

LANGUAGE AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE OUTLOOK ON THE WORLD. ROMANIAN CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE FIELD OF LINGVISTIC RELATIVISM

Grigore GEORGIU

College of Communication and Public Relations, The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *The current study questions again the well known theses of linguistic and cultural relativism, starting from the conceptions and applied analyses of Romanian thinkers who initiated systematic researches in this field. Given to specific historical conditions, the reflection on language took a privileged place in the movement of ideas which led to the formation of national conscience and modern Romanian culture. Romanian thinkers saw language as a pivot of national identity and an expression of a particular outlook on the world. In the current study we have analyzed the ideas and approaches of Romanian thinkers who passionately researched the philosophical meanings coded in the words and expressive forms of our language*

Keywords: *language, linguistic relativism, cultural differences, cultural model, intercultural communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

A fundamental theme of philosophical thinking, formulated ever since the early reflections and attempts to rationally explain the world, the relation between unity and diversity, seen as two constitutive and complementary attributes of any forms of existence. This relation pervades all the registers of existence, either in nature or in society, from the atomic structure to the amazing variety of the living world and of human lifestyles. Human thinking has been always engaged in the search of a unitary principle, likely to put in order and make intelligible the kaleidoscopic diversity of the world. Deciphering the way in which the unitary and the diverse aspects intertwine within the configurations of nature and also within the fabric of human symbolic creations have always been a great challenge for the philosophical and scientific mind.

Modern theoretical subject matters have shown a special interest in the manifestations of the unity / diversity relationship in the sphere of thinking and cultural creation. An American anthropologist believed that man experienced cultural differences the moment when he noticed „the contrasts between the habits of his own society and the habits of the society he happened to come into contact” (Linton, 1968:72). Therefore, the awareness of the differences among cultures is the outcome of the interactions among societies that

have been multiplied in the modern era. At first, fueled by rationalistic and Enlightened assumptions, anthropological researches sought to determine the universal features of human condition, but, at the same time, they discovered the variety of languages, of lifestyles and cultural practices. In an attempt to explain the genesis and existence of cultural diversities, theorists have invoked historical, geographical, biological, social or psychological factors. On this ground clashed various schools of thought and explanatory models, from the evolutionary and neo-evolutionary to the functionalist, structuralist, culturalist and relativist ones. The equation of the factors likely to explain the differences among cultures should also include *language*, as the main means through which man encodes his knowledge of the world and through which the interpersonal communication takes place.

Linguistic relativism, which emerged in response to mono-linear evolutionism, confers to language the role of primary differentiating factor, and considers that language structures shape up in an unconscious way the sensitivity and spirituality of a people. Language is the indicator of human condition, the bond of social existence, but it is also the factor that confers identity to ethnic groups and nations. In this paper, I will briefly refer to several principles of linguistic relativism and the role played by language in the symbolic construction of national identity. In the second

part, I will try to explain why the language issue has taken such an important place on the agenda of modern Romanian thinking. Finally, I will also discuss about the outlook on language embraced by major Romanian thinkers, who tried to „extract” a specific vision of the world by analyzing certain elements characteristic to Romanian language. Their demarche is part of the relativist-type approaches, and, as we shall see, they shed light on certain features of the Romanian spirit, through a complex hermeneutical analysis, trying to decipher connotative meanings that were „buried” in the intimate fabric of the Romanian language.

2. THE PLURALITY OF LANGUAGES: AN ENIGMA?

George Steiner believes that these days „between four and five thousand languages are currently spoken” all over the world” (to which we should add a number almost as high of extinct languages), and this strange linguistic pluralism raises questions of an extreme socio-historical and philosophical difficulty. Therefore, paraphrasing the idea of Levi-Strauss, author of the work *After Babel*, we are facing an enigma and an „anomaly” because humankind’s linguistic and cultural diversity would be „the supreme mystery” that anthropology and philosophical thought should decipher. (Steiner, 1983:79-80).

