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LINGUISTIC THEORY

A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROJECT

Up until today, the term linguistics has never figured in the title of any chair in the Collège de France.* However, those having a rapport with language have not been lacking, among them those of “language and literature,” “history and philology” of various cultures, philology, although it does not study language itself, having recourse to it. There are four personalities to be kept in mind in the twentieth century: Abbé Rousselot, whose teaching of phonetics, although briefly, left a permanent mark on his listeners; Mario Roques, who gave a course in the “*Histoire du vocabulaire français*” from 1937 to 1946; Roland Barthes, who rendered “*Sémiologie littéraire*” illustrious from 1976 to 1980; and M. Zemb, who two years ago was the first linguist in the modern sense

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

* This text gives the essentials of the inaugural lecture of the Chair of Linguistic Theory of the Collège de France, given on April 26, 1988.

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to enter the Collège, with a chair of “*Grammaire et pensée allemandes.*”

However, the heading “linguistic theory” is not, in spite of its newness, the mark of a rupture. It is a sign of the times. For almost a hundred years, three renowned professors, Bréal, Meillet and Benveniste, occupied successively the same chair of “compared grammar” in the Collège de France. The subject had appeared much earlier elsewhere. Through a strange coincidence, it was at Paris that the German Bopp learned Persian, Arab, Hebrew and Sanscrit with great teachers, but his famous book of 1816, *Sur les systèmes de conjugaison comparés du sanscrit et des langues grecque, latine, persane et germanique*, in which he joined the views of the exceptional Danish scholar Rask, had no followers in France. This is because only two currents were represented in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century: some scholars specialized in particular languages whose dynamics they barely envisaged, while others were theoreticians of general grammar which, through Port-Royal, went back to medieval thought and had not assumed the character of a comparative and historical discipline. But in 1866, when Bréal introduced comparative grammar in France with the translation of Bopp’s work, whose course he had followed in Berlin, the situation changed. The habit of taking social factors in evolution into account was extended to linguistics, a science whose name appeared in 1826 in a work by Balbi¹ and was taken up again in 1833 by Nodier.² On the other hand, the discipline was divested of mysticism with a nationalistic odor which was responsible for a certain attitude of reserve in France, for example, with regard to Grimm, none the less recognized as the one who had first posed (1822) a linguistic law by postulating the consonantal mutations in ancient German.

In 1881 Bréal, open to the great minds, confided his teaching at the École des Hautes Études to a 24-year-old scholar, F. de Saussure, who became famous after his *Mémoire sur le système des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, presented at Leipzig in 1878 before the founders of the Neo-grammarians school. These latter renewed the methods by explaining the changes in sounds in

¹ *Introduction à l’Atlas ethnographique du globe.*

² New edition of the *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, by Boiste.

languages by regular phonetic laws, susceptible however to being counteracted through analogy or borrowing. Saussure added the sign of his genius to this theory, of which he especially retained a real historical perspective finally substituted for the confusion of history with genesis, which characterized some of the earlier comparatists. Saussure remained in Paris for ten years. His teaching was not only an important stage on the road that would lead to his own *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), a basic work for all the linguistics of our century; through his exactness, richness and elegance he would also form a generation of enthusiastic linguists. Among them was Meillet, the successor of Bréal in the Collège de France in 1906. The idea of system, less antinomic than that of history, was already present in his procedure and even the structuralism of distinctive characteristics were there. Moreover, his *maître* Bréal, who did not entirely trust the simplistic vitalism and certain organic divagations of comparatism, entered the lists of French tradition of general grammar through his *Traité de Sémantique* (1897), although in the meaning he gave it the science of analysis was far from being purely static.

