Language, Thought, and Culture in 'Post-modernism': Some Implications for General Historiography

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1. Preliminary Remark

By 'post-modernism' I understand in the present context a way of thinking championed by the likes of Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard. Although their emphasis may vary, they all share a pervasive interest in the *theory of language*. Since I have dealt rather extensively with the philosophy of language and of linguistics (cf. *Itkonen* 1978 and 1983), my curiosity was quite naturally aroused by their work. Once I had become better acquainted with it, my curiosity turned into disappointment, and even indignation. Some of the reasons for this change of attitude will become evident, as we proceed. My interest in the historiographical aspect of the question stems from the fact that during the last three or four years I have been working on a comparative history of linguistics in the West and in the East.

2. Language: a 20th Century Obsession

Three phases can be discerned in the history of Western (metaphysical) philosophy, depending on what is taken to be the primary object of analysis. From antiquity until about 1600, the overriding question concerned the nature of the external *world*. This was the age of *ontology*. From 1600 until about 1900, the ontological question was largely replaced by a new one: how, if at all, can we acquire reliable *knowledge* (about the external world, assuming that such a world exists)? This was the age of *epistemology*. Since 1900, a new type of question has been asked: how do we use *language* (to talk about the external world as it is known to us)? This is the age of *signification*.

It cannot be emphasized too much that this periodization of history is meant to be merely suggestive. For instance, the scholastic grammarians (= 'modistae') anticipated the 'age of signification' in their attempt to integrate reality (= 'modi essendi'), mind (= 'modi intelligendi'), and language (= 'modi significandi') into a single whole.

From the evaluative point of view, it seems clear that the change from ontology via epistemology to signification constitutes *progress*, on the condition that the research object of the later age *contains* (though in a modified form) that of the earlier age. It seems just as clear, however, that if this condition is not fulfilled, then a fallacy of some sort has been committed. For instances, if signification is investigated as such, without due recognition of the role either of mind or of reality, then we certainly have to do with a fallacy. To my mind, the 'spirit' of the 20th century is to a large extent characterized by this very fallacy. In the next section I shall distinguish between three different exemplifications of it.

3. Three Fallacies Concerning the Supreme Importance of Language

A. 'Philosophical Questions are Ultimately Linguistic Questions'

It is well known that the Anglo-American philosophy of this century has undergone a 'linguistic turn'. Interestingly enough, this has manifested itself in two quite dissimilar ways, namely as the formal-logical approach epitomized by Carnap and as the 'ordinary language' approach epitomized by the later Wittgenstein. In the heyday of linguistic philosophy it was not uncommon to hear that philosophical questions could, and should, be reduced to linguistic questions. Yet a moment's reflection suffices to show that, if taken literally, this view borders on absurdity. For instance, ever since antiquity there has been a persistent attempt to analyse *causality*. But it would be absurd to say that, in doing so, philosophers have been interested *merely* in the use of the word 'causality', without any regard either to what we know about the course of events in the external world, or to what really happens there. *Locke* (1700/ 1975: 488) already realized that "the extent and certainty of our knowledge.. ha[s] so near a connexion with words that unless their force and manner o signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly an(pertinently concerning knowledge." But this insight cuts both ways: words ar(intermixed with knowledge, which – as Locke further observes – "terminate[s in things". Thus philosophical analysis cannot possibly be exhausted by analysi of words alone.

B. 'Language Determines Thought'

In popular psychology it is often held that people speaking different languages, e.g. Chinese and English, perceive or experience the world differently. This view is known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'. It has remained unconfirmed by more than thirty years of psycholinguistic research. To quote *Clark & Clark* (1977: 577): "The main thrust of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that differences in languages affect thought. ... So far, however, no convincing examples of these differences have turned up. ... What this suggests is that language differences reflect the culture, and not the reverse." Thus it is wrong to say, with the young Wittgenstein, that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world". (To be sure, what he intended was not quite to argue for an equivalent of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.) What should be said, instead, is that the limits of my culture are the limits of my world. And then it should be added at once that I am free to *extend* the limits of my culture, namely by getting acquainted with *other* cultures, whether past or present. The weird thing is that a huge number of 'intellectuals' continue to cling to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, no matter what psycholinguists say about it.

