The Great Discovery of Hobbes' Philosophy of Language

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by

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The XVIIth century is a century of a splendorous sensibility and of an intense curiosity on the intimate nature of human language. The reasons are many and diverse. I will not analyze them. Nor I even refer them. Let me just remind you that the main question concerns the role which language performs in the process of knowledge: Does language help to promote knowledge? Or, on the contrary, does it prevent its progress? Is language a disturbing factor or a necessary element for the acquisition of knowledge? A mere means for communicating knowledge or an essential *medium* for constituting knowledge?

Two great positions can be signalized. A critical position, which attributes to language mere communicative functions and moreover emphasizes the insufficiencies and disturbing effects language introduces on communication: Bacon, Locke, Descartes, Arnauld, Melabranche and, in

general, all those who look for the construction of new artificial languages – from Lodwick to Dalgano, from Seth Ward to Wilkins. And a positive position which, although recognizing some limits and imperfection of human languages, nevertheless stresses its constitutive character[1]. From my point of view, just two names in modern times: Thomas Hobbes and some years later Leibniz.

Hobbes' situation is quite singular. He is the first to point out the constitutive character of language in the process of knowledge. And he does that in such a radical way that he quite deserves to be considered the indisputable predecessor of the computational linguistic theory of cognition. As he says in a famous statement: "reasoning is nothing but reckoning"[2] . Hobbs is also the only one to do it in England where, in the line of Bacon, the critical position was prevailing. Further, he is the one who more clearly and explicitly makes of language the articulation point of a general theory of mind (a theory of human nature, as he says) and a political theory. That is, he is the one who more clearly and explicitly extracts the political consequences of a certain language conception. As Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*, without language "there had been, amongst men, neither common-wealth, nor

[1] For further developments n this issues, see Pombo, O. *Leibniz and the Problem of Universal Language*, Münster: Nodus Publikationem, 1987.

[2] [2] HOBBES, *Leviathan*, edited by C. B. MACPHERSON, London, Penguin Books, Pelican Classics, 1968, p. 99. Em todas as referências que se seguem usar-se-á a abreviatura ***L*.**

society, not contact, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears and wolves." (***L.*** p. 100)

In fact, for Hobbes, language has three uses. The first is a private use. At this level, language makes us able to "transfer (*translation*) our mental discourse into verbal discourse" (***L.*** p. 100), that is, language stabilizes the imagetic fluid (mental discourse) by establishing points of reference and orientation around which representations become fixed and isolated. It is in this sense that Hobbes attributes names the status of *signals* (marks, notes, *monimenta*), only distinguishable from other *signals* (for instance, signals made with rocks set up at sea to remember dangerous places to navigators[3]) by their sonorous nature and by allowing the remembrance, not of other objects, but of thoughts of one person to himself. The second is a communicative use. Language is now the exteriorization, the exhibition (that is, the communication) of thoughts of one person to other persons. Language is no longer a sensible/sonorous mark but a *sign* (***L.*** p. 100).

But, there is a third use (I would like to stress). A use by which names are not only mnemonic marks of private use (*signals*), not only exterior signs of communicative value (*signs*) but also a signification, a bow (a link) between a sound and the conception which this sound allows us to remember

[3] Cf. HOBBES, *Human Nature or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*, V, § 1, in *The* E*lements of Law Natural and Politic,* ed. F. TÖNIES, London: Frankcass R. Co. Ltd., 1969. Para as referências subsequentes utilizar-se-á a abreviatura ***H.N.***.

and to communicate. Now, it is only at this third level that arbitrariness of language emerges. Names can thus be defined by Hobbes as voices of men, "arbitrarily imposed as a mark to bring to his mind some conception on which it is imposed and as a sign to communicate to others those conceptions" (***H.N***. V, § 2).

In the first two uses (mnemonic and communicative) language is submitted to universal mechanical causality. As a producer of sounds, of sonorities of private and public use, man does not escape the involving determinism. There are bodily, passional, phonic, articulatory mechanics which can explain the production of those sounds as "diverse motions of the tongue, palate, lips and other organs of the speech" (***L***. p. 100). On the contrary, in conceptual use, language escapes that mechanical determinism since the relationship between the sound and the conception it designates is arbitrary.

