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Critical Theory of Linguistics and Language

A Humanistic, Historical and Comparative Approach to Linguistic Ideologies



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ÍNDICE

PRELIMINARY REMARKS	13
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	15
INTRODUCTION.....	17
1. ON THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF LINGUISTICS.....	31
1. The constitution of the object of "linguistic science"	31
1.1. Science as a "well-made language"	31
1.2. Restrictive decisions on the "metaphysical" level	32
1.3. "Conceptual metaphors" in linguistics.....	33
1.4. Meaning	34
1.5. The role of philosophy.....	36
2. Real language and the object of linguistics: language and grammar ...	38
2.1. The meaning of " <i>linguistic</i> " and " <i>language</i> "	38
2.2. The "real grammar".....	39
2.3. The ontology of "speaking" and its effect on the language of linguistics.....	39
3. Some pragmatic questions about contemporary linguistic theories.....	41
4. Speaking about language is not speaking a meta-language.....	44
5. How do we speak about "real language"? Legitimacy vs. objectivity.....	45
6. How to constitute and to recognize a "valid linguistic discourse"	47
2. CRITICAL THEORY OF LINGUISTICS (CTL)	49
1. The Critical Theory of Linguistics and Josef Simon's <i>Philosophy of the Sign</i>	49
2. The Critical Theory of Linguistics (CTL).....	50
2.1. What is CTL?	50
2.2. The main keys of CTL	52
2.2.1. Linguistics and individuality.....	52
2.2.2. Linguistics and linguistic "truth".....	53
2.2.2.1. The case for "language is x"	53

2.2.2.2. The case for "something linguistic happens or does not happen".....	54
2.2.2.3. CTL's field of application of "true" and "false"	54
2.2.3. CTL and the notion of "structure" in Linguistics	56
2.2.4. Linguistics as one "linguistic game" more?	58
2.3. CTL as Pragmatic Linguistics	59
2.3.1. Why?	59
2.3.2. Purposes throughout history	60
2.4. Ethics of CTL	62
2.5. Epistemology of CTL	65
2.5.1. The competence of "making sense" and the determination of the "human"	65
2.5.1.1. Language not as "matter of fact" but as a "variable"	65
2.5.1.2. The task of understanding	67
2.5.2. Epistemic tools with uncertain meaning	68
2.5.3. How is language "given"?	70
2.6. Logic of CTL	74
2.6.1. CTL and dialectic logic.....	74
2.6.2. Why?	75
2.6.3. How?	75
2.6.4. Dialectic logic in CTL	78
2.6.4.1. Dialectic Logic of the concept.....	78
2.6.4.2. On "contradiction" in dialectic logic. Hegel about "being" and "nothing"	80
2.6.4.3. The logic of linguistic research	84
2.7. Ontology of CTL	86
2.8. Pragmatism and teleology in CTL	88
2.9. Individual teleology and epistemology in CTL.....	89
3. THE HISTORICITY OF LINGUISTICS AS A SUBJECT MATTER OF CTL.....	93
1. Linguistics as a "historical discourse"	93
2. CTL as historical criticism on contemporary language studies	94
3. Some relevant elements of the historical and ideological background of 20 th and 21 st century linguistics.....	96
4. Excuse on time, paradox, control and death.....	108
5. Two examples of the refusal of the historicity of human language.....	112
6. Historical legitimacy of linguistics.....	115
7. CTL and "cultural studies": the temptation of acquiring "moral" legitimacy through "political correctness"	119
8. Linguistics is a science of culture: Hermann Paul revisited	122
9. CTL as the modern "science of principles"	140

