

**LANGUAGE:
AN EMERGING DRAMA IN THREE ACTS**

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ACT 1: LANGUAGE: MATTER OR ENERGY?

Is language a dead thing as 'matter', or is it a matter of 'energy' – the tool that often determines the shape of the things to come, or the force that drives the segments of human aggregates in a society towards a given direction?

SCENE 1: MATTER

Let's assume language is like matter, dead. But if it were dead, what brings it back to life? Had we posed this question to Saussure, he would have said, "Why, *parole*, of course!" *Parole*, the actual instantiation of speaking; *Parole*, that is clearly not a monologue; *Parole*, that is where all theatre lies, some chained by the rules of the game, the *langue* or the '*system*', and some that are unleashed, with brazen violation of accepted forms of speech behavior. Let's assume then that languages can be enlivened, which is when it assumes a definite contour, a structure.

In fact, when *matter* is moulded into a structure, what emerges is a *sign*; and when signs are given shapes, they demand names; when names are created, what we get are the nominals. Very soon, nominals demand that there be verbs that go with their character, and then on we are saddled with prefixes, suffixes, terminations, trappings, traces and agreements - a whole lot of forms that appear on the center-stage, each demanding attention. It is then that matter

comes to life. All those formative trappings act as enzymes acting as catalytic forces that promote different biochemical reactions. When looking at language as a matter drives us towards *Bio-semiotics*, one can't but help going back to Charles Sanders Peirce's (1892) *The Monist* where he has an essay called *Man's Glassy Essence* (vol.3:1-22), where he talks about the feeling of even objects like an amoeba or a slime-mould, as if matter has an 'inner side' – perfectly capable of qualities that are typically attributed to things living. Peirce says here:

"Hence, it would be a mistake to conceive of the psychical and the physical aspects of matter as two aspects absolutely distinct. Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relation of *action* and *reaction* with other things, it appears as matter. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as consciousness. These two views are combined when we remember that mechanical laws are nothing but acquired habits, like all the regularities of mind, including the tendency to take habits, itself; and that this action of habit is nothing but generalization, and generalization is nothing but spreading of feelings." (CP 6.268).

To what extent is language prone to generalizations? To what extent is it a construct that is open to feelings? As a creative person, one is bound to say, "to a great extent". Therefore, should we say, just as we the speakers "feel" for our languages, on its own, language too "feels" as it comes alive in paroles.

SCENE 2: ENERGY

What is the consequence of a position that says that language is like an energy that operates on events, moments, relations, or even in a given space – driving all elements that make connections with it – speakers, meanings, intensions, extensions, and last of all, *texts*? In fact, this falls with the theoretical position that is known by the *Physical Codification Thesis* as in Emmeche (1999) under which "The *sign* should be re-conceptualized as something that enables a change of state to be brought about between energetic entities, and thus ***semiosis*** is the transformation of energy into signs, relatively stable spatio-temporal units occurring within particular orders of matter-energy configurations. These orders are systems of knowledge and of molecular organization as well; they are organized codal actions (of codification of energy) that provide both continuity of knowledge and transformation of energy" (Emmeche, Clause, 1999, 'The biosemiotics of emergent properties in a pluralist ontology' in Edwina Taborsky, ed. *Semiosis. Evolution. Energy: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Sign*. Shaker Verlag, Aachen; 89-109).

It is good to remember that in the literature, we also get a *Pansemiotic thesis*, which believes that the whole universe is perfused with signs, and that semiosis is not only a process common to both organic, functional wholes (organisms as interpreters, or interpretants) as well as to the interpretants – the objects denoted by the signs, and their universal categories, which perhaps existed even before the origin of life. The pansemiotic thesis believes in the idea that matter is effete (that is, affected, over-refined, and ineffectual) mind, or that the qualities of experience and sensation 'appear' in degrees, and that even inorganic systems have them. Even if we do not subscribe to the 'Origin' theory, and subscribe to a 'Continuity' thesis (that mind is continuous with matter, and that systems with meaning-attributing capacities have originated

from, or are a certain organization of, material systems), one is more inclined to such a view of nature.

ACT 2: POSITIONING LANGUAGE

Language is a space that opens up its frontiers to all who wish to bring in the fusion of matter and energy, and to my mind that is what the theatre is doing. Notwithstanding the clichés like "Life is a Theatre" etc, I would rather be inclined to agree with Ashok Kelkar who talks about "The Play is the Thing", bringing performance into the focus when language needs to be discussed.

