

Language, Signs and the Direction of Time(s)

1. Can a problem be solved not by simplifying, but, on the contrary, by moving it to a different, more complicated and, some say, more obscure level? Apparently, my question is rhetorical and its answer would normally have to be 'no'. But *Energeia*'s quite original initiative was not to publish a set of already-finished scientific texts, but rather to start a debate.

So my goal, at least for the time being, is not to state a position regarding language and causality, but to raise a few questions – the nature of which is not specifically linguistic, but rather epistemological (if not even philosophical). My starting point will be Coseriu. However, I will refer not only to his text, rightfully recommended by *Energeia*, *Linguistic Change Does Not Exist*, but also to another Coserian study of the same year, 1988 – *Tempo e linguaggio*.

Since this text is only supposed to open a discussion, and not to state a final position, I will not provide a fully-developed bibliography (with specified edition, page of quotation etc.); only the 'general', almost always famous, titles and authors will be mentioned in a chronological, but not very formal list at the end.

2. Causality and time

We have to admit that (for more 'philosophical'¹ or for simply 'intuitive' reasons, I'm not sure which) we tend to correlate the four Aristotelian causes with four major dimensions of time:

- the efficient cause, with the past (yes, the fire can coexist with the increasing heat in the room, but still the heating begins 'after' the fire was lit)
- the material cause, with the present (to be more exact, with co-presence; when there is no more wood or no oxygen left in the room, the fire will cease)
- the final cause, with the future (the initial lighting of the fire is done 'because' I, who live in this room, am cold and think about getting warmer)
- the formal cause, with 'eternity' – which, in its turn, may be conceived **a)** in the sense of a Platonist Idea pertaining to an incorruptible, but also intangible world, or **b)** in the more phenomenological (the word that we would use today), Aristotelian sense of a shape or principle which, while being incarnated in the individual thing, still remains identical to itself (for instance, there is an ideal, best possible shape of a fireplace and if I manage to build a device accordingly to this form, my home will be as warm as one can get).

Now, it seems that our current (and I may add: positivist) idea of a 'deterministic' cause is in fact a mixture between the first two above-mentioned causes - and this turns our whole discussion, inherently, into one about the direction (and perhaps the nature) of time.

¹ Of course, the canonical text-of-origin for all these ideas is Aristotle's *Physics*.

3. Kant about nature and liberty

What is, in fact, a deterministic cause? It is a measurable (provable) physical fact which *precedes* another, the later being its necessary consequence. Of course, one particular cause may not be sufficient to solely determine its effect – a case in which we have to discuss about an ensemble of causes. But what we mustn't forget is that this entire conception should be referred to the Kantian world of nature, in which, according to the German philosopher, there is absolutely no place for liberty. So, in strict epistemological terms, searching for the deterministic 'causes' of linguistic change is somehow absurd, because determinism itself is synonymous to refusing the possibility of a 'rupture' in the empirical chain of events – of the type of 'chasm' which, precisely, has a 'spiritual' nature in the sense studied by the post-Diltheyan *Geisteswissenschaften*.

Now, where from could such a rupture emerge? If we remain within the limits of Kantian philosophy, it could be a result of the so-called 'transcendental' liberty, which characterizes every human being; but we must not forget that this liberty of ours strictly concerns what we would today name the 'mental' domain of *decision*. I can freely choose to do this or that (for instance, to move a 500 kg stone in my courtyard); but in order to put my will in action, I have to comply with the empirical laws of nature. If my bodily powers are too weak for the task at hand, I will either abandon it, or invent some technical apparatus to help me. Anyway, my transcendental liberty annuls itself precisely by 'becoming' an action. As a human, I can 'perceive', understand, follow the liberty present in my will. But from nature's point of view, the beginning of a wholly new chain of events (my stone is moved, some grass is destroyed, the aspect of the whole garden changes, etc. etc.) is as incomprehensible as the appearance of, let's say, a human finger 'piercing' the plane of a two-dimensional world.