Benveniste succeeded Meillet in 1937. Just as the one had drawn a theory of the social causality of linguistic changes from his work, the other, in his books on nouns and nominal suffixes in Indo-European, gave a presentiment of a conception of the human subject of the discourse whose fecundity has not yet been fully exploited. His courses were however essentially devoted to comparative grammar, as were those of his predecessor. This is why, even if the accident of 1969 that, through a tragic irony of destiny, deprived the linguist of the use of speech, had not been followed by a period of almost twenty years during which linguistics was absent from the Collège de France while it prospered elsewhere in various ways, the conception defended here can in no way appear as simply a prolongation of the teaching of a man whose stature dominates our time. Although like all those of my generation I owe much to Benveniste, my intention is a different one, more modest and more daring at the same time. Convinced that there is no real separation between the two ends, one historical, the other general grammar, which have in turn dominated our studies, I endeavour to draw, from the examination of the most diverse languages and their cycles of evolution, a model

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of language that can contribute to an anthropological project. By creating a chair of linguistic theory the Collège de France has noted the evolution of the problematic. The Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres has ratified the vote of the professor of the Collège de France. But why not also the Académie des Sciences? By not consulting this latter was there a desire to remind us that linguistics, at least in its present state, is to be only the most scientific of the literary disciplines? Many linguists fear that from the Pandora's box of human sciences, some of which have the habit of working for the public and answering its demands, there issues too much ideology. They thus need to hide behind the repeated assurance of the scientific nature of their field. Scientists, living in science, speak less about it, and they even claim at times "this part of a dream that a too inexorable deduction would reduce to nothing," as M. Nozières said in the inaugural lecture from his chair of "statistical physics." At times they have recourse to metaphors (genetic field, chaos, etc.) with which many can identify. However, their method remains a legitimate model for linguists since through the rigors of proof it overcomes the impatiences of intuition. In fact, common sense, borne by the illusory transparence of such a daily activity as speaking, produces an inexhaustible geyser of chimeric visions on the phenomena of language: the letters of the alphabet represent all sounds; Chinese has no grammar; no words are found to express concepts in Australian dialects; Bantu dialects have a very poor lexicon and would not be true languages, and so on. By establishing the facts, the linguist endeavours to employ objective research. The Académie des Sciences can in this regard pay it some attention.

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It is not easy nor without risk to give an epistemology of linguistics. By devoting oneself seriously one is exposed, faced with the abundance of interpretative models in time and space, to do no more than investigate the history of the ways of knowing language and analyze the continuities and ruptures in theory. That is, to be a professor of linguistics rather than a linguist. Of course, one implies the other. It is more important to find the time to offer one's stone, even if it is only a pebble. To be too fascinated by

history one forgets to build. Everything seems to have already been said. One way, certainly narrow, is to search between the religion of the precursors sometimes observed in France and the iconoclastic cheerfulness which is sometimes met with in the United States. To me, the most profitable way seems to be to interrogate the other sciences on their methods, those of nature, those of man.

In an article of 1986³ Victor Yngve, a former physicist, advises linguists, having become one himself, to learn their procedures from the scientists, not the philosophers. He adds that linguistics, born of philosophy like all the sciences, has not really broken this original bond as the others have. As proof, he cites the large place given to polemics, as was formerly the case with physics. Criticizing this scholastic tendency, the author recommends the retention of only one aspect, that in which linguistics is an experimental science. The linguist, in fact, must be able to accept the rebuffs of reality not with the masochistic hope of tending the other cheek but of finding a way to avoid them. This assumes that linguistics is not yet mature enough to elaborate a hypothetical-deductive model and that we have a conception of it that is more Baconian than Keplerian, without taking into account that there would have been no Kepler's law without the description of the movement of the planets by Tycho Brahe nor, more recently, quantum mechanics without the innumerable spectroscopic data accumulated before. Linguistics, which also disposes of an enormous amount of material of at least six thousand languages, perhaps more, many of which are hardly known, must consequently respond to three demands that recall experimental sciences: "describe," which postulates a thorough examination of a mass of data and recourse to experimentation; "explain," what has been described by drawing laws from it; "predict" in terms of those laws. This is an important part of a linguist's activity: experiments through compared observations on the acquisition or learning of a language; technical research on the relationship between sounds, segmental or melodic, and their content; questionnaires on various points of syntax, etc.

