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Language as Representation, as Agency, as Being

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Human language has been studied over the centuries mostly for its rational properties. The tradition of equating a language with its grammar, i.e., with the logical and morphosyntactical attributes of utterances *seen exclusively as propositions*, goes back in fact to the Platonic and Stoic grammarians.

Human language, however, is not necessarily propositional. And in any case human utterances actualise much more than what is predicated by the propositional content they may have. Thus, over the centuries, another current of language studies has developed as well, one that sees ordinary speech as the *concrete expression of situated meaning, revealing both an individual psychology and a people's mind set or Weltanschauung*. The present paper will try to justify this second linguistic current and, with it, the teaching of cross-cultural communication as a redefinition of one's existential stance.

A bit of linguistic history

Although relatively recent, the modern view of language as more than just a cognitive faculty expressed in a semiotic system, has illustrious predecessors in medieval nominalism as well as in antiquity. Aristotle, for example, did not limit himself to describing the formal properties of rational discourse or *logos* (in, for example, *On Interpretation*); he also saw speech as the shared value system that binds individuals into a community of discourse (*koinonía*; see *Politics*, I:1,2). Indeed, the often misused citation from Aristotle, 'man is by nature a political animal', is in fact a statement about language and should be glossed: 'man is an animal whose natural, constitutive dimension is the community of discourse called civil society (*polis*)'^[1] Thus utterances are expressions of three vectors, not just one: man's capacity to articulate

- experience,
- nature, and
- society.

As human beings, we are what we say, and what we say is largely determined by our interaction with our community.

The scientific study of language as culture may be said to originate with Humboldt for whom 'man is man only through language, and the world is the world only insofar as it is constituted linguistically; (...) man lives with objects seen exclusively in the way language presents them to him'^[2]. Note that Humboldt is saying here much more than what Boas, Whorf and the American school of cultural anthropology were to say a century later. Language for Humboldt is not simply a set of categories to describe the world or a filter colouring reality; it is the organ by which we seek to know and it is the very medium in which what we know (our world) is constituted.

In the last century Antonio Gramsci (a linguist by training before turning to political activism) defended the materialist conception of 'language as an autonomous means of meaningfully organising experience'^[3]. What is more, he added history: Gramsci argued that languages are not only shaped by the socio-economic organisation of the societies producing them but also 'contribute to shaping the forms (economic, political and cultural) which go to make up that society' (*ibid.*). In other words, language is an *entity* which, alongside nature and civil society, co-determines our perceived universe **dialectically** over time.

Let us now subjectivise this historical-materialist account, in order to explain our personal *experience* of language. For instinctively we all sense language to be the tissue not only of the world we know but also of ourselves within that world.

Language as the sedimentation (not the residue) of instances of speech

If I were to ask for a definition of 'language', most of us, remembering Ferdinand de Saussure's inspired lectures and the ensuing commentaries, would probably respond something to the effect that it is 'an open system of highly polysemous articulated signs used to express meanings'. But this defines language as *langue*, i.e., the set of (universal?) semiotic regularities we observe in people's speech. What about language as *parole*, i.e., the product of the single acts of speech taken together ('*la somme des cas particuliers*', as Saussure defined it)^[4]. Each act certainly communicates much more than the combination of its (universal?) regularities: this fact explains why we sometimes have problems in translating jokes and why, on the other hand, we have no problem in recognising a loved one's style in a letter. The product of a multitude of such acts (*parole*)

must therefore be even denser in non-generalizable meanings -- a rich sedimentation of unique intents, the primordial soup of culture. But how to study it? Saussure made it clear that, in choosing to create the science of *langue*, he had left aside the task of defining and founding the science of *parole* (*ibid.*, *seq.*). Let us therefore attempt a definition of 'language' that captures -- not the general conditions of signifying (i.e., of meaning making and attribution) -- but rather the specifics of how individual instances of communication are realised and how, together, they form a given language/culture.

Beyond language as a purely verbal system

In this perspective, we may define language as an **overall modulation of social behaviour** created by repeated **reactions** to meaning-sharing events and by repeated **attempts** at (co-)producing such events in response to a **felt need to represent** something (to oneself, to others), to **do** something (through representation), and in any case to **be** something (through representation).