4. Beyond Kant's dualism: Humboldt and the priority of history 'over' time

We all know that, at least at the level of its initial 'agenda', Kant's thought was dualistic in a very rigid, strict sense of the world. For instance, intuition (sensorial perception) and concepts (intellect) were 'cooperating' in the constitution of objects, but without mixing. Only later did imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) gain its exceptional (and, to quote the philosopher's own words, 'mysterious') role as the possible root of both... sensibility and sense. The same thing can be said about the empirical, deterministic world vs. "egological" freedom. Imagine the "natural" destiny of the stone in my yard: it would have stayed for centuries in the same spot, if it weren't for my capricious intervention. From a strictly phenomenal point of view, human decision can only appear as an accident; and this isn't only in (post) Kantian philosophy – things are even more so if we adopt a positivistic framework in which we only believe in material, measurable facts.

I haven't of course forgotten that what we are discussing here are not physical phenomena – but language 'facts' and activities which necessarily include 'mental' aspects. And in order to understand these, I sincerely think (and I bet Coseriu would agree) that we have to leave Kant's philosophical stubbornness of using clear-cut dualism and instead 'embrace' Humboldt's anthropological and 'historist' thinking. I will propose a metaphor: if we imagine Kantian time of natural events as a river (and actually this is an image used by the philosopher himself, when he talks about the second analogy of perception), then my human, 'free' intervention perpendicularly falls within it, like a pillar, troubling the whole flow. Yet, the pillar remains a pillar and the water remains water.

But in Humboldt's view, my present is not the simple intersection point of external, empirical phenomena and internal liberty. My present, and I together with it, are immersed in history. And as far as the limits of my liberty are concerned, they are no longer 'given' through the laws of nature. Especially because it manifests itself as creativity, its boundaries are established, so to say, by myself in my desire to be understood (and even accepted) in the community and/ or by some 'significant others' in particular. We aren't dealing with Kant's infinite, but also in-operable liberty anymore. What we have here, in my opinion, is the primal source for what Heidegger would later call 'finitude'.

Myself, as well as its correlative world, are historical. This is not a closed relationship - on the contrary, it is only through communication with others, comparison with their vision of reality, that objectivity can be accomplished. In Eugenio Coseriu's words, objectiveness can only emerge from inter-subjectivity.

5. Work, thought and an 'absurd' question about time

Very often, when he speaks 'philosophically' about language, Coseriu mentions it in relationship with another fundamental human activity – that is, work (physical labor), and quotes Hegel's conception according to which we simultaneously construct two different worlds in which we live. The first one is the 'perceivable' world of empirical phenomena; the other one is the intelligible world of thought. Personally, I am inclined to think that our (re)search for a more 'palpable' causality of linguistic change stems from a confusion between these two worlds. And Coseriu's 'scandalous' title (which simply denies the existence of the phenomenon) is also based on the priority of the intelligible.² It is at this point of my argument that I feel the need to 'speculate' that if the whole world were empirical, if the whole evolution (or, simply, movement) of reality were deterministic, we would probably 'spend' as little awareness and cognitive effort on language change as we are spending on the fact that wind blows. But clearly (and this debate initiated by *Energeia* is the living proof) linguistic change raises deeper problems than meteorology. I guess this is why Coseriu begins his text entitled *Tempo e linguaggio* by criticizing Saussure's idea that time affects and changes anything, *la langue* included.

A phrase often repeated, the Romanian linguist says, but which should be avoided, because neither is language a thing which could be affected by an external agent, nor is time an agent which can change things. I would interpret this latest statement as follows: it is obviously not time itself that makes things happen; it is facts, situated in time, which affect other facts situated in time.

That is why I will now ask an 'absurd' and yet crucial question: a cause (in our modern, deterministic sense of the word) is something which precedes its effect; but *what is the direction of time* (as a general frame of reference) within which this 'order of events' takes place? Time is *αριθμός κινήσεως κατά το πρότερον και ύστερον*; but when the 'anterior' which we are talking about is not the lit match I'm holding in my hand, but the even 'earlier' idea/ expectation/ choice, among future possible events, of a fire warming up my home, aren't we in the presence of a paradox?

