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# Émile Benveniste and the Rhuthmoi of Language - Part 4

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Linguistique et théorie du langage



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# Language as *Rhuthmic* Basis of a Radically Historical Anthropology

As we can see, Benveniste's answer to the question "in what sense is language in the nature of man?" was quite extraordinary. For him, language is *in the nature of man* because it sets the conditions for a *radically historical anthropology*, this expression having to be understood simultaneously in two complementary ways.

First, unlike that presupposed by liberal, Hegelian or soft hermeneutical theories, this anthropology is *radically historical*. In all cases analyzed so far, the activity of language is exercised and its anthropological and social correlates occur neither according to beneficial *a priori* conditions of possibility, nor as the generation of the positive through the negative, nor in a constructive back-and-forth movement between object and mind. It does not necessarily lead to progress.

But, on the other hand, contrary to neo-Heideggerian or neo-Nietzschean theories, this radical historicity still remains the basis for an *anthropology*, which is neither cripplingly limited by factual and traditional conditions of possibility, nor by totally heterogeneous and external power relations. It is true that language activity is not backed by abstract, dialectic and hermeneutic schemes, which are in fact only derived from it, but this activity is never entirely determined by its conditions either, whether in terms of Tradition flows or of Power wars, and remains always capable of introducing bifurcations and novelty, innovation and creation.

When it is observed for itself the activity of language appears as highly *paradoxical* which does not mean here contradictory but endowed with an *infinite potential*.

Like for Saussure as a matter of fact, for Benveniste linguistics singles out terms that are first separated and hierarchized. Language encompasses society and the *I* transcends the *you*. Therefore, there cannot be no synthetic surpassing of the two elements of the pairs considered. However, at the same time, although they are hierarchized, the poles of these pairs are always taken in their mutual production. Instead of similarly reifying language and all semiological systems that constitute society, like in the sociological *interlocking* relation, the linguistic relation of *interpretancy* makes it possible to observe them in their mutual generation. Likewise for subjectivity, while the point of view of social science reifies the individual or the social or both at the same time, the linguistic reversible relation of transcendence which links the *I* and the *you* allows us to grasp them through their simultaneous coproduction.

Among the various philosophical interpretations of language presented above, this schema could seem the closest with the hermeneutical circle which highlights, for its part, the back-and-forth movements between reader and text, scientist and object, philosopher and tradition. By introducing the idea of interaction, soft hermeneutics fares certainly better, as far as language is concerned, than previous theories, but she believes wrongly that the two poles considered have equal status and she finally reduces interaction to a mere circle. She does not take into consideration the *fundamentally paradoxical nature of language*, which for Benveniste, as for Saussure (see Michon, 2010, Chap. 5), is the key to its understanding.

Some linguists reproach Saussure for a propensity to emphasize paradoxes in the functioning of language. But language is actually the most paradoxical thing in the world, and unfortunate are those who do not see this. The further one goes, the more one feels this contrast between oneness as a category of our perception of objects and the pattern of duality which language imposes upon our thought. ("Saussure After Half a Century," 1963/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, pp. 41-42)

Note that it is, for Benveniste, this paradoxical nature of language that makes "the condition of man" "unique."

It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. [...] If we seek a parallel to this, we will not find it. The condition of man in language is unique. ("Subjectivity in Language," 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 260).

Moreover, soft hermeneutics still considers wrongly that the meaning unfolds as it were independently of the operation of language. She remains within the framework of the *énoncé* - statement, which is her main interpretation tool, and totally ignores the *énonciation* - enunciation. Instead, Benveniste places, as we will see, the center of language activity in the "formal apparatus of enunciation" and not in the unfolding of the meaning. Consequently, unlike Ricoeur's hermeneutics which associates subjectivity only with narrative (see Michon, 2010, Chap. 8), Benveniste's theory renders possible a deep linguistic anthropology of subjectivity more interested in philological and historical description of the specific configurations assumed by the interaction than in its general form.

Although Benveniste never mentioned explicitly any link between this peculiar conception of the activity of language and his previous study on the notion of rhythm before and after Plato, it is not hard to see now how they could be related. Indeed, whether in the case of the relations between language and society, or in that of the relations between society and individual, or, as we will see in the next chapter, in that of the functioning of the enunciation apparatus responsible for the emergence of subjectivity, we always deal with "form[s] in the instant that [they are] assumed by [something] moving, mobile, fluid" or, when we take duration into consideration, with "particular manner[s] of flowing." The moving configurations assumed in their complex interactions by society, individual and subjectivity, under the aegis of language, constitute genuine *rhuthmoi*, impermanent forms or even sometimes manners of flowing, assumed by a common and fundamental movement of production.

By reworking the notion of rhythm and unveiling that of *rhuthmos*, Benveniste laid certainly the foundation for the revolutionary *theory of language* which he developed from the end of the 1950s until the early 1970s, and thus provided us with powerful tools capable of going beyond most philosophical paradigms available in the 20th century, and of accounting for the *radical historicity of man*. For him, language provides a solid basis for anthropology, but not because it offers the transcendental conditions necessary for the development of human thought and action, nor of course because, on the contrary, language would in fact only be a simple means by which Being and Truth would express themselves without any consideration for Man, nor because it constitutes a dialectical medium combining transcendental and factual conditions by which Man would not only be rendered capable but also encouraged to develop his knowledge and to emancipate himself, neither because it provides a hermeneutical medium through which Man could painfully progress in his knowledge of the world and possibly expand his freedom, nor, finally, because it constitutes a very thin film unable to protect the human beings from the erratic play of natural and social forces roaming the world. Language is the natural foundation of anthropology because it is *radically historical* and *fully rhuthmic*.