A terminological remark may here be in order. In connection with cultural studies I often encounter an expression like 'thought structures of a culture'. Now 'thought structure' has a precise content in cognitive psychology, as when a mental operation performed on one (hypothetical) 'thought structure' converts it into another; (though it would be more accurate here to use the term 'mental representation'). But in a cultural context the talk of 'thought structures' strikes me as pompous and deliberately mystifying. It should be replaced by such informal, and more truthful, expressions like 'way of thinking' or 'world view'.

C. '(Social) Reality Consists of Signs, or of Discourses'

Together with the rise of *semiotics*, the view has been gaining ground that human society should be considered a linguistic entity, i.e. constituted by (results of) processes of communication. The plausibility, or otherwise, of this view depends, first, on whether the term 'language' is meant literally or metaphorically and, second, whether the 'linguistic' point of view is meant to be applied exclusively or together with other points of view. In combining the 'literal' interpretation with the 'exclusive' one, *Lyotard* (1979) represents what is worst in this approach. He regards society as a conglomerate of quasi-atomistic 'language-games'. He thinks, for instance, that engineers and doctors are just participating in their own language-games. However, it is perverse to say that building bridges and curing diseases (or, for that matter, destroying bridges and spreading diseases) is just a matter of *language*. Such activities surely reach beyond the bounds of language and make contact with, and even *change*, the external world. In an explicitly *semiotic* context, where 'language' is

replaced by 'sign' (to be further subdivided into 'symbol', ' icon', and 'index'), the view in question may not seem too implausible. But this time it is threatened by vacuity. If actions are reinterpreted as 'indexes' (= expressions) of their motives (= meanings), or effects are generally reinterpreted as 'indexes' of corresponding causes, then we have 'proved' that social reality (or reality *tout court*) is thoroughly 'linguistic' (= semiotic) in character. But this is just a terminological trick. Moreover, the sense of novelty surrounding the semiotic approach is to a large extent dispelled, when it is realized that the iconical and indexical *sign*-relations are identical with the more familiar *associative* relations of similarity and contiguity.

In sum, viewing all social activities in linguistic terms strikes me as a deliberate attempt at mystification. As long as war, poverty, ecocatastrophe etc., etc. are seen as matters of language, their real causes must remain hidden.

4. A Critique of Foucault's View on Intellectual History

As far as I can see, representatives of post-modernism are likely to commit all three fallacies discussed above, though perhaps with varying degrees of explicitness. Moreover, to their misguided emphasis on language they add a curious twist of their own, namely by dismissing linguistic *meaning* as untrustworthy or irrelevant, and thus reducing language to linguistic *form* (or 'expression'). In *Itkonen* (1987) I have traced the genealogy of this extraordinary view to Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, and I have refuted its Derridaesque version in some detail. In this section I shall concentrate on the post-modernist conception of *history*, represented most incisively by Foucault. Those looking for overall assessments of post-structuralism/post-modernism should consult e.g. *Seung* (1982), *Habermas* (1985), and *Merquior* (1986).

Les mots et les choses (1966) is widely considered Foucault's principal work. Combined with *L'archéologie du savoir* (1969), it contains Foucault's most explicit statements on the nature of (intellectual) history and on the historiographical method. Although Foucault later came to emphasize the 'genealogical' aspect of his method over the 'archeological' one, there is a fundamental unity in his work: "There is no pre- or post-archeology or genealogy in Foucault" (*Dreyfus & Rabinow* 1982: 104). It is for these reasons, and because the two books deal with a topic I happen to know quite well, namely the history of linguistics, that I shall concentrate on Foucault (1966 and 1969).

As Foucault sees it, the post-medieval history of Western culture is divided into three distinct periods, viz. the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and the Modern Age. These periods are separated by 'sudden and absolute breaks', which means that the thought of an earlier period, preserved in written documents, becomes incomprehensible to people living in a later period. To justify this thesis, Foucault sets out to prove that changes of the above