From the physical/ empirical/ positivistic point of view, the answer is clear. There's a so-called second law of thermodynamics most of us, people, know of; applied to the whole universe, it describes the end (of everything we know) as generalized, maximum entropy. This is an event far away in the future, but it still shows the overall direction. And we don't really need to have attended

² This is the first thesis in *Le langage: diacriticon tes ousias. Dix thèses à propos de l'essence du langage et du signifié*, in D. Keller, J. P. Durafour, J. F. P. Bonnot, R. Stock (eds.), *Percevoir: monde et langage. Invariance et variabilité du sens vécu*, Sprimont (Belgien), p. 79-83; see also *Energeia* 4, 49–52.

this lesson in Physics, since we all can simply “see with our own eyes” which way the time goes. Wind and rain turn stones into dust. All living things get born before they die, and in between they are young and playful before becoming old and bitter. Time is *the* strongest reality out there; it dominates us, never stops passing and carries us with its flow.

6. The pendulum and the eclipse

Or is it the other way around? Henri Bergson, one of the most challenging thinkers of modern... times, uses two famous metaphors in order to try and change our perception on this fundamental question.

The first one is the example of the pendulum. The arm of this mechanical device swings back and forth, marking equal intervals in what we, human beings, capable of remembering the whole sequence of movements, call time. But the pendulum itself does not grow older, it knows nothing of change. It doesn't move through time, it only repeats the same (relative) trajectory in space. So maybe it's not us who grow older because the whole universe moves towards maximum entropy. Maybe the (lifeless, non-biological) universe as such knows absolutely nothing of time, and the temporal direction that we attribute to it is an effect of the relationship defined by Bergson in his famous *Matière et mémoire*. This is a ‘doctrine’ which confirms Kant's view according to which time is not a characteristic of extra-subjective *noumena*, but one of the two intuitive-‘egological’ conditions allowing the phenomena themselves to exist. But this is as far as Bergson goes along with the German philosopher; all the rest of his work is a devastating critique to... Kant's critiques. According to Bergson, time cannot and must not be related to/ measured through space, the worst thing we can do is to assimilate (that is: to confuse) temporal relationships with spatial constructs - because ‘past moments’ exist only for living entities, and they are not ‘before’ the present, but comprised (as memories) in it; as for the future, it simply is what we can speculate, but don't know anything about.

[Of course, this latest idea is not new; Aristotle had already anticipated it,³ but the best known initiator of this train of thought is Saint Augustine, with his famous “*nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi*” and his tripartite assimilation of past as memory, present as perception/ attention and future as expectation.]

Bergson's second metaphor, even more radical than the first one, is his referring to an astronomer's capability of announcing a future eclipse. Here I would say that the French philosopher willingly makes us cross a mental ‘border’, so that we can perceive an epistemological hard question. What the astronomer does, Bergson says, is merely a mathematical extrapolation of a regularity in the past - it has nothing to do with (the) future, the definition of which is ‘that about which we don't know what or how it will be’.

7. (Life and) liberty as the source(s) of time

Time is not a quantitative characteristic of the physical universe, Bergson says. It is a qualitative dimension (marking the universe) of living things.⁴ And, most importantly (at least for the discussion

³ Coseriu refers to Aristotle's position in the above-mentioned text, *Tempo e linguaggio*.

⁴ Bergson's ‘philosophy’ in *Matière et mémoire* could be summarised in the three following ideas: A) an inanimate material object in the Universe “bares” the (direct or indirect) action of all the other things in the world; it has total, perfect perception (extrinsic, simultaneous determination) and zero liberty (duration, time); B) time only appears where there is a form (however primitive) of life, where we can find some resistance to the action of external influences, some delay of their action, a “bubble” of indetermination; a plant, for example, can orientate its leaves towards the sun; or an animal can perceive danger and run; C) as far as constitution of time is concerned, the difference between animal and man is only gradual; simply put, human beings dispose of a larger memory (that can be used pragmatically), which is

that I am proposing here), time only appears where some kind/ degree of biological liberty manifests itself. Time does not exist for a grain of sand moved by the winds, but ‘is there’ for a thistle clinging on to a rock. This is the most anti-Kantian of Bergson’s ideas, because it states that time is missing precisely where all is absolute determinism; time only exists where there is biological, living liberty and some kind of self-preservatory finalism.

