Émile Benveniste and the *Rhuthmoi* of Subjectivity – Part 2

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The Emergence of the Subject in the Operation of the Enunciation Apparatus

Now, the *I* does not function alone. It is part of a larger linguistic system based on speech, which Benveniste describes meticulously and calls "the formal apparatus of enunciation" (1970/1974, p. 79-88).

First, the *I* belongs to a twofold distinctive system which installs the subject in his social interaction but also establishes the referential use of language. On the one hand, the speaking person is differentiated from other humans by the system of pronouns which opposes *"ego"* to *"you"* or, as Benveniste says now, *"I"* to *"you."*

> It is first of all the emergence of the person indices (the relation *I-you* [je-tu]) which occurs only in and by the enunciation: the term *I* [je] denoting the individual who performs the enunciation, the term *you* [tu], the individual who is present there as addressee *[allocutaire]*. ("The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation," 1970/1974, p. 82, my trans.)

However, this system also has the more unexpected role of allowing the differentiation of "ego" with respect to the world through the opposition of the couple "ego/you" to "him." Far, therefore, from the I defining itself in a process of reference which would allow him to exist simply by opposing the world, as in the Cartesian tradition, it is the linguistic pronominal system, to which it belongs, and naturally the activity of speech, which create the conditions for referential practice.

> Language provides the linguistic instrument which ensures the dual functioning, subjective and referential, of discourse: it is the essential distinction, always present in any language, in any society or in any time, between the ego and the non-ego *[entre le moi et le non-moi],* operated by special indices which are constant in the language and which are used only for this use, the forms called in grammar the pronouns, which carry out a double opposition, the opposition of "ego" to "you" *[du "moi" à "toi"]* and the opposition of the system "ego/you" to "him." *[du système*

> *“moi/toi” à “lui”].* (“Structure of Language and Structure of Society,” 1968/1974, p. 99, my trans.)

At the same time, this pronominal system, the very first foundation of subjectivation, is extended by a set of indicators which, far from relating to the existing physical space-time—whose existence naturally is not denied by Benveniste—establish spatiality and temporality for the speaker by taking their own enunciation as a central reference point.

Concerning spatiality, these indicators are the deictics “here/there,” especially the demonstratives “this/that,” “this one/that one,” “these/ those,” etc., which allow to locate “any object in any field, once the one who orders it has designated himself as the center and reference point.”

> The personal pronoun is not the only form of this nature. A few other indicators share the same situation, notably the series of deictics. Showing the objects, the demonstratives order the space from a central point, which is Ego *[Ego]*, according to variable categories: the object is near or far from me or from you, it is thus oriented (in front of or behind me, up or down), visible or invisible, known or unknown, etc. The system of spatial coordinates thus lends itself to locating any object in any field, once the one who orders it has designated himself as the center and reference point. (“Language and Human Experience,” 1965/1974, p. 69, my trans.)
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> Of the same nature and relating to the same structure of enunciation are the numerous indices of ostension (type *this, here*, etc.), terms which imply a gesture designating the object at the same time as the instance of the term is pronounced. (“The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation,” 1970/1974, p. 82, my trans.)

As for temporality, these indicators are adverbs such as “now,” “later,” etc., and the “verbal tenses” mobilized in the speech instance. According to Benveniste, it is indeed “through language that the human experience of time is manifested.” Unlike “physical” time (the time of the cosmos) or “chronic” time (the social convention established by the calendar), “the human experience of time” manifests itself “through language,” that is to say, through “the exercise of speech.” And the temporality linked to the exercise of language has the particularity, like its spatiality, of being centered on the “instance of speech.” The present which “coincides with the moment of enunciation” constitutes “its center—a generative and axial center together.”

> It is through language *[par la langue]* that the human experience of time manifests itself, and linguistic time also appears to us irreducible to chronic time and physical time. What is unique about linguistic time is that it is organically linked to the exercise of speech, that it is defined and ordered as a function of speech. This time has its center—a generative and axial center together—in the *present* of the speech instance *[l’instance de parole]*. Whenever a speaker uses the grammatical form of “present” (or its equivalent), he situates the event as contemporary in the instance of the discourse *[l’instance du discours]* that mentions it. (“Language and Human Experience,” 1965/1974, p. 73, my trans.)
>
> A third series of terms pertaining to the enunciation consists of the entire—often vast and

> complex—paradigm of temporal forms, which are determined in relation to the EGO, the center of the enunciation. Verbal "tenses," the axial form of which, the "present," coincides with the moment of enunciation, are part of this necessary apparatus. ("The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation," 1970/1974, p. 83, my trans.)

In 1970, Benveniste listed the three main anthropological consequences of the appropriation and operation of the enunciation apparatus by the speaker: express[ing] "his position as speaker," "implant[ing] *the other* in front of him," and "express[ing] a certain relationship to the world."