³ "To Be a Scientist," Presidential Address, the Thirteenth Lacus Forum, Lake Bluff, The Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 1986 p. 1 (1-21).

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But there is above all a spectacular natural experiment and without a doubt one that is unique in human sciences that I propose to call the *creole laboratory*. The African slaves deprived of language on the plantations in the Antilles or the Austronesians whose dialects differed from one area to another, created pidgins that became creoles, thus giving an image of what is required to make a language and of its lines of evolution. However, the substrate languages, African, Austronesian, etc. left traces, largely unpredictable, on the creoles, so that this experiment is not free from all social influence. The need for comprehension set off disruptive forces that vary with each type of human group. Does that mean that the sciences of language, since they are not purely experimental, would also lean toward the social sciences? Actually, these latter cannot alone furnish a methodology for linguistics, because languages also reflect the functioning of knowledge in that their use in communication, although it modifies them, does not change their nature as languages. Encoding on an onomasio-logical itinerary of concepts toward words deserves to be studied just as decoding, that follows a semasio-logical itinerary from words to concepts. A linguistics of the speaker, faced with that of the listener, may contribute to the sciences called cognitive, that is advanced by a part of contemporary research in psycholinguistics, in transformational syntax, in generative semantics and in ethnoscience. Today, studies on artificial intelligence and on communication in natural language with a computer receive, in the United States or Germany, for example, important grants. Thanks to these means, the linguist may hope to have a better grasp on the functioning of human intellect by comparing its performance with that of the machine.

However, we must formulate at least three reservations. First, the good execution of a program does not guarantee that the constructed system is the model of linguistic operations and cognitive activity of man. Then, machines are at present unable to treat the fundamental property of natural languages, that the same expression may correspond to several meanings and inversely the same meaning to several expressions. Finally and especially, this research can in no case dispense us from a constantly more precise description of human languages, which are still unequaled as a means of reasoning, solving problems and expressing affects. So in

spite of the interdisciplinary profit of these undertakings, in which the linguist encounters for instance psychologists and mathematicians, he finds himself led back to the complexity of his object. As we have seen, this does not arise exclusively from social sciences, nor experimental sciences, nor cognitive sciences.

Consequently, the linguist must persuade himself that the research he does is all the more useful to others when he has better defined his method. This is seen for two of his temptations, semiology and logic. As for the former, Saussure's program was shown to be too optimistic:⁴ we still do not perceive the direct interest for the linguist in the laws that describe the life of signs within social life. As for logic, the starting point and line of flight of linguistics, its light is indirect: certainly, many operators of language reveal a natural logic, and logical concepts like that of modality are useful, but it is because language is not frozen in the timeless that even illogical language is the most fertile of formal systems. Nothing corresponds to the ties between phonology and grammar. Nor does anything else correspond to the categories created by abstraction, such as "complement," "pronoun," "transitivity," "possession," etc. Linguistics finds them all ready in the languages. Nevertheless, the difficult point is that in analyzing them we never exhaust the material to be studied. Languages present multiple problems and partly escape the linguist, convoking other sciences. But it happens that these human sciences, biology (of which neurology, full of promise, is a part) can furnish no basis for linguistic assertions on speech.

This complexity and our ignorance perhaps explain the present dispersion into so many schools unless it is that the stakes are high enough in what is most human in man so as to arouse the controversy. Among the doctrines the most interesting are sometimes the most ephemeral: their short life span comes from the fact that in explaining a small part of the data of language they leave a great deal unexplained: they do not always have time to exploit their discoveries. Other models appear that pose new questions without answering the old ones and which extol one explanatory principle for all, a sort of talisman of a type that is

⁴ Cf. Jaap J., SPA, *Sémiologie et linguistique. Réflexions préparadigmatiques*, Amsterdam, Rodopi 1985, p. 18.

