

Émile Benveniste and the *Rhuthmoi* of Subjectivity - Part 3

Monday 8 February 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

*

We will see that Benveniste's essays on general linguistics unfortunately received a mixed reception from the members of the rhythmic constellation. Nevertheless, our investigation has shown why we must certainly grant him one of the very first places. Compared to Lefebvre's still Platonic approach and even that of Foucault, who illuminatingly described the social consequences of the diffusion of the *metron* in modern societies and developed a ground-breaking conception of time without though never addressing the question of rhythm, that of Benveniste was much more innovative, at least rhythmologically speaking. He proposed nothing less than to reconsider the theories of language, society, subjectivity and time from an entirely new *rhuthmic* perspective which revolutionized the conditions of rhythmanalysis.

1. In the two previous chapters, we have seen how Benveniste radically transformed, at the very beginning of the 1950s, the understanding of the *concept of rhythm* and, probably in the wake of this discovery, how he outlined, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the contours of a new theory of language which broke free from most dominant models of the time—and made them suddenly strangely outdated. On the one hand, he engaged in a devastating *critique of the semiotic basis* that supported most social sciences as well as most kinds of philosophy, without joining either with the philosophers who opposed semiotics and dualism from a sheer ontological or naturalistic point of view. On the other hand, on the basis of the *brand new semantics* resulting from this change, he sketched the outlines of a revolutionary conception of man opposed to all ahistoric and historicist anthropologies, as well as to all anti-anthropology. By comparing it with Ricœur's soft kind of hermeneutics, to which it could seem close at first (due, for instance, to their common use of the concept of interaction), we realized that Benveniste rendered possible a *radically historical anthropology*, which was not the case for Ricœur which still postulated the existence of an ahistorical moral core, the *ipse*.

2. This new chapter has helped us to specify the characteristics of this historical anthropology through the description of the functioning of subjectivity in language.

2.1 Apart from its semiotic apparatus—which is not entirely disregarded by Benveniste but which must be subject to the primacy of semantic activity—language offers places (the *I* but also the deictics and the verbal present tense) which are, in a certain sense, imperative and therefore transcendent to the speakers, but which are, also, always empty (non-conceptual, non-referential, non-semiotic) and therefore always available for a complex process of appropriation which allows

each individual to access subjectivity through a semantic activity including setting temporality and spatiality, referring to things, and interaction with other human beings—all these relations being each time set up in a particular manner and yet understood, accepted and taken up by the interlocutor as soon as he or she speaks.

2.2 We noticed that the existence of this process does not mean, however, that the subject would remain firm and constant throughout its unfolding as a substantial self. This will be a mistake often repeated by Benveniste's readers, as we will see for instance when we look into Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. In fact, Benveniste, without indulging in time ontology, hard hermeneutics, deconstruction, or hyper-pragmatism recognized that subjectivity is, at the same time as it emerges, caught in mobile relations with other speakers with whom it has to share pronominal forms, processes of construction of reference and present, and composed of discrete instantiations, each speech act triggering, so to speak, a new subjective spark.

3. Here again, the concept of *rhuthmos* fits perfectly with Benveniste's suggestions.

3.1 Seen from enunciation theory and semantics, subjectivity is real and universal while *being* radically historical, in other words it is endowed with a certain consistency but it is nevertheless flowing through time—and vice versa, subjectivity is always flowing but assumes specific manners of flowing, which provide it with a certain firmness. In short, the subject should be taken neither as an essential or substantial self nor as an illusion covering an actual dispersion, but through *the rhuthmic flow of its instantiations*. Subjectivity is an *anthropological rhuthmos*.

3.2 This description must naturally be correlated with those made previously concerning the relation between language and society as well as between language and individual. Not only is language the "interpreter" of all other semiotic systems which function in society, but it offers the individuals both the means and the opportunities to perform interactions. Consequently, the subjectivation supported by the activity of language involves the production, maintenance or disruption of social ties. In this sense, language is the deepest foundation of interaction and therefore of society, which should not be taken either as a substantial whole or as a mere addition of separate individuals but through *the rhuthmic flow of its interactions*. Every society, every social group, in this sense, is a *sociological bundle of rhuthmoi*.

3.3 Strikingly, Benveniste gives the activity of language an even wider role: not only is it responsible for the fluent cohesion of subjectivity and society but it also founds "humanity" itself. Indeed, "in the absence of language, says he, there would be neither the possibility of society nor the possibility of humanity." In short, thanks to the "formal apparatus of enunciation," any human being can participate in *the semantic and pragmatic production of the signifiante in language* and therefore in *the correlated rhuthmic phenomena of subjectivation, sociation and humanitation*—if we may say so—*involved in it*.

I would say that long before serving to communicate language serves to live [*le langage sert à vivre*]. If we posit that in the absence of language, there would be neither the possibility of society nor the possibility of humanity, it is indeed because the characteristic of language is first to signify. ("Form and Meaning in Language," 1966/1974, p. 217, my trans.)