Indeed, the questions about the amazing diversity of languages put us in an uncomfortable situation, because we have no reliable explanations and answers, only vague hypotheses and theoretical speculations. Is the plurality of languages mirrored (reflected) in the plurality of cultures? Can we say that there are as many cultures as many languages are spoken around the world? Has the impressive diversity of languages a corollary in the diversity of cultures? By resorting to the theory of the multitude, can we postulate a correlation between the multitude of languages and the multitude of cultures? Can we regard cultures as symbolic edifices built up on the support or around languages? Is language a kind of *axis mundi* that organizes the universe of meanings and values specific to a culture? The tendency to answer in the affirmative to these questions is natural, if we accept the thesis of relativism that a language contains a particular way of describing and understanding reality, a set of meanings shared by the community of those who speak it. Languages encode within their specific structures a latent vision on the world, thus being „a main

support of cultures and human groups’ identity.” (Malita, 1998: 220).

It is still hard to accept that any language, whatever its qualities, its degree of lexical and syntactic complexity and whatever its spread, would give birth to a specific cultures, with consistent, well individualized achievements. Of course, any language represents a particular expression of the human condition and has absolute existential legitimacy, being at least a promise of culture. For example, Maiorescu captures this dialectics between the specific and the universal, by referring to the power of literature to express, within the pattern of a particular language, situations, experiences and attitudes that can have relevant meanings also for people who speak other languages, who live in other times and in other cultures.

An individuality of a people has its absolute value and as soon as it is expressed in the powerful form of beauty, it encounters a resounding echo of love in the humankind, as an integral part of it. (Maiorescu 1984:19-20).

Nevertheless, the path from the real to the possible is interspersed with countless factors, from those pertaining to natural, geographical and demographic data, to historical, social contexts or of any other kind. Therefore, relative hierarchies, differences of power and opportunities are at work within the linguistic atlas. There are different cultures using the same language, with certain particularities. Linguistic kinship between two different cultures is a strong factor of closeness and convergence. Some languages are spoken by millions of people, have monumental achievements, lasting works of literature and science, already part of the world heritage, while other languages are spoken only by some hundred people, in small, local, isolated communities. Their cultural, cognitive and expressive potential is obviously different.

Trying to explain the impressive plurality of languages, without losing sight of the fundamental unity of human species, is today, as well, an extremely difficult exam for social and philosophical thinking. There are few references to this type of analyzing the opposites. Because they do not have any rational explanations, the questions on language diversity stimulate our imagination and metaphysical reflection. „Why should human beings speak thousands of different and mutually incomprehensible languages” (Steiner, 1983:220), given the fact that all

individuals belonging to the *homo sapiens* species have so many elements in common: genetic structure, anatomical conformation, neural - physiological features, plus a set of universal needs, similar to all people regardless of their social status. The quoted author argues that although, at first sight, it looks like some „oddity”, linguistic pluralism is an objective historical fact and, irrespective of mythological explanations or otherwise, it should be seen as an ontological, insurmountable datum. The myth of Babel Tower is a macro metaphor that helps us build narratives and meanings in order to decipher an enigma that defies human logic and experience. Not even Darwin's schemas cannot satisfactorily explain why some languages have survived while others have vanished. The adaptability criterion is not applicable to language.

We have no criteria to support that a language is intrinsically superior to another, that it survives because it is more effectively adapted to the requirements for sensitivity and to physical existence. (Steiner, 1983:84).

3. DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, DIFFERENT WORLDS

The relativistic concepts of culture were established as a response to the 19th c. mono-linear evolutionism, which interpreted cultural differences only as „stages” of a single development, as „historical gaps” in relation with the Western model, considered to be exemplary and canonical. The principles of cultural relativism were established as a result of ethnographic researches and comparative studies initiated in the first half of the 20th c. by the founders of American cultural anthropology, Franz Boas (1858-1942), Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) and Edward Sapir (1884-1939). Cultural relativism starts from the hypothesis that there is not a cultural pattern that can be considered universal. Every culture must be understood in relation to its specific data and contexts, to the lifestyles it expresses and supports. For Sapir, the meanings of the concept of culture refer to a „set of attitudes, outlooks on the world and specific features of civilization that confer to a certain people its original place in the world” (1967: 329).