SCENE 1: CONSTRUCTING A CRITICAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE &

THE 'ACT' OF SPEAKING

I have often asked that part of myself who is a linguist as to what is the role of a linguist vis-à-vis the 'act' of speaking? Does his assignment begin and end with stating 'How to do good things with words?' (à la J.F. Austin) or create a grammar of illocutionary speech acts (like John Searle)? Is he a pedestrian walking along the beaten track looking at the man on the stage with a sense of wonder and envy? Or, is he a part of the performance?

I think the linguist tries to critique 'language' and human performance vis-à-vis 'language use' trying to remain in a neutral space, often not realizing that his critique is a part of the performance and no matter what theory he may subscribe to, his description is still a grossly political act. The linguist often begins with a position that his theory a system or is it reducible to any fixed set of proscriptions. He soon realizes that no critical theory can be apolitical, and hence it needs to be grounded even though each theory must have a utopian component that allows wild guesses, dreams, seemingly impossible combinations and wilderness. He realizes that the theory must take a social position vis-à-vis various forces at play in the society each of which gets mirrored in language, and that it must push beyond the dogma that had blocked all creativity and dissent, and that had indirectly contributed to the ideological and institutional framework of oppression. As a critique of language and its performance, its fulfillment or the lack of it – of its social and political obligations, modern linguistics as a critical theory emerged from the history of uncertainty in the dark period that gave rise to the enlightenment a few centuries ago, but it took strong roots between the two world wars constantly negotiating for its space with other disciplines, and trying to discover a meta-language that would reflect a kind of integrity and coherence.

SCENE 2: CRITICAL THEORY AND LANGUAGE AS THE FOCUS

Outside language, for the literary theoreticians, the problem was that of making choices - between science and religion, progress and morality, technology and social development, all of which seem to have collapsed in the war-time bunkers. One disaster has been replaced with another, and the present century has witnessed a series of "betrayals" which needed to be understood. We need to understand the 'themes' and their 'treatments' through which the period of critical theory building passed.

Among the initial critical theoreticians, **Korsch** (*'Marxism and Philosophy'* 1923) employed the insights of materialist dialectics to criticize the increasingly petrified forms of Marxism to argue that freedom could never be identified with any given form or system. Around the same time, **Georg Lukacs** (*'History and Class Consciousness'*, 1923) known for his contribution to the development of the sociology of knowledge, used Critical theory both to analyze the discordant relation between "bourgeois" theory and practice as well as develop interpretations of issues like alienation. **Ernst Bloch**, with his utopian theory and his position on historical materialism, raised questions in the areas of anthropological, religious studies, and existential philosophy. This was also the time when the **Frankfurt School** was established, with Max **Horkheimer** (one who had coined the term "critical theory") leading from the front after 1930s to juxtapose critical theory against all "traditional," metaphysical and materialist forms. "His purpose", as said Bronner (1993) "was to highlight the manner in which critical theory militates against all attempts to construct a fixed system and every attempt to identify the *subject* with the *object*, whether conceived in terms of social institutions or the "covering" categories of philosophy."

Stephen **Bronner**, in his 'Points of Departure: Sketches for a Critical Theory with Public Aims' argues that exile was the real theme of the 1930s through the end of the second world war. After Horkheimer, the relation between politics and philosophy was well worked out in the work of Martin **Heidegger**, who played a major role in the '30s. As in linguistics, jumping from the neo-grammarians to Saussure, and from his ideas to Ed Sapir's Linguistic Relativity position, or to the position of the descriptivists like Bloomfield and Hockett, finally giving birth to Chomskyan positions, each critical theory is known by the philosophical positions it opposes. This was a period in which all hope for the future seemed lost, which was when **Walter Benjamin**, who would become one of the most prominent literary critics and philosophers of the century, sought to save it by recapturing "the glow of the profane." His position against totalitarianism (especially, against the classical Hegelian concept of totality), and emphasis on the particular would ultimately lay the basis for transforming the entire critical project. Benjamin viewed surrealism, with its emphasis on the transformation of everyday experience, as an essential component of the revolution. His own radicalization, in fact, occurred through his relationships with outspoken critics of bourgeois cultural traditions like Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and others. However, when expressionism and modernism came under attack in favor of "realism" during Stalin's time, a debate took place in which Lukacs, who had openly retreated from his youthful avant-gardism in order to propound a standpoint in conformity with the new communist line, set the stage for a debate in which Bloch and Bertolt Brecht offered the most important responses.