mentioned kind have in fact occurred at three separate levels of abstraction, namely general metaphysics, linguistic sign, and such disciplines as linguistics, economics, and biology. Having justified his thesis to his own satisfaction, Foucault draws from it some momentous consequences. The traditional type of historiography, which is based on the (hermeneutic) attempt to understand written documents of past ages, must simply be abandoned and be replaced by 'archeology'. All the archeologist can do is to consider written documents as formal objects, or 'discourses', and to record the 'regularities' exhibited and the 'transformations' undergone by the discourses of a given age. 'Genealogy' introduces the additional notion that it is 'power' of some sort which has brought about the sudden and absolute changes in 'discursive formations'. As *Habermas* (1985: 323) puts it, history turns out to be "ein sinnloser, kaleidoskopischer Wandel von Diskursuniversen, die nichts miteinander gemeinsam haben, ausser der einzigen Bestimmung, Protuberanzen von Macht überhaupt zu sein". For philosophy, the consequences are no less momentous. Since each age has its own concepts and meanings, there are no permanent philosophical problems to be solved and no Western philosophical tradition. Rather, every new age creates its own (apparent) philosophical puzzles and then disappears together with them.

Foucault's entire archeological-cum-genealogical edifice rests on the assumption that there are in fact such absolute breaks in the intellectual history of the West. The truth of this assumption is taken for granted by all Foucault-disciples, and it has been hailed even by Newsweek Magazine as one of Foucault's lasting contributions. Yet, it is quite easy to show that at least in the case of general metaphysics, linguistic sign, and linguistics, practically all of Foulcault's facts are wrong. I shall document this claim in considerable detail in a forthcoming article. In what follows I shall single out only some of Foucault's more conspicuous blunders. In each case I shall first paraphrase Foucault's view on the matter and then refute it.

A. Renaissance
i) General Metaphysics. "The central notion is *similarity*, as it occurs in Paracelse's cosmology: on the one hand, 'aemulatio', i.e. the correspondance between microcosmos and macrocosmos; on the other, 'convenientia', i.e. the unbroken chain which starts from minerals and, passing through plants, animals, humans, and angels, leads to God."

The principal school of thought in the Renaissance was not an alchemy of the Paracelsean type, but Aristotelianism, fought equally by humanism and the new Galilean-Baconian type of natural science (cf. *Ong* 1958). Aemulatio found full expression already in the Stoic cosmology (cf. *Lapidge* 1978). Convenientia, or the ' great chain of being', originated with Plato and culminated in the 18th century, i.e. in the Classical Age and not in the Renaissance (cf. *Lovejoy* 1936,

esp. 183-184). The alchemical way of thinking did not end with the Renaissance, but continued well into the Classical Age, as shown most dramatically by Newton's persistent occupation with it.

ii) Linguistic sign. "The Renaissance-type linguistic sign is ternary: it consists of a spoken or written entity, its referent, and the similarity between the two."

Foucault does not document this claim, and it would indeed be difficult to do so. All major Renaissance grammarians (including Linacre, Scaliger Sr. Ramus, and Sanctius) accept the traditional view of the linguistic sign as a binary entity consisting of form (= 'vox') and meaning (= 'significatio'). To be sure, Sanctius speculated that the 'original' language might have possessed some sort of form-referent similarity, but this is another matter (cf. *Breva-Claramonte* 1983: 230). On the other hand, Foucault himself must admit that the thesis of form-referent similarity, championed e.g. by de Brosses, Copineau, and Court de Gébelin, came to be widely accepted in the Classical Age. Thus precisely the opposite of what Foucault says is true.

iii) Linguistics. "The Renaissance grammarians could not grasp the existence of meaning. This is why Ramus proposes to treat only the formal aspect of language in his grammar."

Ramus criticizes the grammarians of his own time for not distinguishing carefully enough between lexical meaning (= 'significatio') and grammatical meaning (= 'adsignificatio', formerly ' consignificatio'). In his view, e.g. 'noun' must be defined formally, i.e. as 'characterized by case and number', and not semantically, i.e. as 'referring to a thing'; and in particular, the two types of definition must not be confused. (cf. *Chevalier* 1968 : 267). On this issue, today's linguistics fully agrees with Ramus. It is simply grotesque to say that Ramus was unable to understand that something like linguistic meaning exists.

B. Classical Age
i) General metaphysics. "The central notion is *representation*, as in Linné's botany, where a 'tableau' composed of arbitrary linguistic signs represents in a transparent way a taxonomy of things. The representative capacities of language and mind cannot be questioned. Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are all committed to this ideal."