Arbitrariness is thus for Hobbes a crucial point in which a very important, decisive transposition is made. Men overcome natural determinism, rise above all other animals and is able to initiate, to start the construction of the artificial mechanisms which are at the basis of political body. Only individuals able to establish (that is, to institute and to command respect) arbitrary links between names (marks and signs) and conceptions,

are in a position to establish the conventional relationships which characterize that great (dark) artificial man who is *Leviathan*. In other words, the arbitrariness of language is already a power and being so, it is the announcing signal of another power – the power of the institution of political society. Social conventionalism is thus like an enlargement, an extension of that other act (yet a more radical achievement) of conventional institution of all meaning which is language.

Arbitrariness is therefore a central thesis, both of Hobbes' philosophy of language, of Hobbes' political anthropology and also of his gnosiology. [4] Now, given the central status of the thesis of arbitrariness of language in the system, Hobbes will try to find a solid ground for it, and he will try that both in contextual, polemic terms, and in internal, systematic terms.

In contextual terms, Hobbes will have to refute the opposite thesis which defended the non-arbitrary but natural character of human languages. A thesis which postulated the existence of an original, primitive language before Babel. The actual diversity of languages being consequently apparent since, in their origin, all languages come from the same primordial root. According to this thesis, there is a natural character of that divine (or adamic) language. Either directly received from God, either created by Adam on

[4] A topic which I have developed elsewhere. Cf. Pombo, O. (1985), "Linguagem e Verdade em Hobbes", *Filosofia* nº 1, Lisboa: ed. Gec, pp.45-61.

God's inspiration, the adamic language is thought out as shaped by the intelligence and knowledge of the world it represents.

As we all know, in the 17th century, to discuss the thesis of an adamic language is not to discuss any minor theologuem but, in the frame of a modern transposition of the cratilian antagonism *thesei* / *phusei*, to analyze the cognitive properties of language. That is probably why Hobbes' refutation of this thesis is so sophisticated.

I will not analyze it in detail[5]. I would just signalize that Hobbes refutation of adamic language is built on a new and very ingenious exegesis of biblical text. It implies 3 moments. First, to refute the divine origin of language (it was not God but Adam – the first man – who instituted names); second, to emphasize the Babel incident (the adamic language was lost, hopelessly forgotten. It left no traces at all); third, to give men, real historical men, men "forced to disperse themselves into several parts of the world" (***L.*** p. 101), the entire responsibility for the creation of language.

By a comparative analysis of his texts, it is very interesting to see in which way Hobbes claims for man the invention of language in order to open the possibility for asserting the arbitrariness of language. An to do this,

[5] Cf. Pombo, O. (1985), "Linguagem e Verdade em Hobbes", *Filosofia* nº 1, Lisboa: ed. Gec, specially pp.52-54.

Hobbes looks desperately for a way to ground the arbitrariness of language in the interior of the mechanicist determinism of his metaphysical system.

He pursues two main hypotheses: 1) arbitrariness has its origin in an act of individual will; 2) arbitrariness comes from a process of collective choice. But, neither in one case nor in the other, does Hobbes' system offer a solution.

As far as the first hypothesis is concerned, arbitrariness comes from an individual act of will. But, in Hobbes' system, there is no place for any spontaneous, unconditioned act of will. The will is nothing but "a small beginning of motion within the body of Men" (***L.*** p. 119), "the last appetite or aversion immediately adhering to the action" (***L.*** p. 127), one of these small invisible endeavors (*conatus*) interior to the body of man, and thus, inscribed, even if unperceivably, in the universal determinism which regulates all natural phenomena.

Let us now briefly consider the second hypothesis – the arbitrariness of language comes from a process of collective choice. As Hobbes says, "It is incredible that men once come together to take council to constitute by

decree what all words would signify"[6]. The choice could not proceed by a *consensus* since a collective agreement would yet suppose a minimal rationality underlying the very agreement, that is to say, there will be no place for arbitrariness. Hobbes solution is to stress that "It is more credible that, at first, there were few names and only of those things that were the most familiar (…) these names having been accepted, handed down from fathers to their sons who also devised others" (***De H.*** X, 2).