> As an individual realization, enunciation can be defined, in relation to language *[la langue]*, as a process of *appropriation*. The speaker appropriates the formal apparatus of the language *[l'appareil formel de la langue]* and he expresses his position as speaker through specific indices on the one hand, and by means of ancillary procedures on the other. But immediately, as soon as he declares himself a speaker and assumes the language *[la langue]*, he implants *the other* in front of him, regardless of the degree of presence he attributes to this other. Any statement, whether explicit or implicit, is an address, it postulates an addressee *[un allocutaire]*. Finally, in the enunciation, language *[la langue]* is used to express a certain relationship to the world. […] The reference is an integral part of the enunciation. ("The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation," 1970/1974, p. 82, my trans.)

To conclude on this point, what Benveniste calls the "ego," that is the general form of human subjectivity "that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness" is both diffracted into and produced by the use of a series of various linguistic forms. First, it relies on the use of the pronoun *I* (or verbal forms when the pronoun is omitted) which simultaneously actualizes and polarizes, each time it is uttered, an apparently simple but actually complex pronominal system organized according to two nested interactive couples (ego/you and ego-you/him). Every time it is actualized, this system concurrently makes the ego emerge and allows the referential process, which traditionally was supposed to reflect the distance separating the subject from the world. Second, the actual use of a series of linguistic indicators, such as the deictics and the verbal tenses, especially present time, allows the subject each time to both locate himself in space and time, and to render any other kind of space and time (physical but also metric and chronic) possible. Naturally, all these characteristics are shared by all human beings. Provided they speak the same language, the access to expressing oneself, implanting the other in front of oneself and expressing a relationship to the world, is available in turn to any of the co-speakers.

As a result, most of the fundamental views of natural science as well as social science and humanities are put into question. The opposition between ego and world, that between ego and society, and those between present and past, as well as between present and future, are taken back to linguistic oppositions organizing the activity of discourse.

The Mobility and Discontinuity of the Subject in the Flow of Language

Benveniste is aware of the strangeness of the conclusions he reaches and of the difficulty he will

encounter in getting them to be accepted, so little is known about the language.

The subject has first, for Benveniste, a very particular characteristic. It is neither a pure product of social and cultural relations as sociologists and many 20th century philosophers would have it, nor a pole of psychological identity which would be the basis of all exchange processes, as psychologist and more ancient philosophers claim, but a condition for both social interactions and psychological identity which implies a tension maintained between them.

As we have seen, it relies both on the existence, in all human languages, of a set of vacant places available for communication and on the actualization of these places achieved through the communication performance. All terms like *I*, *you*, the deictics, the present tense and all the forms which are linked to them, are "'empty' signs, that are nonreferential with respect to 'reality,'" but that are "always available and become 'full' as soon as a speaker assumes them in every instance of his speech." This paradoxical characteristic has, notes Benveniste, a fundamental function: it serves to solve the problem of "intersubjective communication."

> The importance of their function will be measured by the nature of the problem they serve to solve, which is none other than that of intersubjective communication. Language has solved this problem by creating an ensemble of "empty" signs that are nonreferential with respect to "reality." These signs are always available and become "full" as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse. ("The Nature of Pronouns," 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 254)

Indeed, if the *I* would be permanently filled with the idiosyncrasy of each speaker, "there would be as many languages as individuals and communication would become absolutely impossible."

> If each speaker, in order to express the feeling he has of his irreducible subjectivity, made use of a distinct "identifying signal" *[un indicatif]* (in the sense in which each radio transmitting station has its own "call letters" *[son indicatif propre]*), there would be as many languages as individuals and communication would become absolutely impossible. Language wards off this danger by instituting a unique but mobile sign, *I,* which can be assumed by each speaker on the condition that he refers each time only to the instance of his own discourse. ("The Nature of Pronouns," 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 254)

Another example of this phenomenon is the functioning of reference. Since the speaker posits himself as center in his referring to the world, this could result in a kind referential war, each speaker setting his own center and refusing others'. But "the pragmatic consensus" which "makes each speaker a co-speaker" explains that the others actually "co-refer identically."

> The very condition of this mobilization and appropriation of the language *[la langue]* is, for the speaker, the need to refer through discourse, and, for the other, the possibility of co-referring identically, in the pragmatic consensus which makes each speaker a co-speaker. ("The Formal

> Apparatus of Enunciation," 1970/1974, p. 82, my trans.)

Finally, the same kind of paradoxical experience occurs with the present tense. On the one hand, "the specific instance from which the present results is each time new," which could seem to result in making it "impossible to transmit."

> The act of speech is necessarily individual; the specific instance from which the present results is each time new. Consequently, linguistic temporality should be realized in the intrapersonal universe of the speaker as an experience that is irremediably subjective and impossible to transmit. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 76, my trans.)

But here too the functioning of language transcends the logical impossibility. In actual linguistic communication, my temporality "is immediately accepted as his own by my interlocutor."

> Something singular, very simple and infinitely important occurs which accomplishes what seemed logically impossible: the temporality which is mine when it orders my speech is immediately accepted as his own by my interlocutor. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 76, my trans.)

Strikingly, Benveniste concludes here his reflection by using the same metaphor as ten years before. "Both are thus tuned to the same wavelength."

> Both are thus tuned to the same wavelength. The time of discourse is neither reduced to the divisions of chronic time nor locked in a solipsistic subjectivity. It functions as an intersubjectivity factor, which, unipersonal as it should be, makes it omnipersonal. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 77, my trans.)

