

Émile Benveniste and the *Rhuthmoi* of Subjectivity - Part 1

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

Sommaire

- [Language as Rhuthmic Basis of](#)
- [The I as Empty Linguistic Form](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

In our elaboration of the phrase *radically historical anthropology*, we have insisted, so far, on the terms *radically historical*. Benveniste helped us to suggest the outlines of a *rhuthmic* conception of human life independent of most modern philosophical theories. We must now approach the notion of *historical anthropology* itself. Indeed, at the same time as he was describing the relation between language and society, language and the individual, Benveniste sketched out a *rhuthmic* theory of subjectivity through the development of the concept of “enunciation apparatus.”

Language as *Rhuthmic* Basis of Subjectivation

According to Benveniste, subjectivation is first and foremost a language phenomenon—which is itself, it must be kept in mind, a universal.

It is in and through language [*le langage*] that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language [*le langage*] alone establishes the concept of “ego” in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260)

Whatever the forms in which we usually grasp it (consciousness or feeling of being oneself, subject of experience, memory and will, etc.), subjectivity derives, more or less directly, from the *activity of language* which constitutes its primary condition. “‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego.’”

The “subjectivity” we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject.” It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences [*des expériences vécues*] it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that that “subjectivity,” whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language [*du langage*]. “Ego” is he who says “ego.” That is where we see the foundation of “subjectivity,” which is determined by the linguistic status of “person.” (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260)

Subjectivation does not derive from “the feeling” of being oneself or of having “experiences,” but from “the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles, and that makes the permanence of the consciousness.” So Benveniste implicitly makes here the same reproach to psychologists and phenomenologists as, previously, to sociologists and anthropologists: that of studying a pure abstraction, “man separated from language.” For him the linguistic nature of man makes null and void any study which would be limited to what is experienced by the subject because feeling “is only a reflection,” and the subjectivity only “the emergence in the being a fundamental property of language. “Ego” is he who says ‘ego.’” By these statements, Benveniste underlines the anthropological force of language. He explicitly challenges the ideas traditionally held in this regard in philosophy and psychology. The unity of the subject does not come from the subject itself, whether conceived as a soul, a reflexive entity or simply as experience, but from language in action.

It should be emphasized however that this is not to say that the subjectivity is installed by and through “*la langue*” as in the innumerable versions of structuralist or poststructuralist thought. *La langue* is only a construction, too often reified by the grammatical, philological and philosophical studies, concerning language as an activity. For Benveniste, in fact,

nihil est in lingua quod non prius fuerit in oratione – there is nothing in *language [la langue]* that was not previously in *speech*. (“The Levels of Linguistic Analysis,” 1962/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 131)

The subject therefore emerges through speech acts which, although they appear similar, are each time entirely new, as we already mentioned.

How do we produce language [*la langue*]? We do not reproduce anything. We apparently have a number of models. But every man invents his language [*sa langue*] and invents it all his life. Now all men invent their own language [*leur propre langue*] on the spot and each in a distinctive way, and each time in a new way. Saying hello every day of your life to someone is a reinvention every time. All the more so when it comes to sentences. (“Structuralism and Linguistics,” 1968/1974, pp. 18-19, my trans.)

The *I* as Empty Linguistic Form Filled by the Enunciation

The detailed analysis of this emergence of “*ego*” in speech activity shows a very fascinating theoretical object: pure extraordinariness constantly emerging from the most banal behavior. In the discourse in which it appears, the *I*, says Benveniste, does in fact refer neither to a concept (the general class of all subjects), nor to an empirical individual (the particular person who would be its referent).

On the one hand, no *I* is the realization of a universal and timeless idea that would precede it, because there is no object of thought, no concept, to which its different instances of use can identically refer.

Each instance of use of a noun is referred to a fixed and “objective” notion, capable of remaining potential or of being actualized in a particular object and always identical with the mental image it awakens. But the instances of the use of *I* do not constitute a class of reference since there is no “object” definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in identical fashion. (“The Nature of Pronouns,” 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 252)

Two years later.

There is no concept “I” that incorporates all the *I*’s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept “tree” to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer. The “I,” then, does not denominate any lexical entity. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 261)

On the other hand, the *I* is not the name designation of an empirical individual either, for it is identically available to all speakers.

Could it then be said that *I* refers to a particular individual? If that were the case, a permanent contradiction would be admitted into language, and anarchy into its use. How could the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 261)

The *I* is therefore neither the sign of an idea, nor the name of a person; neither the proxy of the abstract concept of a series of occurrences, nor the representative of an empirical individual.

Now these pronouns are distinguished from all other designations a language articulates in that *they do not refer to a concept or to an individual*. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 261)

The reality designated by the *I* or the *you* is specific to the discourse in action.

What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a “reality of discourse,” and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of “locution,” not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. (“The Nature of Pronouns,” 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 252)

In other words, the *I* is not a sign. It is not part of the *semiotic* order and has no “signification.” Quite astonishingly, the *I* receives its content only from its enunciation. It is therefore filled with a different reference each time it is uttered and “corresponds each time to a unique being.”

Each *I* has its own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such. ("The Nature of Pronouns," 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 252)

In 1958, Benveniste insisted on this point. The *I* is a term which depends on the "instance of discourse" in which it is used and therefore "has only a momentary reference."

We are in the presence of a class of words, the "personal pronouns," that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 261)

In 1965, Benveniste elaborated further his argument. Outside of actual discourse, the pronoun *I* is only an "empty form." It "receives its reality and its substance from speech alone."

Outside of actual discourse, the pronoun is only an empty form, which cannot be attached neither to an object nor to a concept. It receives its reality and its substance from speech alone [*du discours seul*]. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 68, my trans.)

The *I* is only filled when the speaker "appropriates" the "formal apparatus of language" for himself, through a reference to its instantiation itself. This peculiar process therefore makes it belong to the *semantic* order and to what Benveniste calls the process of "signifiante." It is, one might say, an expression of the very historicity of Man.

The individual act of language appropriation [*appropriation de la langue*] introduces the one who speaks into his speech. This is a constitutive datum of the enunciation. The presence of the speaker in his enunciation means that each instance of the discourse constitutes an internal center of reference. ("The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation," 1970/1974, p. 82, my trans.)

The reality to which the *I*—or the *you*—refers is therefore not *virtual and external*, as would be an Idea or a concept which could encompass all the *I*'s which have been expressed in the past, are expressed at any moment in the present and will be expressed in the future, but neither is it *external and actual*, as that of a singular individual would be. In other words, Benveniste dismisses, at least as for the *I* is concerned, both the Platonic-scholastic theory of individuation by form and matter, and the classical and objectivist theory of individuation by position in space-time, and replaces them with a historical and anthropological theory of subjectivation linked to the very exercise of language.

[Next chapter](#)