But again, Hobbes is unable to escape the difficulties which are inherent to the conventionalist position. If arbitrariness of language cannot come from a collective choice, a *consensus* which (as we saw) would imply the denial of that arbitrariness, then it can only be the outcome of a lonely capricious *onomaturgus*. But again, in that case, how to explain that each man does not speak a private tongue? How to explain that there were not as many idiolects as speaking creatures? Further, the despotic power of the *onomaturgus* of imposing by force the chosen nomination would come to be (in the case of Hobbes) not only an indisputable act of will (and thus impossible) but also a circular argument. In fact, the power of the *onomaturgus* already supposes the previous institution of the political sphere. How could Hobbes argue that the arbitrariness of language grounds the

[6] HOBBES, *De Homine*, X, § 2, in Bernard GERT, *Thomas Hobbes*: *Man and Citizen*, U.S.A.: Harvester Press/Humanities Press, 1972. Nas referências subsequentes usar-se-á a abreviatura ***De H.***

political sphere when it would be the political sphere to ground the arbitrariness of language?

What I mean is that, in both of the two hypotheses thematized and explicitly explored by Hobbes in order to ground the arbitrariness of language, he is conducted to black holes.

Some criticism has come to this point. Some have stressed that there is not any place in Hobbes' system for a real arbitrariness of language[7]. Others have argued that arbitrariness of language is nothing but an undemonstrated postulate, an ideological exigency (claim, demand) of Hobbes' philosophical system[8]. Now, what I would like to stress – and that is my main point in this paper - is that there is a third solution for grounding the arbitrariness of language. A solution which Hobbes' system is able to provide although if never explicitly called on account of the arguing.

We saw that language is for Hobbes the verbal *translatio*, not of things but of the mental discourse which refers those things. Now, if for Hobbes the name was on the side of the thing, it would be possible (and even necessary) to postulate a similarity, a fundamental isomorphism between language and

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[7] ROBINET, André, ″ Pensée et Langage chez Hobbes: Physique de la Parole et Translatio″, in *Révue Internationale de Philosophie* , n.º 129 (1979). pp. 474.

[8] POLIN, Raymond, *Politique et Philosophie chez Hobbes*, Paris: Vrin, 1977, pp. 7-9.

the world. But that is not the case. That is to say, Hobbes' philosophy of language deviates from any kind of co-naturality between words and things. However, that co-naturality could yet be established at an ideal level, that is, between the name and the representation it designates. If the name does not represent the thing, it could represent the representation of the thing. And, in this case, it would be possible to stress, not a naturalness of language, not an external motivation of language but an intralinguistic motivation, an homology between the representation and its linguistic expression.

Allow me to call attention to an important distinction Hobbes makes between representation and conception**.** Let me quote: "there are many conceptions of one and the same thing and for every several conception we give a several name" (***H.N.*** V, §5). That is to say, while the representation is the substitute of the thing in mental discourse, the conception is conceived as the ideal, almost intentional determination of that representation. In that sense – there is not one conception of the thing as the totality of its determinations or as its essential determination. What we have is several different conceptions of one and the same thing. Further, each conception has a purely subjective reality and what each name expresses is one of those several conceptions of one and the same thing.

Before concluding, let us see which are the consequences of, let us say, this sketch of a linguistic theory of signification for the question of arbitrariness of language. If it would be possible to think the thing by a full representation, a concept which would embrace all its determinations (as in Leibniz), if it would be possible to think the thing in its essential determination (as in S. Thomas Aquinas) or in its objective contents (as Descartes would say), then it would yet be possible to believe in some kind of homology between the name and that continuous totality (Leibniz), that essential determination (S. Thomas Aquinas), or that objective ideality (Descartes). But – I wonder – would it be thinkable to establish any kind of homology between each name and each one of the multiple (subjective) conceptions which constitute the representation of one and the same thing?

A last point. Paradoxically, this distinction between conception and representation is contradictory with that other Hobbesian thesis according to which language would be just the verbal translation of a previous mental discourse – that is, of a previous non-linguistic discourse. On the contrary, in the light of the distinction between conception and representation which I am proposing, language appears in all its constitutive character. In fact, the differentiation of the several conceptions of one and the same representation only is possible within language. That is what Hobbes recognizes when he writes: "it is by the very names that we are able to stabilize the multiple

conceptions of one representation" (***H. N.*** V, § 4) That is to say, without language, the thought would be an imagetic fluid, an open sea with no possible orientation. That means that ideas are not images but words.

Even if this thesis of the constitutive character of language was for Hobbes less important than his thesis of arbitrariness of language, the fact is that – I suggest – it ought to be considered as his great discovery, his major contribution to the comprehension of human language.