Finally, relativism developed the idea that the historical process would embrace a plurality of evolution lines, refusing the evaluations that establish conjectural hierarchies among cultures. Relating the particular cultural models to the

history of communities that produced them, we come to understand them as „moments of a specific sequence”, of a particular history, thus canceling the assumption that we can discover a single lineage in human evolution (Sapir 1967: 210). The approaches on language bring face to face the universalistic and the relativistic conceptions, as two major paradigms in-between we find numerous intermediate positions. The universalistic paradigm is illustrated, for instance, by Noam Chomsky's conception, which involves a universal language *competence* of human beings, but which is updated in different variants and *performances*. George Steiner was a valuable guide through the labyrinth of theories on language. He argues that linguistic relativism has been gradually built up starting from the „lineage” of Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, passing through the anthropology of Franz Boas and reaching an explicit formulation in the works of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Worf. However, there are many thinkers who foreshadowed the principles of linguistic relativity, such as Vico (with the idea that language peculiarities generate and reflect different visions on the world) and Leibniz, where we find the idea that

language is not the vehicle of thought, but its determining environment. Thinking is language internalized, and we think and feel as our distinct language urges and allows us to do. (Steiner, 1983:107).

Among the forerunners, Wilhelm von Humboldt is the most towering personality. He inspiredly formulated the idea that language peculiarities and cultural structures of a nation show similarities and conditioning relationships. In disagreement with certain Kantian theses, of great authority at that time, Humboldt launched, in Herder's footsteps, the hypothesis that language shapes up thinking and human sensitivity, that there is a „consonance between the *Weltanschauung* of a specific language and the history and culture of those who speak it” (Steiner, 1983:115). The idea that language is like a „filter” that organizes the ways we perceive and interpret reality will be developed and argued by Sapir in his studies. We unconsciously project the categories of a language, its default schemas in the field of experience and thus we put order into the world picture. Like languages, „human culture is endowed with an extraordinary suppleness” (Sapir 1967:145), and the diversity of cultures can be understood by analyzing the expressive

relationships between the peoples' linguistic patterns, their ways of thinking and their basic attitudes towards the world. Sapir's ideas, summarized by Steiner, tell us that "the real world" we live in is largely a symbolic construction, built unconsciously upon our linguistic habits, that „the world in which different societies live are distinct worlds" because they speak different languages, that we are „the prisoners" of the language we speak (1983:122). A more radical version of linguistic relativism, and more thoroughly substantiated, on the basis of concrete anthropological researches, was developed by B.L. Whorf who would deserve, according to Steiner, much more interest, and from which we grasp the idea that language maps out the territory of experience and „we dissect nature along the lines drawn by our mother tongue" (1983: 123).

Relativism has thus become a proper conceptual framework for the study of contemporary processes, given the fact that in the globalization context, cultures interact in an intensive way, and the differences among them have become ever more visible. More and more people with different linguistic and cultural equipments inevitably meet and interact, both in the field of practical experiences, and also in the virtual space, built on the support of new communication technologies. In the mosaic-like world of today, which unfolds as a „multicultural bazaar" (Bauman, 2004:115), when we witness the expansion of identity conflicts, having predominantly cultural motivations (be them religious, ethnic, linguistic), the theme of cultural diversity is back on the agenda of social and political thinking. The relativist perspective is necessary because it encourages the tolerance and understanding stands towards different lifestyles. Removing any intolerant attitudes, resizing the relationship between „we and the others" and non - conflictually managing cultural differences are seen to be priority goals. Indeed, this goal we have mentioned sums up the most difficult task of the world today. In a globalized world, it is important for individuals and for societies to learn „to manage diversity more effectively - for this ultimately is the major challenge: *managing cultural diversity*" (UNESCO, 2010:5).