Here, every ‘orthodox’ empirical scientist should be inclined to shout “Anathema! Vade retro!”, etc.; but, before doing that, shouldn’t we go back to our starting point and remind ourselves that, more than two millennia ago, Aristotle talked to us about a cause (the final one, which, if it appears, dominates all the others) that operates *from the future*?

In order to limit this discussion I will not further present two other contributions which, I think, are also crucial. I will only give the names of the two ‘persons’ and theories involved. The first one is Edmund Husserl, with his revolutionary lectures given between 1905 and 1910 and published by Heidegger in 1928 (one year after his own *Sein und Zeit*) under the title *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*. The other one is Heidegger himself, ‘inventor’ of hermeneutical phenomenology. These are two thinkers who definitely tried to re-shape everything humanity had thought about time. I must agree that, as far as we can see in 2013, they haven’t succeeded too much in the sense of a general, spiritual revolution. But comprehension takes a great deal of time. Many of us are still struggling with accepting the fundamental truth discovered by Kant: there is no philosophical question more primal⁵ (and thus important) than the one of *time*.

8. *En revenant à nos moutons (sheep? mutton?)*

So: Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Kant, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger and, of course, Coseriu. What do all of them have to do with linguistics? Well, maybe the first six are *outsiders*, if not even intruders, invaders of a space that any positivist linguist would very much like to define as one of non-philosophical, non-epistemological, ‘purely factual’ scientific enquiry. But the last one... is he just an eminent linguist with some dubious (intellectual) friends? Should we talk about the author of *Sincronia, diacronia e historia* in some Dr. Jeckyll vs. Mr. Hyde manner, should we only take into account his widely recognized, more... applied work(s) in, let’s say, the description/ history of Romance languages and leave the rest aside?

Personally, I owe some of my strongest scientific convictions to Coseriu and there are two things that I really need to state on this matter.

Firstly, the exceptional success of his ‘applied’ linguistics is not the result of personal luck or random and limited moments of intuition - rather, everything stems from a system of thought (precisely: of theoretical, epistemological, philosophical thought) in which all things hold together; so whoever reads a Coserian article should try to understand it in the light of the trichotomy of the planes of language, of the pre-eminence of *logos semantikos* and *energeia*, etc.

Secondly, I would attempt to correlate the Romanian linguist’s thought with the one of the philosopher of language which has exerted the strongest influence on Coseriu: Wilhelm von Humboldt. This is because much of what today we still (quite naïvely) call “linguistic change” comes

organized rationally, with the help of signs included. However, ‘authentic’, deep memory and duration remain the ‘affective’ (and sort-of-irrational) ones.

⁵ All external phenomena occur in space; all internal phenomena are temporal; but since an external ‘thing’ or ‘event’ can only exist for us by passing through inner conscience, all that exists has (at least at the level of its first and most intuitively pure appearance) a temporal nature.

from the phenomenon investigated in *La creación metafórica en el lenguaje*, Coseriu's article written in 1952. The origin of each and every 'change' lies in an 'expressive' intuition and initiative belonging to some individual speaker. This intuition/ initiative is meta-phorical in the widest sense of the world, precisely because it 'departs' from the generally, momentarily accepted modes of speaking. And going back to Humboldt, we find (in *La tâche de l'historien* - 1821, but not only there) the idea that there are two main sources for the development of events in human history. On the one side we have, of course, a set of more 'empirical' conditions such as the number of members in a community, their economical-social standard, the power of their army, etc. On the other side (and ignoring this aspect would be a big mistake) there are the exceptional individuals whose ideas can shape the will and even the destiny of nations. Of course, one could say: this is simply the old Romanticist theme of genius, we don't really believe in such things nowadays. But if we go back to the problem of language and we try to discover the source of (what we call) a change, what do we discover?