In humans such **reactions** start at birth (most likely even earlier) and are clearly linguistic at 6 months: a child of that age will, for example, look at family members when named. The child's first **attempts at representation** -- by imitating one or both parents' gestures, for example -- start around 6 months and by one year of age are clearly linguistic: a one-year-old is able to use a handful of recognisable names regularly. (The names are generally sound inventions and not imitations of the language heard in the environment; they constitute the baby's personal language.)^[5] The use of combinations of two words, i.e., what most linguists would accept to call 'distinctively human language', comes three to six months later. For us, however, what goes on **before** the appearance of verbal proto-propositions also qualifies as 'distinctively human language'; indeed, it is the very stuff of human language)^[6]. Halliday also makes this point in no uncertain terms: 'From the functional point of view, as soon as there are meaningful expressions [in child-adult or child-child interaction] there is language, and the investigation can begin at a time before words and structures have evolved to take over the burden of realisation.'^[7]

Our definition does not negate Humboldt's view of language as an organ but chooses to portray that organ through its manifestations (**behaviour, reactions, attempts, felt need**), much like we portray a nation's economy, a functional entity, in terms of inputs and outputs. '**Social**' (indicating both an individual's behaviour with others and the behaviour of an entire society) captures Aristotle's notion of community-communication while '**overall**' emphasises that language is much more than verbal behaviour. Finally '**modulation**' expresses both Gramsci's dialectical view of language and Saussure's definition of *parole* as the **accumulation** of 'individual instances' of speech (or, as we have called it, the **sedimentation** of individual 'messages'). This last point deserves comment.

We have asserted elsewhere that a 'message' is a (momentary) modification of situated behaviour^[8]. Here we add a new notion: the sedimentation of such modifications produces the stable behavioural 'modulation' we call language. A 'modulation' is not a reflex or a habit; it is a sensitivity to particular configurations of events. To make the concept clearer, let us take an example from everyday life. A person who knows nothing of a certain sport can acquire a **feel for the game** by going to matches regularly, observing the action closely and, when the other spectators cheer, **letting the excitement take hold**. 'Letting the excitement take hold' constitutes a momentary modification, repeated over and over in circumstances indicated (by the other spectators) as meaningful. The 'feel for the game' is the resulting behavioural 'modulation'. It is a sensitivity to particular events, experienced as a capacity to see meaning in the players' actions on the field. With time, that sensitivity will permit commenting and predicting actions.

The characteristically human modulation of behaviour we call language presents, in its verbal manifestations, analysable regularities anchored in the general properties of human mental representation as studied by semiologists as well as by psychologists, philosophers and linguists. But these regularities, which define *verbal-language-as-a-semiotic-system* (or *langue*), reveal only the **systematic** (universal?) characteristics of speech. This is not very much, given the immense expressiveness of *that which is unique* in a situated speech act. This is why it is dangerously misleading to say that speech is simply the 'application' of the rules of a language to a specific instance, or, in Saussurian terms, that *parole* is simply a 'realisation' of *langue*. On the contrary: *verbal-language-as-a-semiotic-system* (*langue*) is but a **reduced subset** of *speech-and/or-kindred-behaviour* (which we shall call hereafter '*parole+*'). In a word, *langue* is merely the shadow of *parole+*, a skeleton, a handful of conceptual categories dutifully abstracted from a quagmire of dense meaning-sharing events that can only be grasped in full by experiencing them.

The expression '*speech-and/or-kindred-behaviour*' may seem unduly complicated in English, while the short form '*parole+*' may seem arcane. But there is a reason for using them. As a behavioural **modulation**, language is the sedimentation of specific communicative acts, each one constituting a **will to mean** manifesting itself as a particular **stance** within a given communicative event. A **stance** is a manifestation of intent; it translates behaviourally as a shift in *kindred behaviour* as well as (although not always) in speech. This, I feel, should be made terminologically explicit.

How '*kindred*' is '*kindred behaviour*'? That is, in what ways can non-verbal communicative behaviour be considered **formally** comparable to verbal language? An example will give some idea (see Kendon^[9] for a well-documented empirical study). Let us consider how a student in class, John, might successfully communicate, by coughing, that he wants the attention of another student, Mary. First, he uses a distinct vocal (but **not verbal**) sign exhibiting rhythm and intonation (his cough was staccato and falsetto), articulated as a theme/rheme predication (i.e., John's soft pretonic set the stage for his loud, falling, tonic 'call') and semanticised as a sociolinguistic norm (in John's community,

as elsewhere, coughing is used to attract attention discretely). Moreover he followed appropriate turn-taking rules (John waited until Mary had finished taking a note to be sure she would hear), an iconic gesture (John leaned towards Mary, thus producing a closer-than-normal sound source), and perhaps even some yet-to-be-discovered Extra Sensory Perception mechanism involving focusing. In short, John's cough exhibits most of the attributes of verbal communication except for morphology and syntax: it is an example of *parole+* as pure 'kindred behaviour'.

Language as Representing and Doing

Now let us consider the last part of our definition of language. We said that language develops through repeated attempts at (co-)producing meaning-sharing events in response to **felt needs to represent, to do, to be**. What do we mean by '**language as a modality of representing**', '**language as a modality of doing**' and, to arrive finally at our main topic, '**language as a modality of being**'?