4. THE LANGUAGE ISSUE IN MODERN ROMANIAN CULTURE

In all the approaches regarding the Romanians' national identity, developed either by Romanian

thinkers or by foreign researchers, language takes a prominent place. The reason for this comes from the individuality of the Romanian language and from its singular position in Eastern European geography. Being a language of Latin origin, the Romanian language is strikingly different from the languages around it, which are mainly of Slavic origin or of a non-European nature, such as Hungarian and Turkish. The reflection on language and the growing idea that Romanians speak a language of Western origin, and not of Eastern descent, took a privileged place in the movements of ideas that led to the formation of our national consciousness. Nicolae Olahus is the first Romanian scholar who explicitly stated with solid arguments the Latin origin of the Romanian language and people, in a work written in Latin in 1536. Let us also remember that Olahus was a scholar of European renown, a friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was appointed to high dignities in the Roman Catholic Church, which enabled him to disseminate these ideas in the milieu of Western scholarly culture.

The idea of the Latin origin of the Romanian language grew stronger and stronger as a mark of our national identity, also through the encyclopedic work of Dimitrie Cantemir and the many-sided activity of the scholars who formed the Transylvanian School in the 18th c. A historian and linguist of genius, Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, developed the theory of the „circulation of words", according to which after the value of any linguistic forms is directly proportional to the frequency of its use in the living language of a national community. An encyclopedic personality, a polyglot, with an impressive cultural horizon, Hasdeu foreshadowed the relativistic outlook, on the grounds that language has the capacity to reflect in a holographic way the entirety of social life, all the manifestations that define the lifestyle of a people. „There is nothing more social than language, the strongest knot, if not the foundation of society" (Hasdeu, 1984:8). Hasdeu was animated by the conviction that „every comma in human history has a deep meaning" and that „two - three words in one language can restore a long and obscure phase in national history" (Hasdeu, 1984: 604).

It would be unfair not to mention also Eminescu's ideas on language, summed up in aphoristic formulas, but which have surprisingly current resonances. He believed that the language is „the measure of the civilization of a people", the most profound indicator of its spirituality and identity. Language is the expression of thought and

feeling alike, and therefore, „in his language alone, a man can fully understand his heart” (Eminescu, 1970:127). Another idea voiced by Eminescu, which is to be found in the current theories on language, is contained in the following statement: „We are not the masters of language, instead language is our master” (Mss. 2257). Situated on a „watershed land” between the East and the West, as Blaga would say, the Romanians were receptive to the idea of cultural differences and produced theories and explanatory models in line with the principle of relativism. We note in this context several significant ideas and approaches developed by the Romanian thinkers.

5. RELATIVISTIC APPROACHES DEVELOPED BY ROMANIAN THINKERS

„In every language there is an implicit metaphysics” (Blaga 1977: 180), this is a statement consistent with the theories of linguistic and mental relativism. Lucian Blaga developed a theory of culture in order to explain both the universal and the specific dimension of culture. The symbolic dimension is a universal one, but it is always made manifest in particular stylistic forms, within a „stylistic field” shaped by factors which belong to the collective unconscious of an epoch, society and national community. Linguistic pluralism has also a metaphysical significance, in the sense that all languages and cultures endeavor, with a relative success, to reveal the mystery of the world, a fact which entitles them to exist in their specific forms. A language theorist argues that „national languages should be seen as styles, if we want to rightfully judge their specific character” (Vossler 1972:7). Cultural creations have intrinsically a stylistic seal, they differ and are singled out by a set of stylistic features.

According to Blaga’s theory, the concept of style does not refer only to the formal aspects of the work, instead it aims at content elements, such as spatial and temporal representations, the preference for certain values and certain attitudes toward existence. These various factors form a unitary *stylistic matrix*, which is imprinted into the collective unconscious of all creations within the perimeter of a culture. Interpreting the metaphysical significance of the diversity of human creative forms (languages, styles, outlooks, religions, cultures), Blaga writes that it grants „a meaning, a significance to the very *relativity* of human products and creations. The style cannot be absolute.” (1969:374). Moreover, since all styles

are relative, we cannot conceive of any “superiority of one over another” and the author’s conclusion is that: „From a metaphysical angle, styles are equivalent” (377-378). Obviously, from a metaphysical angle, we can also talk of the „equivalence of cultures”, an idea that Blaga developed in a different theoretical context.

