Émile Benveniste and the *Rhuthmoi* of Language – Part 3

Tuesday 2 February 2021, by Pascal Michon

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Is Language a Hermeneutical Medium For Man?

These conclusions might seem, at first glance, to bring the Benvenistian conception of language closer to the less radical hermeneutical conceptions developed from the 1970s by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) in a series of remarkable books: *La Métaphore vive*, 1975 – *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, 1978; *Temps et récit*, 3 vol., 1983-1985 – *Time and Narrative*, 1984-1988; and *Soi-même comme un autre*, 1990 – *Oneself as Another*, 1992. Indeed, unlike Hans-Georg Gadamer, the latter proposed a hermeneutical conception of language that left room for subjectivation.

A certain number of points clearly distinguishes, however, this conception from that of Benveniste. In the classic hermeneutical tradition initiated at the beginning of the 19th century by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), with which Ricœur reconnected over Gadamer's ontological re-interpretation, language was considered as a human medium which implies that meaning is both inherited and produced, found and reinterpreted. The text and the reader, the common social world and the individual are thus caught in spirals in which determinism and freedom constantly revive each other. As a result, these spirals cannot be reduced to a dialectical progress, but a subjective construction nonetheless remains possible even if it is uncertain.

This conception of language comes up against two difficulties however. First, in these interactions, the opposite poles are considered equivalent, which they are by no means, as we have just seen, in the eyes of Benveniste for whom language and society, the *I* and the *you*, are certainly in interaction but remain clearly hierarchical. Second, these spirals are seen as transcendental forms of the historical flow and remain entirely undetermined. Soft hermeneutics thus avoids the traps linked both to fixism and to dialectics, but it does not make it possible to differentiate between the different *qualities* or historical *specificities* of the movements during which subjectivation occurs. This is the reason why it tends to reassign to the subject a certain anhistoricity in the form of a universal moral "ipseity"or selfhood (Ricœur, 1990).

We do not find anything of the kind in Benveniste who does not locate the source of ethics and politics in an interior refuge but in the activity itself of human beings: each speech act is an ethical,

social and political action by which the relations between human beings—and therefore the subject himself—are constantly reinvented.

> Saying hello every day of your life to someone is a reinvention every time. ("Structuralism and Linguistics," 1968/1974, p. 19, my trans.)

At the same time, this conception of the radical historicity of subjectivation does not lead, like that advocated by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) on poststructuralist bases, which Ricœur rightly rejected, in a pulverization of the subjectivity, because it is framed by what Benveniste calls the "formal apparatus of enunciation." This apparatus, in particular, explains why the linguistic interactions during which the subject emerges do not occur as simple formally similar spirals but as relatively unified and each time specific ways of flowing which are possible to distinguish ethically and politically (for examples, see Michon, 2005/2016 and 2007/2015c). I will come back to this point in the next chapter.

Is Language a Part of a Larger Pragmatic Order?

This conclusion brings me to the last interpretation given to the idea of universality of language. If Benveniste extracts the theory of language from the transcendental, ontological, dialectical and hermeneutical models, then should we see in his theory, as Derrida puts it—rather mischievously—of Austin, a theory backed by a Nietzschean conception of historicity? For him, is language reducible to acts of speech "withdrawn from the authority of the value of truth, from the opposition true/false" and referred to the only "value of force, of difference of force? (illocutionary or perlocutionary force)." (Derrida, 1990, p. 37-38, my trans.) Does language merely proceed to *transfers* of movement or of force?

I showed in volume 3 how important it would be to reconsider Nietzsche in his invisible relationship with Humboldt. Nietzsche who was a trained scholar in philology and who spent many years studying the question of rhythm would certainly appear in a very different light than in these few lines of Derrida. But let us take Nietzsche as he was most often read in those years. Certainly, for Benveniste as for Austin, the performative does not describe something that exists outside language and before it, it is not a mirror that would reflect states of affairs or states of the soul. It is one of the points where the self-referential character of language is instantiated. But he does not consider that the performative, as Derrida says, "produces or transforms a situation," in short that it "operates" (p. 37) and breaks the self-identity of the being by a perpetual emergence of energy.