Thus, the subject has no part in the sociological and psychological oscillations between individual and society, ego and others. Thanks to its implantation in the activity of language, it can be at the same time—and without any difficulty—personal and "omnipersonal."

The second conclusion reached by Benveniste concerns the non-identity of the subject to himself. Subjectivity is according to Benveniste entirely dependent on language. But here we end up with another paradox. Language is, in fact, what allows the subject to "emerge," but it is also the *I* which conversely allows each speaker to *"appropriate for himself"* the language. On the one hand, says Benveniste:

> Language is accordingly the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of

> subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 263)

However, on the other hand—and in the same movement of thought—he also writes:

> Language *[Le langage]* is so organized that it permits each speaker to *appropriate [for/to] himself* an entire language *[*s’approprier *la langue entière]* by designating himself as *I*. […] In some way language puts forth “empty” forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates [for] himself and which he relates to his “person,” at the same time defining himself as *I* and a partner as *you*. The instance of discourse is thus constitutive of all the coordinates that define the subject and of which we have briefly pointed out only the most obvious. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, pp. 262-263, my mod.)

But then a question arises. What about this speaker “appropriat[ing] for/to himself the language” and “designating himself as *I*.” Isn’t there a circle difficult to explain? Is he already a subject before he becomes *I*? We seem to be getting into an insurmountable difficulty.

In fact, the problem evaporates when we realize that we must not think of the speaker in a position of anteriority or posteriority in relation to language. As we have seen, in Benveniste’s eyes we only have to deal with the “speaking man,” that is to say, not only man as *able to* speak but also man *while he is* “actually speaking to another man.”

> We can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it. We shall never get back to man reduced to himself and exercising his wits to conceive of the existence of another. It is a speaking man whom we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man. (“Subjectivity in Language,” 1958/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 259)

Thus the subjectivation process is absolutely indivisible and not reducible to “moments,” even if Benveniste distinguishes in his first papers what he calls “the person” of the speaker (his body, his emotions mainly) from “the subject” he becomes in his act of speech. The difficulty arises from our habit of thought which opposes doing and being, present and past or future, here and elsewhere. But, with regard to subjectivity in language, these pairs do not hold, because among the two elements that compose them, only the first is in fact determining. The subject is always already an *I-here-now* which establishes the marks themselves in the name of which we can oppose ourselves to the world and order space and time. The linguistic subject, being the condition of possibility of the reference and of the ordering of space-time, is not therefore susceptible of an analysis based on the conditions relating to these.

It is true, on the other hand, that this implies thinking of the subject as made up of *discrete instances*. Indeed, if *I* or *you*, or the deictics and the present tense, have no external reference to the utterance that gives them a certain stability, they are entirely and immediately dependent on the successive instances of discourse in which they appear. And Benveniste does not shy away from this

consequence.

> *I* signifies "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*." This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing *I,* uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which *I* could be imputed to another. ("The Nature of Pronouns," 1956/1966, trans. M. E. Meek, 1971, p. 252)

Ten years later, he also notes that as soon as one human being pronounces the empty terms that the "formal enunciation apparatus" provides him with, he becomes, "each time, a new person."

> As soon as the pronoun *I* [je] appears in a statement where it evokes—explicitly or not—the pronoun *you* [tu] to be opposed together to *he* [il], a human experience is established anew and reveals the linguistic instrument which founds it […]. As soon as one of the human beings pronounces them, he assumes them, and the pronoun *I* [je], part of a paradigm, is transmuted into a unique designation and produces, each time, a new person. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 68, my trans.)

Thus subjectivity seems to lose all permanent substance and to transform itself into discrete acts of discourse from which it "receives its reality."

> Outside of actual discourse, the pronoun is only an empty form, which cannot be attached to either an object or a concept. It receives its reality and its substance from discourse alone. ("Language and Human Experience," 1965/1974, p. 68, my trans.)

But this is precisely this non-substantial and non-unitary aspect of the subject that allows it to function and makes possible the integration in human society of the individuals who mobilize it in turn one after the other.

By extending the fundamental dynamic orientation of Saussure's theory of language—who has been wrongly portrayed by too many of his followers as a prestructuralist before naturally becoming the scarecrow of poststructuralists (Michon, 2010, Chap. 5)—Benveniste thus developed a radically new theory of the subject. Insofar as language is at the same time *the interpreter of society* and *the site of the subjectivation* of any speaker, the subject appears to be completely independent of the individual—whether the latter be, in fact, considered as a producer or as a product of society. Seen from language, the subject is neither a pole of psychological identity, nor the result of social subjugation. By actualizing the empty forms of language, the speaker simultaneously accesses the personal and the omnipersonal levels. The subject leaves behind the traditional opposition between psychological and sociological categories and, by a logical tour de force, as remarkable as it is banal, ensures the speaker the possibility of expressing his irreducible specificity, while being nevertheless understood by his interlocutors. It thus founds both the subjectivity of the person and the intersubjectivity which is at the basis of society itself. Of course, this paradoxical role has a price:

the non-identity of the subject to itself.

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