Another author who also directed his research along this line was Mircea Vulc nescu (1904-1952). In his work *The Romanian Dimension of Existence* (1943), Vulc nescu applied to Romanian language a phenomenological and hermeneutical, in an attempt to determine how we understand the world, the fundamental attitudes towards existence and the specific configuration of Romanian spirituality. The methodological value of Vulc nescu’s work and the novelty of his perspective reside in the fact that, in order to decipher and interpret the specific profile of the Romanian spirit, he analyzes the language structures that „preexist the thinkers’ activity” and steer, in a vague and unconscious way, their insight into the world and the lines of thought. Vulc nescu writes that „the material” he will investigate is given by

the configuration of the language and the structure of the expressive symbols with a general circulation in the Romanian people, in other words, the thinking moulds that the words are shaped up (1996:165).

Based on these analyzes of great finesse and depth, Vulc nescu underlined that in Romanian many philosophical categories acquired relatively different meanings from those specific to the Western thinking. It refers to the ideas of existence, essence, space and time, to the specific meanings of the expressions about disjunction and negation, to the relation between real and possible, between necessity and chance. Extremely interesting is the author’s thesis that „at the root of the Romanian conception about the being we find a supremacy of the virtual over the actual” (1996:188), a feature that may be related to the frequency of the verbal forms through which one can speculate on the possible (“what would have been if ...?”).

Constantin Noica (1909-1987) will continue the hermeneutic effort begun by Vulc nescu and will develop a relativistic conception with a solid philosophical foundation. He tried to „extract” from the acknowledged expressions of the Romanian language (some untranslatable) a specific vision of the world. In his conception,

language fulfills a holographic function, since it is „the part” that reflects „the whole”. Noica’s work devoted to this theme opens up with a paradoxical statement: „Only through the words of your tongue can you remember things you have never learned.” (1970: 5). How can we interpret this statement? There are representations, images and meanings that we, as individuals, may not have learned in an explicit way, but learning the language, we implicitly took over the dowry of meanings „stored” in the language. As native users of that language we unknowingly benefit from the thesaurus of meanings that were accumulated in the words and phrases by means of which we call things, facts, events.

By his demarche, Noica endeavors to „unearth” from the language a latent philosophical vision, embarking on an *archeology of meanings* that are “buried” and often „forgotten” in expressions that belong to the archaic and popular treasure-store of Romanian language. To this end, he analyzes the meanings of specific words in the Romanian language, such as: being, disposition, onto, the self, meaning, utterance, creation, embodiment, partying, longing. Some words are roughly equivalent in other languages, but no translations can convey the full semantic weight these words are conveying to a native speaker of Romanian.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the vast field of the conceptions on language, two paradigms are colliding, the universalistic and the relativist ones. In-between, we find numerous intermediate positions. The paradigm of linguistic relativism, anticipated in the German thinking by Herder and Humboldt, postulates in-depth correlations between the characteristics of a language, the ways of thinking and the world of experience. The assumption of relativism is that thinking is predetermined and foreshadowed by the language we speak.

The relativistic outlook was formulated by the American anthropology in the interwar period and is known as the „Sapri-Worf hypothesis”, after two anthropologists who established the theses that each language is differently mapping out the territory of experience, depending on its specific grammatical patterns, that the speakers of different languages live in „different worlds”. Romanian

Culture, located at the crossroads of multiple influences, favored and produced theories and explanatory models fitting into the horizon of relativism. The Romanian thinkers were receptive to the idea of cultural differences and, as the Romanian language is structurally different from the languages of the neighboring peoples, our national identity was organically linked to language. Lucian Blaga found a synthetic formulation for the principle of relativism: „In any language, there is an implicit metaphysics”

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