It was then that collaboration with Theodor Adorno, Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which marked a significant shift in the direction of critical theory. No longer was the proletariat seen as the revolutionary subject of history, no longer were teleological notions of progress taken seriously, no longer was the liberal enlightenment legacy taken for granted, no longer was it merely a matter of redirecting technology towards new ends. The critical theory of society

surrendered to a more directly anthropological form of inquiry, and language returned as the focal point once again.

ACT 3: TRANSFORMATIONS

In the second half of the earlier century, on the socio-political front, the possibility of revolutionary transformation was seen as fading in the face of an apparently seamless bureaucratic order buttressed by the "culture industry" and intent on eliminating subjectivity – giving rise to a certain cultural elitism. Interestingly, this was the time we hear about autonomy of linguistics from among all human and social sciences, and within linguistics, the focus was on autonomy of syntax. This was also the time when 'transformations' ruled the supreme thanks to the Chomskyan revolution in the theory building within linguistics (documented in his 'Syntactic Structures' in 1957 to his journey up to the 'Aspects of Theory of Syntax' in 1965 and beyond).

SCENE 1: CONSTRUCTING THEORY? INWARD HO!

We must also see the emphasis here on the inward looking – moving away from 'field studies' or looking at language from outside. Finally, the Chomskyans of all varieties always emphasized moving away from purposive aims while doing linguistics. This meant that one must study language for the sake of language. It is not surprising if we find parallels of this restrictive move in other field of arts.

On the other front, however, it is with Adorno that the relation between theory and practice went almost to the extent of disintegration. The connection between immanence and transcendence appeared most tenuous. "Dialectics at a Standstill" analyzed his rescue of utopia through an "inversion" of reality and his redefinition of critical theory as an anti-systemic metaphysic lacking any criteria with which to justify its claims or articulate its purposive aims. Adorno was always concerned with "undistorted communication" and an emancipatory interest capable of informing the rational adjudication of grievances. He had also become a prominent "public intellectual," who dared to take a stand on the most important political and philosophical issues of the age. Perhaps this is part of the reason why he retreated from his earlier methodological commitments to epistemological forms of inquiry. There was a parallel move by Chomsky who became a public intellectual taking political positions that associate him with liberalism but at the same time, keeping his flock quite under control within linguistics, criticizing studies on the relationship between language and society or between language and culture as of no consequence to the enterprise of building a theory of language. As time went by, both socio-linguists and comparativists began raising uncomfortable questions, for which those who believed in disciplinary autonomy within linguistics had no answers.

Outside Linguistics, this was also the time when Habermas made what is known as a "linguistic turn," which was inspired by his new interest in pragmatism and analytic philosophy. Critical theory had originally viewed these philosophical standpoints with contempt. But, according to Habermas, the normative claims of critical theory would now finally receive justification. They would become grounded within the inter-subjective construct of language itself and, in this way, he believed that a new discourse ethic might prove useful in informing a host of essentially liberal perspectives on law and politics – especially in the way language inter-played with them.

Notice that we have by now returned full circle to the notion of language as a play, ploy and performance.

SCENE 2: LANGUAGE AS A PERFORMANCE

We return to the debate on matter and energy within the tradition of semiotics and take a position that language is perhaps both matter and energy. It allows us to operate on as a tool on itself as a field. There was a time within our tradition of knowledge when it was perhaps an either-or or "all-or-none" matter in defining each component of linguistics and grammar, but as I have argued elsewhere, it is often the case that "a speech community will get the grammar it deserved." Language is a very purposive element, capable of transforming – of being and becoming a political act, a symbol of resistance, a force that binds a human aggregate together, and even a geographic tool that defines a nation space, or a culture. Such being the all-pervasive nature of language, it is not a theoretical setback for us if we take a position that language is beyond the socio-grammatical categories – like gender, class, number and person, and yet is conditioned and constrained by each one of them.

Language is watching those who perform with this tool on stage, given any parole – real or 'realistic', and at the same time it is language that plays the role as the curtain rises. It is both an actor and a spectator, both a playwright and the right space where the play is to be grounded – stage or no stage.

Linguistics today has to sit with Performing Arts Theory to decide on a new set of agenda.