4. THE BIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF CTL AND THE LACK OF BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR POSITIVE LINGUISTICS.....	145
1. The problem of "speculative neural sciences"	145
2. Language, consciousness and the brain	146
3. The biological basis of language: individuality, temporality and dynamics of the human brain.....	150
3.1. The neural activity underlying verbal behavior	150
3.2. Paths of categorization.....	154
3.3. The "analytic instinct"	156
3.4. Linguistic analysis.....	157
5. AN AESTHETIC ALTERNATIVE FOR AN "INTEGRAL" LINGUISTIC THEORY.....	161
1. Reductionism and holism in the theoretical approach to language.....	161
2. The aesthetic approach.....	163
2.1. Linguistic interaction from an aesthetic point of view	169
2.2. Analytic and aesthetic constitution of the object of linguistic theory and the objects of linguistic sciences.....	172
3. An aesthetic approach to the concept of grammar.....	176
3.1. Acquisition and reshaping of the speaking ability.....	177
3.2. Individual availability of expressive means.....	179
3.3. Global neural self-structuring: recombination and analysis.....	180
4. Verbality and its referring to the world: meaning and semantics.....	181
5. Is analytic work on language possible from an aesthetic perspective, and does it make sense at all?.....	185
5.1. The individual path to the totality of factual speaking	187
5.2. The aesthetic criticism of the reductionism of analytical methods in linguistics and the possibility of overcoming it.....	190
6. Final remark.....	197
6. SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON EMOTIONS IN LANGUAGE, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CRITICAL LANGUAGE THEORY.....	199
1. Emotion as research object in contemporary linguistics: methods and goals	199
2. The scientific and academic background of current linguistic emotion research.....	200
2.1. The German philosophy of consciousness	200
2.2. The classical psychology.....	202
2.3. The present academic and scientific context.....	203
3. What are emotions and how many are there?	205
4. Modalities of linguistic emotion research	210
4.1. Emotion research in texts.....	210
4.2. Experimental research of emotional reactions to language	212

5. The linguistic emotion research from the point of view of a critical epistemology of linguistics	214
6. The aesthetic access to <i>understanding</i> emotions in language	222
7. BACK TO TEXTS: SOME POSSIBLE KINDS OF EMPIRICAL "STYLE RESEARCH" WITHIN CTL	225
8. ON LANGUAGE AND NON-LANGUAGE.....	229
1. The "dialectic" of language and non-language.....	229
2. Language as emerging from non-language.....	234
FINAL REMARK.....	239
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES	241

INTRODUCTION

1.

This “Critical Theory of Linguistics” (from now on CTL) is neither a new “model of language” nor a new specific methodology for doing linguistics. It is a *reflection about the epistemological conditions under which linguistic work takes place*, and about the consequences of such conditions both for the *ontological validity of the results* of single linguistic work (i.e.: how good they are in matching and/or explaining what actually happens while speaking) and for the *ethic legitimacy* of its theoretical approaches and working methods (i.e., how *responsible* they are).

CTL thus moves in the domain of the “conditions of the possibility of linguistic knowledge”. This explicitly Kantian formulation qualifies its subject as a mainly philosophical issue, but in the field of language studies the *underlying philosophy* is no discipline exterior to empirical work, but its *real, factual basis* and the *fundament of its coherence, legitimacy and relevance*. It represents the “*transcendental-logical framework*” of the research, to say it in a famous formulation of Jürgen Habermas. This book is the result of a long and sustained theoretical scrutiny of the *presuppositions and conditions* of linguistic work throughout history, and thus it is *both a philosophical and a linguistic treatise*. Distinguishing philosophy from linguistics surely makes sense in most contexts, but it does not reflect any ontological opposition. In the field where I am moving one has to keep both linguistic and philosophical.

CTL is no “new linguistics”, but the continuation and renewal of the efforts of several single thinkers, throughout history, to introduce into grammatical or linguistic work the critical insights made possible by the most advanced ideas, past and present, about language, knowledge and science. In my opinion, within *Western linguistic tradition* the most decisive advances in this sense, and the most inspiring support for my own criticism, are those of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Hermann Paul and Eugenio Coseriu. CTL primarily attempts to update their achievements assisted by today’s most suitable scientific, cultural, and philosophical tools. It formulates *updated criteria for qualifying valid linguistic research*, past and ongoing,

depending on its accordance to the critical level made possible by theoretical reflections about language and its study until now.