Today's Romanian language has an expression, so often repeated it has acquired an almost paremiologic value, whose sense is that different evaluation criteria apply to different types of empirical events - which, of course, is trivial: "Iarna nu-i ca vara" (in a 'word by word' translation - "Winter is different from summer."). This is the phrase used by our current president, Mr. Traian Băsescu, some 10 years ago, when he was Mayor of Bucharest and, after some heavy snowing, the authorities were unable to properly clean the streets. Public transport was a mess, everybody was very upset, and this poor excuse used by 'the man in charge' remained in the consciousness of people and was often re-used (more and more, in situations that had less and less to do with snow or winter or summer). Or, if we are inclined to object that phrasal constructions are very different from simple words, I will simply mention that in Romanian we have the adjective 'bovaric', used to describe a person with a certain type of behavior (and maybe suffering from a minor form of psychological disorder). Now anyone can understand where this word comes from: we have it because a famous 19th century French writer invented a character and gave it the name (Madame) Bovary. So I cannot refrain from asking a rhetorical question: how in the world could anyone find a more general rule or law for such an innovation? We must be honest to ourselves and admit that, in cases like these, *savoir pour prévoir afin de pouvoir* simply does not apply.

Well, according to Humboldt and Coseriu, these cases are not exceptions; they are the rule.

9. Peircean semiotics and the three-foldedness of time

One can hardly find a more... pragmatic (*i.e.*: well connected both to the 'palpable' realities of the world and to the needs/ interests of people) thinking than the one of Charles Sanders Peirce. Still, of the three fundamental types of sign (Icon as a manifestation of Firstness, Index as Secondness and Symbol as Thirdness), the last one - and the most massively used in human society - 'extracts', so to say, the power of its significance from the future. Although he always tries to remain a realist, this American philosopher opens a whole new way for the general science of signs (or, rather, of *semiosis*) when, in 1878 (*How to Make Our Ideas Clear*), he formulates for the first time his now more than famous *pragmatic maxim*. The meaning of a symbol is the totality of reasonable actions that the members of a community will perform because of its (the symbol's) existence.

Of course that, here again, we could make a triple parallel: we could correlate 1) iconicity (especially in the signs called by Peirce hypoicons) with the past - we can only make a sign similar to a thing in reality (a photography, for instance) if the thing exists prior to its 'image'; 2) indexicality with the (extended) present - a thing or event is an index of another one as long as, and because it is

physically connected to it; and 3) symbols and symbolism with the future. And although the first two categories of signs are much more ‘realistic’ (we can use icons to re-present the states of affairs in the world, and indexes to ‘point’ to one reality or another), it is the symbol, a conventional sign, capable of lying, which offers the most widely used basis for our communication and cognition.

How can this be?

In my opinion, what we are dealing with here is, again, the teleological dimension of human semiotic behavior. We do not use (and create) signs mainly for ‘talking’ about the world as it already is, we use (and create) them as tools for achieving goals, even more, as pre-instantiations (mental projects) of those goals. So in respect to this theory too, talking about determinist causality in the realm of signs is wrong.

10. Instead of a conclusion, an opening

I am a human being, not a grain of sand. If I were the latter, it would be much easier to scientifically explain why I am resting among other grains on a beach or, let’s say, blown by warm winds across some desert. I am a human being, so within me (and, through the actions of my ‘physical’ self, within my world) causal events occur which do not have an empirical origin prior to them in measurable time. I am a living, thinking being whose main characteristic is, precisely, to resist some of the phenomena which could directly influence, change, move my body. I have a memory of the events I’ve gone through, and it’s an open discussion whether I can remember them because they happened in the past or, the other way around, they are past only because they are (qualitatively) contained in my (“present”) remembrance.

What I am, is a being immersed in a historical world of language, negotiating its relationship with ‘brute’ reality through signs which offer it (to use Ernst Cassirer’s terms) the capacity for ‘relational thought’, a symbolical conscience, that is - an independence from the material conditions and limitations of my existence. This independence, of course, encompasses the liberty of creating new signs for new meanings, as well as of adopting signs created by others as meaningful.

11. References (chronological order)

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