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very little familiar to the exact sciences. In research the real progress in refining the modes of explanation, as for the cumulative advance of knowledge, is the one that integrates, not the one that abolishes. It is best however to remain open to these numerous theories, some of which are attentive to what the others do. In France, rich in both traditional thematics and imported ideas, (at times with a fervor of a late blossoming) we find among other currents functionalism; psychomechanics and its modern adaptations, the semiotic school of Paris; local developments in Anglo-American research in pragmatics; various types of formal linguistics; theories of enunciation; French versions of the stages in generative grammar and its prolongations in the theories of linkage and modular. Or as far as sound is concerned, in metric and autosegmental phonologies.

However costly the choice, I must trace well-defined boundaries. The linguist seems to me to be in the uncomfortable position of a man perched at the summit of a three-sided pyramid. From such a point we know that an individual, if he does not move, can see only one face at a time. Now languages are deployed on all three sides. Because through one of their aspects they belong to the realm of natural sciences (messages are natural objects), through another to a logico-mathematical axiomatic (some operations underlie enunciation) and lastly through psychosocial disciplines (languages are spoken by individuals within groups). The defining of a territory requires criteria. For me, the most important is the rapport between meanings and forms. If it is fruitless to obey, submit to forms by ignoring meanings, it is dangerous for a linguist to present conceptual categories without being careful to find in them, in the formal tissue of the discourse, traces for guidelines and guarantees. Because then there are no longer limits to the extension of the field and the creation of semantic artefacts. Language does not belong to the linguist alone, but he is the only one to hold a discourse on it that articulates the contents on their supports. At an equal distance from the idealism of pure concepts and the fetichism of inert material the linguist's task is to show that forms are inhabited by meanings. The formal signs of meaning transparent in the simplest cases may in other cases be less evident and of various kinds, from intonation, greatly neglected by modern theories, to the order of words, that I consider a real morpheme

sequence, without forgetting the previous context (immediate or broad) nor the structural relationships revealed by rapprochements between the statements of the same semantic family. We learn more about speech by interrogating the substance of languages than we do in posing profound schemes whose discourse would be a surface realization, precarious and ambiguous. We also learn more when, refusing the encyclopedic inflation of a hypertrophied linguistics that responds by another excess (that of “pragmatics”) to the *immanentistes* views of the self-sufficient structuralisms, we admit that forms are bearers of enough meaning so that the signification of a statement does depend solely on its success as an act of speech.

My intention is plain: to propose a linguistics of languages producing a linguistic theory. For me, each of these two terms has an equal weight. There is no conceivable theory except that which does not conceal any language because of recalcitrant data. The precision and often the technicality of analyses could not be incompatible with the elevation of the syntheses. I see a total continuity between a man in the field and theoretical interrogation. Extension is not the opposite of comprehension and also some well-known languages allow profusion to be balanced by intensity. The basic material remains the immense diversity of human languages. That is what defines them and not an accidental profile. It is urgent to remember this, even if it is only to adjure the temptation of Eurocentrism of human sciences in the West. We know that a subtle and recent aspect of this temptation is the refusal of particularisms with the surprising pretext that if they were too stressed there would be some clandestine form of racism. That said, the interest in the most diverse languages does not imply the effort to practice them all. But it is a bulwark against the idolatry of models. I would not sacrifice a language to a paradigm. Fascinated by languages, I am not taken with their pedantic glossology. Since, without a purveyor cadre of great problematics, research is only an accumulation of invertebrate knowledge, it is the explicative ability of a theory that serves as criterion for its retention. Models are not ends in themselves, and it is not enough to evaluate their compared merits by magnifying the concepts deemed to be the least costly and in asking of languages only rare and partial verifications.

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In addition, languages are living entities. The past of words, groups of words, sentences haunt their present. Thus in order to follow the task of language in the activity of speech, we must untangle the skein of temporality and go beyond the opposition between synchrony and diachrony. A linguistic situation is not really grasped except through the tendencies that energize it. This is why a high degree of formalization and frequent recourse to symbols set up in algorithmic schemas that aroused the somewhat polemic doubts of Earl Popper⁵ risks to hide a part of the facts by fixing them. Of course it is often useful to simplify so as to expose and formalize to deal with a mass of data, but that does not explain them. We cannot do away with a statement with the pretext that it contradicts a calculation. The linguist must interrogate the resources of a language, not domesticate them in order to integrate them into a formalism.