Let us begin our explanation with the second modality, **doing**, since the example just discussed -- John's cough -- illustrates this modality perfectly. By **doing** we mean 'acting upon the outside world to obtain a response'. And in fact, by using coughing as language (i.e., as an instance of *parole+*), John obtains a response from Mary -- a quizzical look. Note that the notion of '**doing**' is more restrictive than the notion of 'performative', used by pragmatists to indicate **any** linguistic accomplishment. While it is true that every utterance implies some performative, for the purposes of our definition of language only particular utterances will be considered as '**doing** things with words', i.e., only those utterances that aim at provoking a response.

Doing includes various linguistic functions, the exact number of which varies according to the person defining them. Of the three functions that Bühler attributes to language (*representing, striking, summoning*^[10]), we may count the last two as forms of **doing**. Of Jakobson's six functions -- *representational, metalingual, poetic, expressive, conative, phatic*^[11] -- the last three may be considered forms of **doing**. Of the seven functions Halliday sees in small children's use of language -- *informative, imaginative, personal, instrumental, regulatory, interactional, heuristic*^[12] -- **doing** includes the last four. The *heuristic* function for example -- *getting Mom or Dad to explain why* -- is a form of **doing** since it is acting upon the outside world to obtain, quite literally, a response.

Language is used to **do** things but it may also be used simply to **represent** things, i.e., to clarify how we see things by assigning names and attributing relations syntactically. **Representation** is therefore the next modality of language we shall consider. It includes the remaining sub-functions in the various lists just given: Bühler's *representing*; Jakobson's *representational, metalingual* and *poetic*; Halliday's *informative, imaginative*

and *personal*.

Halliday's *informative* function, for example, consists of *making sense of things by recombining words heard*: by babbling, small children 'inform' their experiences with meaning. It is therefore not a kind of **doing** since it serves to impose order on one's inner world more than to obtain responses from the 'outer world' (Halliday, pp.55,71). Indeed, when *informing*, children do not necessarily care whether they are understood, as Piaget has shown^[13]. Adults, too, often speak mainly to reinforce their ideas in their own mind: theirs is 'egocentric discourse' similar to that of Piaget's children. University professors who talk over the heads of their students or spouses who chatter on while their partner has dozed off are two well-known examples. Note that, even when our *informative* discourse is **other-directed**, i.e. even when we make an effort to talk the language of our interlocutors, we are still '**representing** to ourselves' at the same time. Indeed, in many cases the difference between effectively speaking our interlocutor's language and speaking to ourselves is minimal. This happens, for example, when we open up with close friends or long-time colleagues, i.e. whenever we talk freely, making only minimal adjustments to our language because it is so similar to that of our interlocutor. Saint Augustine noted that we speak to close friends almost as though we were talking to ourselves, as though we were 'one soul in two bodies' (*Confessions*, IV, 6). It goes without saying that, during such talk, it may occasionally be necessary for us to resort to maieutics or persuasiveness (*interactional* functions of language) to get our ideas across. In that case our use of language becomes prevalently a **doing**.

It may not always be possible to distinguish in practice between the two modalities of language use that we have defined so far: **doing** and **representing**. For example, when John whispers to Mary that, for him, she is a '*love nest*', is he informing her with an eye to understanding his own feelings better by using the most meaningful words (for him) to **represent** those feelings? In that case we would say that his **representation** is egocentric. Or is John seeking to help Mary understand what he has come to understand about himself, through the deliberate use of just those terms he knows they share? (Note that, in searching for a term known to and used by both parties and in coming up with the hackneyed expression '*love nest*', John may very well have learned something about himself and about love that, before knowing Mary, he would never have imagined or said.) In such a case we would say that John's **representation** is other-directed. Or is John attempting to represent his feelings as clearly and forcefully as possible, by using Mary's language? (In this case we would be assuming that John sees expressions such as '*love nest*' as '*effeminate*', something belonging to Mary's world.) In that case we would say that John's language, being *markedly* other-directed, is both **representing** and **doing** -- indeed, mostly the latter. Or else, given the stereotypical male role-model inculcated in lads in Croydon (and not only there), is John simply trying to get Mary to accept his physical advances, by using a flattering representation calculated to please her ('*you*' = '*love nest*')? In other words, is he trying to seduce her, i.e., using language as purely other-directed **doing**? It is not easy to say.