It was Ramus, a Renaissance thinker, who introduced the idea of representing taxonomies by means of arbitrary, non-allegoric tableaus (cf. *Ong* 1958, esp. 197-200). In lumping Linné and Hume together, Foucault confuses two opposite views, one which regards the external world as fully open to inspection, and the other which doubts, or even denies, its existence. This confusion is made possible by constant equivocation on what the linguistic sign (i.e. its form) stands for: this is claimed to be meaning *and* idea *and* thing. Ever since Aristotle, the transparency of the triad 'language-mind-reality' was taken

more or less for granted in Western philosophy. (Demokritos, the Stoics, and Nicholas of Cusa are among the exceptions.) It was abandoned precisely at the moment when Foucault claims it was created (cf. *Rorty* 1980, esp. 45-51, 143-146).

"The Classical thought, committed to Linné-type representation, is static and ahistorical. The notion of 'progress' cannot be conceived of."

The social and psychological theories of the Classical Age were thoroughly dynamic. Hobbes and Hume consciously imitated, respectively Galilean and Newtonian mechanics. La Mettrie and Holbach eliminated the mind-body dualism in favour of the 'homme-machine' notion. The Enlightenment thinkers had a systematic interest in the ideas of history and progress (cf. *Collingwood* 1946: 61-85). Here Foucault is forced to openly contradict himself several times.

ii) Linguistic sign. "The ternary sign of the Renaissance is replaced by a binary sign whose components, i.e. form and meaning, are held together by an arbitrary tie."

Nonsense. Ever since Aristotle it was known that signs are binary (cf. point A-ii above), and that the form-meaning relation is arbitrary (= 'kata synthékén', 'ad placitum').

iii) Linguistics. "It is the Port-Royal grammar which revolutionizes linguistics. The primary subject matter of this type of universal grammar (= 'grammaire générale') is neither language nor mind, but the linear order of speech units in relation to the simultaneity of thought units."

The first to argue for this kind of discrepancy between speech and thought was Buffier, in 1732. Until then it was universally assumed that there is a logical order of thought which different sentences of one language, or the word-order types of different languages may reflect more or less faithfully. In particular, this was the view held by the Port-Royal grammarians (cf. *Ogle* 1980: 110).

"The Port-Royal grammar invents a new type of sentence analysis: Each sentence is analyzed as Subject + Copula + Attribute, where the copula performs the function of affirmation and thus combines the subject and the attribute into a single whole, i.e. a sentence. E.g. in the sentence 'Pierre vit' the word 'vit' is thought to contain an implicit copula 'est', which gives 'Pierre est vivant' as the result of the analysis."

This 'new' analysis is as old as Western linguistics itself. It was first presented in Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias*, and it was repeated without any alteration throughout the Middle Ages, as documented in exhaustive detail in Arens (1984). The technical term for the function of the implicit copula was 'compositio'.

"There is, and can be, no diachronic linguistics."

From the 16th century onwards, there was a steadily increasing interest in diachronic linguistics. In the 17th and 18th centuries hundreds of works were published on this topic. It was reliably established that the members of the

following language-families had a common ancestry: the Germanic, the Romance, the Slavic, and the Finno-Ugric languages. The general character and the principal causes of linguistic change were well known (cf. *Metcalf* 1974, *Diderichsen* 1974, *Gulya* 1974).

C. Modern Age
i) General metaphysics. "Everything that can be experienced begins suddenly to exist in a *historical* dimension. Kant is the central figure."

It is true that Kant was the first to clearly realize that a phenomenon like language exists both transcendentally, i.e. as a precondition for research, and empirically, i.e. as an object of research. But being historical is only one aspect of being empirical. (Besides, it seems rather obvious, *pace* Kant, that the transcendental preconditions are also historical in character.) Therefore it is rather far-fetched to view Kant as the apostle of historicity.

ii) Linguistic sign. "Language becomes inherently diachronic. The representative function ceases to be its raison d'être. The dimension of pure grammaticality (i.e. linguistic form as such) is discovered."

There is no justification for saying that the diachronic nature of language was not grasped before 1800 (cf. B-iii). Rask and Bopp, the pioneers of Indo-European historical-comparative linguistics, cling to the ideal of transparent representation in the spirit of Linné and of the Port-Royal grammar (cf. C-iii). The dimension of pure grammaticality was already discovered by Ramus (cf. A-iii), and before him by the modistae.

iii) Linguistics. "Rask and Bopp introduced a new way of looking at language. They changed its very mode of existence."