Where can a principle of explanation be found then, if not in the comparison of languages? The research into universals, linked to typological inquiry, is thus essential. There are two justifications for this. First, any science explores the invariables that include the too great diversity of phenomena under some organizational principles. The linguist must thus distinguish what is common to all languages and what is only found in certain types. In the second place, this sort of compared grammar teaches us a great deal about the different ways in which languages structure what can be spoken. For example, although the desire for something supposes saying so, interior or proffered, there is not a verb "to say" expressed in a word like "to want" in French, while in Amharic, a language of Ethiopia, or in *iatmoul* or *kate*, languages of New Guinea, the verb "to want", which is not often used or even absent, is expressed by preference by a verb "to say" plus a future or an imperative. Another example: in French, a nominal determinant and a relative proposition, as in *le livre du père* and *le livre que tu lis* are, in spite of their relationship, two different structures while in *yaka*, a Bantu language of Zaire, the treatment is exactly the same, through inflection.

For all the studied characteristics, a deductive procedure must be accompanied by an inductive procedure of control. The study

⁵ *Logique de la découverte scientifique*, French translation of N. Thyssen-Rutten and Ph. Devaux, Paris, Payot 1984, p. 401.

of the universals of language thus serves as both basis and counter-proof of a general cadre of treatment of linguistic statements. What I have tried to elaborate is the theory of the three points of view. The triple treatment that I propose here puts statements into relationship, from the point of view 1), semantic-morpho-syntactic (which supposes a previous phonology); from the point of view 2), semantic-referential, with the question on hand; and from the point of view 3), enunciative-hierarchic, with the participants in the conversation. The rapports subject/action/theme of one part and the predicate/process/rheme⁶ of the other closely unite the three strategies. A semantic content and an enunciative choice are only recognized when they dispose of marks, whatever they may be. Syntax is the most structured part of the language along with phonology, which, as we know, played an important role at the end of the thirties in the birth of structuralism. Once morphology has been studied, syntax examines the types of units, verbs, nouns, etc., and their relationships. I will endeavor to show that instead of opposition between noun and verb, we must speak of polarity and that there is a functional continuum rather than clear-cut categories, defined by binary traits as tradition would have it. In addition, many syntactical data, such as the order of words, determination, accusative or ergative structure of the statement, are explained by the second and third points of view through the complex coincidence of semantic and enunciative pressures that put into play values of scale such as the degrees of potentiality, inherence, dynamism, etc. The theory of the three points of view integrates enunciative strategies that may be illustrated by the succession of a rheme on a high register and a theme on a low register, in a French statement such as this, for example: "*Remarquable, cet édifice!*" From this, the theory implies a breaking up of the framework of the sentence. In fact, the thematic progression of the discourse can only be grasped at the level of the paragraph, oral or written, as a succession of sentences. We observe that in many Indo-European languages the relative determinative propositions come from the fusion of one sentence with a following one, toward which the first represents an already-given piece of information. In addition many languages,

⁶ The most important part of the statement.

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for instance from Colombia or the Philippines, have morphemes signalling that, from one sentence to another, the line of thought changes. Finally, all languages have marks of cohesion that can only be explained at a more englobing level than that of the sentence.

Beyond that, all these phenomena postulate a rather general cadre of interpretation that goes further than the antinomy between language as system and word as activity. There could not be two linguistics articulated on these two axes, because the system is not conceivable without its being put into action and *vice versa*. The model of interpretation proposed here to open up a way of unity is that of a linguistics that I call "socio-operative." This has as a basis the dialogal relationship that implants individual operations of emission and reception on the structures of the language, as well as on the circumstances of the exchange of words, the data of these two types both having a foundation in society and culture. From this comes the qualification of this linguistics as socio-operative. The meaning produced by the speaker and interpreted by the listener (another face of the same meaning) is divided into three zones. Only one of the three is coded, that of the components that correspond to formal marks. These components are the reconstructed referent, the signified of the signs, the semantics of the syntactical relationships, the meaning connected to the contextual environment. Subtle operations are revealed through the analysis, conducted for numerous languages, of the marks of modalities of the statement, verbal, personal aspects, etc. However, the linguist cannot ignore the study of two other zones of meaning that are peripheral with regard to his field: they are not coded, thus contingent and not predictable, that is, the zone of situational incidences and that of unconscious significances. Because the exact circumstances of inter locution, the social status of the protagonists, the misunderstandings and lapses, are part of the meaning although the linguist today is deprived of the means to treat them adequately.