Language as Being

Do the overlapping and intersecting modalities of language use that we have named '**representing**' and '**doing**' explain everything we do with language? It would seem so, especially since they include all the language functions described by such eminent scholars as Bühler, Jakobson and Halliday. And yet these two modalities fail to explain what we humans do with language when we sign our name with a flourish, sing in the shower with gusto, or exclaim 'Watch this!' as we begin executing a difficult dive, perhaps without even glancing at the onlookers or being aware of who they are (little children call out like this). These language acts are not a way of giving form to reality (which is the modality we have called **representing**). Nor -- assuming that we have obtained a hold on reality -- are they attempts at prodding reality into revealing its secrets (which is the modality we have called **doing**). They are an attempt to do something even more fundamental with *parole*: thrust oneself into reality and maintain oneself there. Let us call this modality '**language as being**'.

The concepts of 'thrusting oneself into reality' and 'maintaining oneself there' may seem extraneous to a discussion on 'language' and 'distinctively human communication'. Let us remember, however, that we define 'communication' as the *establishment of a relationship*^[14] while we define 'language' as a particular *modulation of social behaviour* (see above). It therefore follows that a people's (and an individual's) *relationship with reality* must be considered a form of communication. It also follows that a people's (and an individual's) *way of behaving* in the reality they have created, must be considered language. In addition, that *relationship* and that *way of behaving* must be considered distinctively human if we hypothesise the existence of an *i*-factor (*intentionality*).

Halliday hints at this most fundamental language modality when he speaks of the *personal* function manifested in young children's talk^[15]. The *personal* function -- which children use when they say things like 'Watch this!' or 'Here I come!' -- is defined by Halliday as the assertion of one's ego. If we substitute 'existence' for Halliday's 'ego', we have the modality of language use we have just called 'language as being'. Language therefore becomes the elaboration of an existential stance. This means, as we concluded in last year's conference paper, that when people speak, they speak above all to communicate themselves^[16].

We may therefore claim to have an epistemologically reasoned basis on which to assert that cross-cultural competence implies a certain kind of linguistic competence -- specifically, competence in the language of one's interlocutor, be it a lingua franca, a pidgin, or the interlocutor's native language^[17] -- and that such linguistic competence implies having acquired, not simply a new way to represent ideas or to get things done, but -- above all -- a new way of being.



- [1] Franco Lo Piparo, 'Aristotle' in H. Stammerjohann (ed.), *Lexicon Grammaticorum* (Tuebingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996), p. 40.
- [2] Donatella Di Cesare (ed.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt. La Diversità delle Lingue* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1991), Introduction, p.xxxii (translation mine).
- [3] Tullio De Mauro, 'Antonio Gramsci' in H. Stammerjohann (ed.), *Lexicon Grammaticorum* (Tuebingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996), p.362.
- [4] Ferdinand de Saussure. *Cours de linguistique générale* (Lausanne, Payot, 1916), p.25.
- [5] M.A.K. Halliday, *Learning how to mean: explorations in the development of language* (London, Edward Arnold, 1975).
- [6] Peter Jusczyk, *The Discovery of Spoken Language* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1997).
- [7] M.A.K. Halliday, *Learning how to mean: explorations in the development of language* (London, Edward Arnold, 1975), p.6.
- [8] Patrick Boylan, 'Relativizing the Concept of Communication' in D. Killick et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the conference Poetics and Praxis of Languages and Intercultural Communication*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow Publications, 2001, pp.45-53.
- [9] Adam Kendon, 'Gestures as illocutionary and discourse structure markers in Southern Italian conversation' *Journal of Pragmatics* (23) (1995), pp. 247-279.
- [10] Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1934).
- [11] Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1982), pp. 350-377. Earlier versions of the same formulation appeared in 1958 and 1960.
- [12] M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as social semiotic. The social interpretation of language and meaning* (London, Edward Arnold, 1978).
- [13] Jean Piaget, *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* (Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1968).
- [14] Patrick Boylan, 'Relativizing the Concept of Communication' in D. Killick et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the conference Poetics and Praxis of Languages and Intercultural Communication*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow Publications, 2001, pp.45-53.
- [15] M.A.K. Halliday, *Learning how to mean: explorations in the development of language* (London, Edward Arnold, 1975).
- [16] Patrick Boylan, 'Relativizing the Concept of Communication' in D. Killick et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the conference Poetics and Praxis of Languages and Intercultural Communication*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow Publications, 2001, pp.45-53.
- [17] Patrick Boylan, 'Accommodation through a Transformation of Consciousness', *Proceedings of the SIETAR-UK conference Globalisation, foreign languages and intercultural learning*, South Bank University, London, 9-10.2.2001 (forthcoming; presently readable on the Internet at: <http://host.uniroma3.it/docenti/boylan/ricerca.htm>). Addenda: https://www.academia.edu/463571/Cross-Cultural_Accommodation_Through_a_Transformation_of_Consciousness