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In his *Problems in General Linguistics*, Benveniste developed a unique conception of language.

1. By bringing to light the *semantic functioning of language*, left out by most previous models, Benveniste allowed us to free ourselves from *the dualism of semiotics* whether it is based on the traditional model of *the Sign* or on the more modern model of *la Langue*. Language cannot be comprehended from and within the semiotic framework in which a large part of philosophy remains caught, even today.

1.1 Philosophy, in her traditional, modern and dialectical versions, subscribes to the fundamentally negative definition of language implied by the concept of *sign* as representative of an absent thing. As medieval Scholastics once said, a sign is *aliquid stat pro aliquo* - something that stands for something else. Therefore, all thought is caught up in the oppositions between sign and referent, sign and idea, that is, in the oppositions between language and being, language and thought. Either language hides being and betrays thought, or language is transparent to the grasp of being by thought, or language is a defective medium through which thought is obliged to pass in order to find the being that she herself is.

1.2 In some of its more critical versions, as for example in Gadamer or in Derrida, philosophy criticizes the representationalism of the concept of sign and the difficulties that arise from it, but she remains linked to semiotics in another way. Of course, philosophy now emphasizes language, but she continues to reduce it to *la Langue*, whether as accumulated meaning treasure or as differential meaning structure. Therefore, she endorses the reduction from signification to signification, from enunciation and discourse to statement, from subjectivation to individualization. This de-anthropologization of language leads to a direct or indirect ontologization of time which makes the *radical* historicity of the subject in language appear only as an *essential* historicity that finally undermines any claim to become a subject. Even when hermeneutics tries to take discourse into account, as in Ricoeur, she only half-leaps and folds it back into rhetoric and narrative, while reducing its semantic and subjective aspects to a simple play between social identity and moral core, what Ricoeur calls *idem* and *ipse*.

2. According to Benveniste, the *universal* which constitutes the *semantic functioning of language* is in fact of a very peculiar type: it is *plainly anthropological-historical*.

2.1 Its concept does not fall within the *logical* categories which found the traditional philosophical rationality, because it combines general and particular, totality and part, series and element; nor within the *epistemological* categories, because it tightly associates subjectivation and the constitution of the space-time; nor within the *critical* categories, because it is both transcendent and immanent to subjectivity.

2.2 However, it does not fall under *dialectical* categories either, because if it associates time and forms instead of opposing them, this association does not entail a reflexive process of extracting a spiritual identity from the natural otherness in which she would be alienated. Nor can it be grasped by *soft hermeneutical* categories that are formally always similar, for it produces ever new forms.

2.3 Finally, it does not get lost in a *deconstruction* of any category in the name of the ontological difference between Being (*das Sein*) and beings (*das Seiende*), or in that of a hard hermeneutical difference between Meaning and meanings, or in that of pragmatic difference between natural or cosmic and anthropological forces, because all these perspectives rightly emphasize the nonsubstantial part of language but wrongly deny it its universality and capacity for developing knowledge and freedom. All of these kinds of deconstruction appear in fact as various forms of inconsistent denial, which cannot help but assume for themselves what they reject for others. Their followers love to write, for their own sake and the sake of the public, one is bound to assume, very long books, using all resources of language, to prove that language cannot help us to establish the truth nor to emancipate ourselves from the historical conditions in which we are embedded.

3. Thanks to his description of the *semantic activity* and his analysis of its *anthropological-historical status*, Benveniste allows us also to develop our critique of the *metric paradigm of rhythm* and elaborate further the *rhuthmic paradigm* we are looking for.

3.1 It has been observed many times that the metric concept of rhythm is related with the semiotic concept of sign (see previous volumes). They certainly share a Platonic ancestry which explains their common dualistic form. Just as the sign is opposed by semiotics to the idea and the thing it refers to and combined into increasingly larger lexical

and syntactical units, metrics opposes strong to weak beats and combine them into structures of larger and larger size.

3.2 More studies would be necessary to prove it in a fully satisfactory manner, but from what we already saw in previous research (on Gadamer and Ricoeur see Michon, 2010, and on Deleuze and Guattari see next volume), we can safely assume that the various deconstructions of the theory of sign and its dualism, whether they are based on *la Langue* or on the will to power, have not induced similar deconstructions of metrics. Some of them, like Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari, have glimpsed at the fact that the language flow is non-metrical but, probably for lack of suitable anthropology, they stopped short of proposing any positive theory of its *rhuthmic quality*. As we will see in the next volume, they have presumed a kind of flat and chaotic nature of language devoid of any depth and organization, de facto hindering subjectivity's development.

3.3 Instead, seen from semantics and enunciation theory, language appears as plainly *rhuthmic* and plainly *anthropological*. At the same time flowing and organized, totalized and differentiated, constant and made of discrete and ever new speech acts, it clearly takes impermanent forms and follows specific ways of flowing. However, this flow is never totally liquid or chaotic. Discourse is always endowed with a certain consistency based both on the interaction of the various elements it actualizes and on a general internal tension (for poetic examples of this phenomenon, see Vol. 2, Chap. 8 on Baudelaire, Hopkins and Mallarmé). As we will see now, this *rhuthmic* consistency is essential to the construction of subjectivity.

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