At the center of this model is man, appearing in the concrete reality of the exchange of words. I propose to conceptualize him as a psychosocial speaker. The term psychosocial integrates the two axes that define the cadre of all communication, but man is above all an interlocutor (in the two senses of speaker and listener).

Linguistics draws from languages only what it has to say, since through the effect of epistemological aporie mentioned above none of the sciences that are also interested in languages is able to procure the least instrument of analysis for it. On the contrary, it is linguistics that can serve these other sciences. The laws that control languages, the forces that modify them, the genesis of the arbitrary extracting the sayable from the mimetics of the sounds in the world, these are the places, properly linguistic, where the psychosocial fact that is language is grasped. The speaker makes the language by putting it into words, which means that naturally and beyond the obsolete *a priori* about his social being or psyche, he is basically dialogal.

A complex network of constraints and liberties links the language to the speaker and linguistics contributes its part, but on the basis of precise data to a knowledge of man pondering the determinisms of his condition by the perseverance in his choices. Language presents, to the child who is beginning to acquire it, a sort of foretaste of life, of rules, of morals. The phonological system, rules of morphosyntax, more or less forcing according to the language; the networks of semes in the lexicon; the idiomatic expressions, are so many areas of conventional force, because the child has to learn them, unless he retreats into the pathological asociality of refusing to talk. At the same time, an area of liberty opens up to the speaker in the exercise of the word; the most structured parts of grammar have evasions. Even the use of functional signs may leave a place for some initiative. This is the case, among many other examples, of the direct object defined in certain dialects, including Persian or Burmese. In addition, throughout the history of languages syntax is constructed around the human *ego*, the source of all discourse, the assigned place of the animate and the inanimate commanding the oscillations of an axis of personality. The speaker marks his presence in the lexicon by the chicanes of the word: *double entendres*, periphrastic connivences, broken connotative rules, episodic of permanent activity, poetic creation, misappropriation for his profit of the inexorable logic of semantic cohabitations.

In fact, such a conception of linguistics implies an entire "anthropology." The man of words obscurely directs the destiny of languages. It is a semi-unconscious but voluntary process that we

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see unfold. Contrary to what we understand when we deny the speaker, as frequently happens, any consciousness of change, the unconscious does not imply the absence of intention. The will of the psychosocial speaker comes into full view in the study of morphogenesis, particularly in the processes of grammaticalization. One finds there the fascinating reality that these processes are not linear but cyclic, or more precisely, repetition never being mechanical, that they unroll in a spiral. The desire to express oneself freely produces forms; the need for collective comprehension going beyond the chances of individual invention imposes constraints that fix forms: it is the birth of a morphosyntax. In its turn, this latter slackens under the pressure of what is meant to be said, and the forms are renewed or contain new meanings while finding old schemas. We see the birth, resolution and rebirth of a major conflict between two needs that direct all the evolution of languages: economy of forms on the one hand, expressivity on the other. One shortens or suppresses, the other lengthens or adds. Long words are shortened to speed up the rhythm of the discourse, but then the elements augment them to avert the risk of ambiguity through homophony and answer the human desire to mark its presence in the discourse. In a parallel way, the conflicts between the simplicity of the types of formation of words and sentences and their complexity or obscureness are sharpened and resolved. Obviously, such processes can only be perceived at a certain duration, sometimes several centuries, sometimes several millenaries. We can give many illustrations of these cyclic processes: the almost universal condensation of entire sentences into compound nouns (in their turn bases for departure for new sentences), alternations of the verbs "to be" and "to have" in conjugation through auxiliary in numerous linguistic families, from Celtic to Slav, renewal of verbal forms in Semitics, process of reduplication in several groups of languages, creolization-decreolization, or from a more external point of view, dialectization of a common language, ending in a new common language through selection of a dialectal norm. In the case of the creoles, the creators of human languages cover in an extremely short time, sorts of glossogenetics or transhistoric demiurges at the level of consciousness, the road that leads in the form of words and in syntax from the synthetic to the analytic, then from the analytic to