Surprisingly, the most relevant advances in recent times concerning our subject come less from linguistics itself than from natural sciences, from evolutionary biology and psychology and especially from neural sciences, which are becoming increasingly relevant for the self-reflection of science and linguistics. This issue will be broadly addressed in this paper.

Now, besides the empirical research in this latter field, some of its representatives also have developed interesting philosophical positions over the last decades, although they would almost deny that they are doing philosophy. Rather, they operate as designers of explanatory models about science itself. This is the case, for instance, of Von Glasersfeld's *radical constructivism*, or Maturana's and Varela's works about cognition and "*autopoiesis*". CTL's working field is to a certain extent the same as that of such designs, and it shares some of their premises and propositions. However, it rejects their one-sided scientism as well as their widespread contempt for "philosophy" and "philosophers" and attributes it largely to ignorance of the achievements of critical philosophy and to a refusal to take into account the latter's decisive contributions to the theoretical frame of sciences throughout history.

2.

At present, truly relevant philosophical and cultural novelties for CTL's work are quite scarce. A significant exception is the philosophical work on language theory by the late German scholar *Josef Simon*. I have commented on its implications for linguistics in several former publications.

In *linguistics* the last century has shown, above all, a proliferation of theoretical models and single research objects, not always sustained by a sufficient methodological and theoretical criticism. Although much valuable work has been done in all fields of linguistic research in the last one and a half century, which has significantly contributed to enlarge and to improve our knowledge about languages and about language in general, we are all witnesses of true masses of irrelevant and naive studies, supported by simplifying ideologies or pure and simple fashion, which have caused considerable confusion in the linguistic scenario.

Since recent developments in linguistics and cultural sciences frequently lack the desirable historical and critical education and consciousness, a determined return to older critical insights seems now advisable in order to *prevent falling back into already identified confusions in linguistic work*. This book is more interested in recovering the critical contributions of older thinkers, not always taken into

account, than in discussing the countless single proposals of many modern linguistic schools still relying on scarcely criticized traditional presuppositions and prejudices.

3.

CTL draws its ontological and ethical judgements from the point of view of “*humanism*”, in the precise historical sense of that spiritual movement, mainly – but not only – developed in the Western tradition, which aims to *improve “humanity” as free rationality*, i.e., as the *responsible use of reason by each individual*.

This implies a critical attitude towards all those conditions and influences which prevent individuals from *thinking and acting according to their own responsibility and in a non-contradictory or non-arbitrary manner*. On the one hand, humanism works towards *individual freedom and coherence*, which according to Kant are the roots of *human dignity*¹, and on the other hand, it works against uncontrolled power and domination, manipulation, ignorance and avoidable damage and suffering². With no doubt, language is one of the main determinations of the human. Therefore, its study is always involved, consciously or not, in the history of human efforts either to improve the human condition or to turn it back to obscurantism, underdevelopment and inhumanity. Linguistics is not immune to regressive temptations, and linguists within the academic world are not always safe from undue pressure, from authoritarian hierarchies and power relations, and from institutional or personal limitations of their “liberty of thought”.

This is, so to speak, the purely “negative”, critical function of humanism within human sciences. But again, consciously or not, whenever we face humanistic studies, we start from some *positive ideas about what a “human being” should actually be like*. And here we meet a remarkable historical “phase lag”.

Current ways of imagining ourselves (for instance as the “subjects” of linguistic utterances or of linguistic research, or of knowledge in general) still rely, on a large extent, on *old metaphysics of subjectivity*, which also dominate social sciences like sociology or even psychology. The “subject of knowledge” is generally understood

1. I. Kant, *Logik*, Vorwort.

2. In professional linguistic bibliography you will hardly find any mention of the kind of suffering grammar has provoked to countless generations of children and young people, forced to learn traditional grammatical categories and analyses which remained largely alien to their lives, interests and practical goals and hardly contributed to improve their expressive abilities. Eminent exceptions are the passionate arguments of Jakob Grimm and Fritz Mauthner against this habit of “torturing” the young minds with irrational demands lacking nearly any real scientific legitimation and with so scarce fruit.