Unlike e.g. the Enlightenment thinker Turgot, Rask had no clear notion of linguistic change. Subscribing to Linné's methodology, he failed to distinguish between genetic and typological classifications of languages. His guiding principle is transparent representation: "Rask recherche partout la conformité entre le contenu et l'expression. Il la maintient à titre de principe, tout en admettant qu'elle n'est pas partout réalisé au même degré..." (*Hjelmslev* 1951/1966:188). For Bopp too, transparent one-to-one representation is the methodological starting point, 'Grundbegriffe' and 'accessorische Begriffe' being expressed by roots and affixes, respectively. He accepts the Aristotelian notion of verb (which, as we saw, was also accepted by the Port-Royal grammar), and even tries to prove that in the Indo-European proto-language each verb-form actually contained one or another realization of the copula (cf. *Verburg* 1950/1966: 236-237). Moreover, universal grammar of the Port-Royal type did not die out entirely.

"The 'inflectional' principle of word-internal vocalic variation (i.e. 'Ablaut' and 'Umlaut') now becomes all-important, compared with the 'agglutinative' principle of affixing."

Bopp tries systematically to prove that inflectional phenomena are secondary and arise from agglutinative ones. As Verburg (ibid.) points out, "everywhere Bopp doggedly insists on the reduction to affixing, ...on the elementary addition of formerly independent linguistic elements" (which then become affixes, i.e. prefixes, infixes, or suffixes).

"From now on, languages are treated in a value-free manner."

Like the great majority of their 17th and 18th century predecessors, the linguists of the early 19th century considered linguistic change as decay. The closer a language was to (the type exemplified by) the Indo-European proto-language, the more valuable it was taken to be.

"Only now that linguistic form is investigated for its own sake, phonetics becomes possible."

Wrong again. As *Robins* (1979 : 117-118) points out, by the end of the 17th century the 'English school of phonetics' was flourishing which laid the foundations for scientific phonetics in the West. (In India phonetics had already much earlier been practised at a level which Western phonetics reached only in the latter half of the 19th century.)

D. On Foucault's Self-Professed Methodology
Recall that Foucault wishes to reject the traditional hermeneutic idea that historical documents need to be interpreted. He claims that all he is doing, is stating the regularities and transformations characteristic of the discourses of a given age. Yet he is contradicting his own advice at every step, because he is continuously engaged in eliciting the basic *Weltanschauung* (= 'similarity', 'representation', ' history') behind individual texts. Ironically enough, it must even be said that Foucault outdoes the hermeneutic historians in their own game: Wishing to squeeze all historical facts into his tripartite straitjacket of 'Renaissance – Classical Age – Modern Age', he is blatantly guilty of *over*-interpretation.

The chasm between what Foucault claims to be doing and what he does in effect, is further evident from the fact that he never states a single 'regularity' or 'transformation'. The only justification, such as it is, for this pretentious terminology is that, in Foucault's opinion, the texts of a given age speak of the same thing (= 'regularity') in different ways (= 'transformation').

The emptiness of Foucault's ' formalist' jargon is concretely demonstrated by the fact that what he says about Paracelse is practically identical with what *Koyré* (1933/1971) says about the same topic (which can hardly be an accident). And yet Koyré (p. 129) describes himself as an 'historien des idées', whereas Foucault repeatedly claims that his 'archeology' is the very opposite of the history of ideas. One of the two must be wrong in his characterization of what they both are doing. And it certainly is not Koyré.

5. Conclusion

In *Itkonen* (1987) I tried to show that Derrida's post-structuralism has no rational justification. In this paper I have tried to do the same to Foucault's view on Western intellectual history (although, for reasons of space, I have been able to use only a minor part of the arguments at my disposal). Foucault has somehow managed to acquire a fame of awesome erudition. *Dreyfus & Rabinow* (1982) speak of his "scrupulous attention to empirical detail" (p. xxii) and claim that critics have failed to show that "Foucault is not in control of the 'facts'" (p. 126). If so, they looked in the wrong place. As far as Western history of metaphysics, linguistic sign, and linguistics is concerned, there are few facts, with or without quotes, which Foucault is in control of. I find it regrettable that books like *Major-Poetzl* (1983) and *Racevskis* (1983) are nowadays being published in which Foucault-type 'sudden and absolute breaks' in Western history are taken as conclusively established truths, and that further 'archeological' studies are based on this (non-existent) foundation.