the synthetic.

Along all these itineraries we see man fashion his rapport with the world in his language as in all his socio-cultural activities at the same time as he himself is fashioned. Three consequences are derived from this. First, the debate on the ontological or chronological priority of thought with regard to language loses much of its interest, with one reservation: the relationship being reciprocal it is important, faced with the long tradition that wants to retain only the influence of thought on language, to recall a symmetrical reality. It is not easy for man to conceive and distinguish what his language does not make explicit, as has been shown by the difficulty of rendering certain ideas of the Latin or Greek Gospels comprehensible using literal translations into many languages, those of the Far East, for example, which do not directly express those ideas. Thus there is a sort of instrumental predetermination of thought through language. In pointing this out, obviously we must not forget that inversely there also exists a reflection of organizational conceptual schemas of the universe in language, as is shown in numerous dialects; for example, in Africa, America and Southeast Asia, the nominal classes dividing the world and nature in terms of the material and functional properties of objects.

In the second place, it is only when man's ancestor specifies speech as a faculty in languages as realizations that social needs accentuate the role of these latter as instruments of communication, while up until then the human species had primarily to distinguish itself by its semiotic aptitude: fabricated signs led to other signs through modelization in series. With the advent of languages man, in order to communicate, also learned to segment (in the spoken series) while at the same time he differentiated (in paradigms) as is confirmed by the study of various forms of aphasia. Since then he has never ceased to perfect his languages, adapting them to his needs. We see this in historical phonology, in the process of transphonologization, by which decisive sound oppositions are preserved because of their usefulness, even in new phonic material. Adapting his languages to his needs, man also adapts them to his environment as he does all other tools, but it goes without saying that they are distinguished by being much more than simple tools.

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Finally, human languages are first of all oral. The linguistic theory we believe it a duty to apply gives an important role to orality and is especially (but not exclusively) furnished with a material made up of oral languages only, African, Amerindian, Oceanian, Asiatic, etc. It is the choice of the vocalauditive channel, in preference to possible others, that shaped the destiny of languages and that of the human species. It is in the oral tissue of the discourse, offered and received, not in its graphic traces that the linguist can find the differentiations without which his work has no meaning. It is above all in the emitted and received word that changes in systems of language germinate. What would a linguistics be that giving priority to written languages would bring no other contribution to the vast anthropological project in which it must be necessarily integrated to neglect or disregard an immense part of humanity: the part where non-written languages are spoken and the part that is illiterate in countries with a written language? That said, we will study here the phenomena in their observable and complete reality, as any research should. It cannot be a question, with the pretext of primacy of the oral, to underestimate the part taken in the destiny of many languages by the revolutionary invention of writing, nor to forget the influence that graphics have sometimes exercised on phonetic changes themselves. French offers certain illustrations of this influence. We will be careful not to neglect the place of writing in the determination of the norm of many languages among those that cover vast cultural areas, and we will remember the esthetic temptation of some great creators of written language beguiled by graphisms. Above all, we will remember that the birth of comparative grammar, and linguistics, is linked to the use of written texts. That is not enough, however, to speculate about the importance of orality in a linguistics that takes man for its project and end.

