full historicity of their internal mutual relations, because it "puts them in mutual dependence according to their capacity for semiotization."

> We can then say that it is the language *[la langue]* that contains society. Thus the interpretancy

> relationship *[la relation d'interprétance]*, which is semiotic, goes the reverse of the interlocking relationship *[la relation d'emboîtement]*, which is sociological. Since the latter objectifies the external dependencies, it similarly reifies language and society, while the former puts them in mutual dependence according to their capacity for semiotization. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 62, my trans.)

In another article from the same period, Benveniste insists on the interdependence that paradoxically accompanies the asymmetric relation of interpretancy.

> Language poses and supposes the other. Immediately, society is given with language *[le langage]*. Society in turn only holds together through the common use of communication signs. Immediately, language *[le langage]* is given with society. So each of these two entities, language *[le langage]* and society, implies the other. ("Structure of Language and Structure of Society," 1968/1974, p. 91, my trans.)

We must beware here the following fact: the relations which link language and society are not of a reflexive type. They develop between "an interpreting system and an interpreted system," or between a system "which articulate[s]" because it manifests its "own semiotics" and a system which "[is] articulated and whose semiotics only appear through the grid of another mode of expression."

> INTERPRETANCY RELATIONSHIP. We thus designate that which we institute between an interpreting system and an interpreted system. From the point of view of language *[de la langue]*, it is the fundamental relationship, the one which separates systems into systems which articulate, because they manifest their own semiotics, and systems which are articulated and whose semiotics only appear through the grid of another mode of expression. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 61, my trans., Benveniste's capitals)

The language is, in fact, the only complete semiotic, or rather semiological, system and serves as a generating model for all the others.

> Language *[la langue]* is the semiotic organization par excellence. It gives the idea of what a sign function is, and it is the only one to offer its exemplary formula. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 63, my trans.)

Only *la langue* – language makes signs work on two levels: "Language *[la langue]* gives us the only model of a system which is semiotic both in its formal structure and in its functioning" (p. 63). On the one hand, formally, it consists "of distinct units, each of which is a sign" (p. 62) and which are generated and received "with the same reference values among all members of a community" (p. 62). On the other hand, in terms of its functioning, it manifests itself in the enunciation which, simultaneously, carries "reference to a given situation" and constitutes "the only actualization of intersubjective communication" (p. 62). Language *[la langue]* is therefore the only signifying system to be invested with a "DOUBLE SIGNIFIANCE."

> This is properly a model without analog. Language *[la langue]* combines two distinct modes of meaning, which we call the SEMIOTIC mode of one part, the SEMANTIC mode of the other. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 63, my trans., Benveniste's capitals)

La langue therefore possesses and exercises less a power of reflection than a power of "SEMIOTIC MODELING" vis-à-vis all other signifying systems, in particular society.

> From this it results that it alone can confer—and it does indeed confer—on other sets the quality of signifying systems by in-forming them with the sign relation [...]. The nature of language, its representative function, its dynamic power, its role in relational life make it the great semiotic matrix, the shaping structure whose other structures reproduce the features and mode of action. ("Semiology of Language," 1969/1974, p. 63, my trans.)

Furthermore, as far as society is concerned, this "semiotic modeling"—which should perhaps be better qualified as semiological since it includes both semiotics and semantics—has a remarkable consequence. Indeed, insofar as it combines the two modes of *significance*, language allows the founding tour de force by which the singular, the specific and the particular proper to a speaker are articulated with the general and the common meanings recognized by his society. Thanks to it, it is possible to refer to given and occasional situations, while transmitting and receiving with common reference values for all members of a community. In this sense, language is therefore the first condition of the relationship between the singular-specific and the general, the particular and the common, which founds society. But we see that it establishes this relationship in a way that in no way involves a dialectical play, since it does not imply so much going beyond traditional norms and particular situations towards a socio-historical state, better shared, more general and more rational, than founding the simple possibility of an infinite communication between the two orders, with respect for one and the other.

This conclusion brings me to the second example: that of the relationship between individual and society. We have just seen that, according to Benveniste, the fact that *la langue* – the language is invested with a double *significance* allows any speaker to appropriate it for his own account, to refer in a singular, particular and specific way, while being understood by other individuals, who do the same on their side. Language therefore makes communication between individuals possible and thus forms the condition of possibility of their community. But this founding power, let's call it a priori, is also accompanied by a dynamic power *to carry out* relationships concretely. Indeed, when a speaker expresses his singularity or his specificity, he "sets himself up as a *subject*, by referring to himself as *I* in his speech," but, simultaneously and necessarily, he also posits another person, "the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to 'me,' becomes my echo to whom I say *you* [tu] and who says *you* [tu] to me." We'll come back to this point in more details below.

> Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* [je] posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to "me," becomes my echo to whom I *[je]* say *you* [tu] and who says *you* [tu] to me. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260).

From the point of view of language, therefore, there is no dualism between *subjectivation* and

sociation. Not only can the singular and the general, the particular and the common, communicate, but *I* and *you* are posed simultaneously and inseparably. The production of society is just as much a production of the subject. Both must be caught in the radical historicity of their common and concomitant production.

> And so the old antinomies of "I" *["moi"]* and "the other," of the individual and society, fall. It is a duality which it is illegitimate and erroneous to reduce to a single primordial term, whether this unique term be the "I" *[le "moi"],* which must be established in the individual's own consciousness in order to become accessible to that of the fellow human being, or whether it be, on the contrary, society, which as a totality would preexist the individual and from which the individual could only be disengaged gradually, in proportion to his acquisition of self-consciousness. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260).

Benveniste qualifies this production as "dialectical." It is, he says, "in a dialectical reality encompassing the two terms and defining them by mutual relation that one discovers the linguistic basis of subjectivity" (p. 260). But we must not be mistaken. Contrarily to what Jean-Claude Milner claims (2008, p. 125-141), Benveniste does not give the adjective "dialectical" a Hegelian sense here. This relation which defines the terms through their "mutual relation" is much closer to the Socratic dialectic or better yet, to Humboldt's *Wechselwirkung* than to the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.

The polarity of the persons provided by language, he says, "does not mean either equality or symmetry: 'ego' always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you* [tu]." However, this transcendence does not imply any negativity, nor any reflection. The successive instantiations of the *I* do not participate in a reappropriation of an in-itself alienated in the other. They produce neither a negation of the social, nor a going beyond of the *I* into a higher stage of self-consciousness. The interdependence of the two poles of subjectivity is based on a *reversible transcendence* which does not involve any play between identity and negativity, but is more akin to an alternating opposition between interior and exterior. To conclude on this point, subjectivation and sociation are certainly in a historical interdependence, but their historicity is in no way dialectical.

> [The polarity of persons] is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. This polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: "ego" always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you* [tu]. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to an "interior/exterior" opposition, and, at the same time, they are reversible. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260).

So, whatever the angle from which we observe it, language is not for Benveniste, as it is for Habermas or Ferry, primarily, the *medium* that allows man to access to knowledge and freedom. As regards the relation of language to society, as for that of the individual to society, the critical position taken by Benveniste does not consist in showing the dialectical work of the opposing elements of the couples he considers, nor, on the other hand, by returning to a pre-dialectical position, by confining himself to noting their irreducible opposition. By placing himself exclusively from the point of view of language, he seeks to follow the specific character of the paradoxical logics of *hierarchical semiotic interdependence* and of *reversible subjective transcendence*. He thus builds

the first foundations of a theory of historicity which is at the same time non-dualistic, non-ontological and non-dialectical.