Austin immediately places himself in the perspective of the action; he observes the act from the point of view of its completion and outcome. Generally speaking, pragmatics is interested in the "illocutionary" dimension of language, that is to say in what we do when we say something, or even in the action accomplished by the speaker when he utters something (Searle, 1969). Thus, for Austin, "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (Austin, 1962, p. 6). Elsewhere he also says, "to issue such an utterance *is* to perform the action." (Sentence taken by Benveniste from the proceedings of the Royaumont colloquium devoted to "Analytical Philosophy and Language" (1962/1963), quoted in *Problems in General Linguistics*, 1966, p. 269)

Instead of taking the point of view of the action once completed, Benveniste, for his part, is

interested in the act itself. He considers that a performative *constitutes an act*.

> The utterance *I swear* is the very act which pledges me, not the description of the act that I am performing. In saying *I promise, I guarantee,* I am actually making a promise or a guarantee. The consequences (social, judicial, etc.) of my swearing, of my promise, flow from the instance of discourse containing *I swear, I promise.* The utterance is identified with the act itself. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 265)

In his eyes, therefore, the pragmatic result in no way defines the performative. The case of the imperative is a significant example.

> Thus, while *Come here!* is indeed an order, linguistically it is something other than saying, "I order you to come here." ("Analytical Philosophy and Language," 1963/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 275)

The result is certainly the same, but the linguistic act by which it is produced is totally different. Benveniste continues.

> There is no performative utterance unless it contains the mention of the act, namely, *I order.* The imperative, on the other hand, could be replaced by any procedure that would produce the same result, a gesture, for example, and would no longer have a linguistic reality. ("Analytical Philosophy and Language," 1963/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 275)

The conclusion is very clear. "It is not this empirical result that counts. A performative utterance is not performative in that it can modify the situation of an individual, but in that it is *by itself* an act."

> We must not be deceived by the fact that the imperative produces a result, that *come here!* actually makes the person to whom one spoke come. It is not this empirical result that counts. A performative utterance is not performative in that it can modify the situation of an individual, but in that it is *by itself* an act. ("Analytical Philosophy and Language," 1963/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 274)

What characterizes the performative is not therefore to extend language outside of itself, to "perform an action," as Austin says, but it is "to constitute an act by itself," i.e. to be "self-referential," or "referring to a reality that it itself constitutes by the fact that it is actually uttered in conditions that make it an act."

> This leads us to recognize in the performative a peculiar quality, that of being *self-referential,* of referring to a reality that it itself constitutes by the fact that it is actually uttered in conditions

> that make it an act. ("Analytical Philosophy and Language," 1963/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 274)

We see what distinguishes this conception of language from that of the analytical philosopher, of his deconstructionist commentator and, I will add, of the whole pragmatic thought (including sociologists like Habermas), which has emerged from the concept of illocutionary. For Benveniste, language cannot be defined by putting it in continuity with the world and by including it in a larger pragmatic order. Language cannot be integrated into a universal theory of action without losing its specificity. Therefore, it is not possible for him, as one can argue for Austin, to pass from his conception of the universality of language to that of a universality of force. Our language condition is not part of a larger condition of being-in-the-world, into which we would be thrown into a vast field of conflicts between wandering energies that would come to express themselves in completely unconditioned ways.

On the contrary, for Benveniste, as we will see in the next chapter, it is necessary to think of our being-in-the-world starting from our being-in-and-by-language, because it is language that allows us to instantiate, through acts, points of reference which form the bases of our subjectivity as well as our perception of space and time (*I-here-now*, deictics, verbal tenses), as well our referential activity *(I/you-he)*, as well as our relation to others *(I/you)*. It is therefore the activity of language, better yet, the organized activity of language, in short the *rhuthmoi* of language, which found our historicity and not the other way around.