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Given this conception, a last question may be posed: of what use is linguistics? At first glance, none, unless like any research to satisfy an intense avidity to know. Or can we say that it has no other usefulness than to keep some grammarians alive, as Erasmus

suggested in derision,⁷ who waste their breath disputing on the dangers that could befall the human species from the confusion of conjunctions and adverbs? Actually, linguistics can render some services. First at a simple level of pure application the experience of the linguist may be put to profit in an external domain, that of planning, a voluntary undertaking by which man is assured of the mastery of his language conceived as an inalienable natural good. Whether it is a matter of determining an interdialectal norm, of neological regulation or of the reform of spelling, linguistics, through the accumulated knowledge on the properties and types of evolution of languages can bring a precious cooperation to planners.

Another area where the contribution of linguistics is essential is that of the history of civilizations. We have no text, no monument, no trace that can attest to the existence of populations designated as Indo-European. Our only witnesses are the Indo-European *languages*. And it is the same for other genetic families, from the Uralians to the Tibetan-Burmese and Algonquins. Linguistics alone holds out the helpful line to us and guides us across the dense fogs of ignorance, aiding us to reconstruct our past in the most likely way. In the stubborn, although partly desperate, effort to discover the meaning of an apparently chaotic and shattered universe language casts a feeble light on the road to harmony.

Finally, what linguistics teaches us is not without influence even on the control of our future, in the face of the challenges that accumulate on our horizon. While the faculty of language, which from the start has characterized *Homo habilis* is so by definition, languages are diverse. My research suggests that I go even further: they have been diverse since their birth itself. For me this is a strong presumption, if not a certitude. We must see in this not only the aptitude of man, alone among living species, to adapt to his environment not only through his biological organization but also through his intelligence and sociocultural vocation. Man exercises a conscious activity on his environment, and it is in this way that he succeeds in reducing the selective pressures of nature. Now, one instrument of this activity is language. Linguistics has therefore an eminent role to play in the enterprise conducted by all human

⁷ *Éloge de la folie*, Ch. 49, last paragraph.

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sciences to arrive at a constantly more profound knowledge of man. The stakes of such a knowledge are, quite simply, our destiny itself.

Is the power of the media going to accelerate exponentially the evolution of language? Do the realizations of the machine have an uncertain future? We can predict nothing from the indications we have, because man, who has always adapted his tools so well is capable of any reversal. Will he invent original forms of communication? Will he distribute functions differently, assigning a new place to language? Without pretending to be a prophet, I remain resolutely optimistic. For me, languages, weighty with all the dialogal presences accumulated from time immemorial, are images of life. The linguist, stubbornly attached to the austere research of the laws behind the intoxication of sounds and the turbulence of words, sees in languages the vital activity of a speaker who has left throughout the past traces of operations similar to those he accomplishes in the daily discourse. This is because he is fascinated by them and at the same time concerned to submit them to calm analyses of reason, so that someone who has speech as a metier may like to drive the secrets of exotic languages out of hiding. Such was also the radiant desire of the poet who wrote, in harmony with the obstinate quest of the linguist:

“Those who every day live farther from their place of birth, those who each day pull their boat on to other shores, each day better know the course of illegible things and, going up the rivers toward their source, between green illusions, they are suddenly overtaken by that severe vision in which any language loses its arms [...] And at the side of the original waters returning with the day, like the traveler, to neomeny, whose behavior is uncertain and whose gait is aberrant, I have the plan to stray among the oldest strata of the language, among the highest phonetic segments as far as the very distant languages, as far as the very complete and sufficient languages,

like those languages [...] that had no distinct words for yesterday and tomorrow. Come and follow us who have no words to say; we set up this pure delight without graphs where the ancient human phrase has course: we move among clear elisions, residues of ancient prefixes having lost their initial letter and preceding the fine work of linguistics we lay out our paths as far as those

unheard-of locutions where aspiration recedes beyond vowels and the modulation of the breath is diffused according to halfsonorous labials in search of pure vocalic endings.

...And it was in the morning, in the purest sound, a fine country without hate nor harm, a place of grace and gratitude for the ascendance of the sure portents of the spirit.”⁸

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⁸ Saint-John Perse, *Exil, Neiges*: IV. “*Seul à faire le compte...*” Paris, Gallimard 1960.