3.4 Here, Benveniste's elegant formulation, which reduces his argument to its most simple lines, must be however correctly deciphered. "Long before serving to communicate language serves to *live*," but in what sense? Can human life also be qualified as *rhuthmic*? As a matter of fact, in this instance, obviously "*live*" does not denote primarily an ideal form of life, nor a phenomenological experience, nor a sociological life in common, nor a tense relationship between experience and horizon of expectation, nor a conflicting expression of the will to power—even if we may include all these meanings in Benveniste's concept. It means firstly the *anthropological-historical adventure* of human beings. It denotes the various manners of flowing that a person's existence, and the existence of the groups to which he or she belongs, have assumed in the past and will assume in the future.

4. In other words, language opens human beings onto their infinite *rhuthmic* production, it represents, incorporated or immanent in each of us, an *absolute in miniature*.

4.1 Through the most simple and banal use of language, speakers transform what seem to be strict oppositions between transcendence and immanence, heteronomy and autonomy, society and psyche, into paradoxical interactions, without, however, involving a dialectical or a hermeneutical logic, nor being subjected to a deconstructive process whether of the Heideggerian-hermeneutic or the Nietzschean-pragmatic types. On the contrary, these tense interactions—if they do not develop to the point of becoming destructive or triggering mere repetition and confinement into oneself—are a source of both *coherence*, and *novelty*, and even *sharing*—as we will see when we study Meschonnic—in that the one who emerges as a subject is in fact always engaged, naturally to varying degrees, in a *transsubject*.

4.2 Because they do not know anything about semantics and remain on the *semiotic* level of signification and statement—even when they believe they are going beyond it—most philosophers, in fact, for their part, only perceive subjectivation under the form of an *individualization*: the individualization, always already realized, of a subject instrumentalizing language; the progressive individualization by *Aufhebung* or hermeneutic spirals of the determinations of meaning; or, in some cases, the de-individualization through subjugation to language conceived as a sign system (Derrida), as a carrier of traditional meaning contents (Gadamer), or as a flat set of statements (Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari).

5. Let us now combine the results of our three chapters and come to some of the deeper philosophical or theoretical consequences of Benveniste's general linguistics.

5.1 Benveniste provides us with a remarkable critical theory that questions most of the major philosophical interpretations of humankind developed in the second half of the 20th century. Traditional philosophies think of the relation between universality and historicity of humankind starting from an *essence of man*. Philosophies of communicative action attach it to *transcendentals* or *quasi-transcendentals of intersubjective communication* (norms of rational argumentation in Apel; grammar of everyday speech in Habermas or Jean-Marc Ferry). Hegelian and Marxist philosophies presuppose that the universality of man is still *alienated both in nature and society* and that he will, one day, be *emancipated from it by the dialectical process* of history (Lefebvre). Philosophies of comprehension subject this relation to an *effective history* with a subjectivity reduced to an interior *moral entity* (Ricoeur) or *without subjectivity* (Gadamer). Finally, philosophies of the will to power or pragmatist philosophies dissolve it into a *cosmos of forces and actions* (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Guattari, Rorty).

5.2 By contrast, subjectivity, in Benveniste's sense, is neither a pure principle of freedom and knowledge, nor a condition of possibility of freedom and knowledge, nor a simple result in consciousness of knowledge and action processes. It is *radically historical*. However, its historicity does not make it either some kind of illusion, a ghost, a mere surface appearance poorly covering the *Abgrund* - the Abyss, as Heidegger and many of his willing or unwilling followers would like. To put it in a nutshell, from the point of view of semantics and theory of enunciation, subjectivity and human historicity do not stem from a *paradigm of Freedom*, whether the latter derives from a capacity for language which would differentiate man from animals or from necessarily reflexive forms of communication in societies. Neither does it fall within a *paradigm of Destiny*, determined by the unsurpassable facticity of a *Dasein* subject to Language or to the profusion of Life and Forces. The *form of life* peculiar to humans involved by the use of language implies in itself a regime of *radical historicity* and it is this particular regime that precisely makes us *human*. It is a *rhuthmic adventure*, each time *risky* and *specific*, but also most of the time *shareable*.

6. To conclude, let us briefly touch on two problematic points. One of the most obvious limitations of Benveniste's contribution is certainly his distance from the contemporary discoveries in natural science. To my knowledge, he never mentioned any of them or paid attention to the aspects that could have helped him in his own reflection. The other, more questionable, is the lack of theory and study of literature. Surprisingly, despite his youthful acquaintance with the Surrealists and his awareness of the historical-anthropological importance of language, he never published anything concerning one of its most important uses: its artistic use in poetry, fiction, novel, etc. A few years ago, Chloé Laplantine (1980-) has gathered and presented the notes he took on Baudelaire (Laplantine, 2011) but, despite their obvious interest, Benveniste chose not to or could not publish them. Poetics joined the rhythmological constellation only with Meschonnic's contributions in the 1970s and particularly with his masterwork published in 1982, which will be discussed in the next volume.

[Next chapter](#)