

THE TRUE TURNING-POINTS IN THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC THOUGHT

Carlos Rafael Domínguez

*Universidad F.A.S.T.A. Facultad de Humanidades. Instituto de Filología.
Mar del Plata, Argentina.*

Abstract: “Homo loquens” is approaching a new millenium. Will this mark a milestone in the history of linguistic studies? Usual periodization criteria are mixed ones and confused. So it is difficult to have a clear view of the line of development of the reflections on language based on such heterogeneous features. Our hypothesis is that it would be desirable to distinguish utterly between an almost permanent logico-syntactic formalizable core (which underwent just minor adjustments and additions, easily analysable in history) and a very wide flexible set of components which was given different emphasis and consideration in relation with absolutely extra-linguistic views.

Keywords: turning-point / formal core / micro-history / macro-history / mega-discipline / umbrella discipline

1.- THE SCENE

Are the International Congresses of Linguists, in a way at least, representative of the state of linguistic studies decade after decade? In a very general sense this is probably true in spite of many omissions and certain peaks of emphasis that seem to be rather controversial.

window to present-day reality in the linguistic field even if many professionals may consider that the perspectives of some areas are not as complete as desirable or some shades of opinion are not adequately displayed.

The announcement of the thirteenth Congress in Tokyo broke a growing line of remarkable concentration of topics in previous occasions and, explicitly, stated as the special characteristic of it to discuss "the diversity of theoretical viewpoints which characterizes linguistics at the present time" (XIIIth Int. Congress of Linguists, 1981). Did this mean a transit to a new *disciplinary atomism*? (An *academically accepted atomism of views* after the pejoration undergone by the term as applied to *data*).

Late in the nineties, immersed as we are all in the atmosphere of post-modernism (and post-structuralism), we see, apparently, the total explosion of a central view. Using a more neutral terminology, we can say that today we are in front of a display of a kind of *case linguistics* as different or complementary to a *linguistics of general models*. But is this absolutely true? Would it be realistic to accept a return to the wider if even less precise concept of linguistics as a field with diverse subfields and areas and lots of imbrications and overlappings? Integration and unity in linguistics are possible and desirable but never at the price of distortion of the field it is meant to describe and explain.

Certain points of concentration there must always be, however. Among the multiplicity of topics certain convergent lines are found, certain triggers of general ideas that prevail over the rest. At present they seem to be, for instance, the following: language acquisition, second language acquisition, historiography of linguistic thought, languages in contact. Even if these points were rather peripheral up to now, they lead to a very central point: an exploration in the nature of language itself via those rather unexplored roads.

And so always we come back to the same central issues.

2.- THE DOUBTS.

Linguistics seems today very fragmented. If so, what are the causes of the apparent present-day fragmentation?

By fragmentation we understand here the existence of many different fields which are considered as belonging to linguistics but which lack the amount of unity required to form only one *science*.

Are the afore-mentioned concentrations of interest in certain topics indicative of successive turning-points around some fundamental viewpoints which totally affect the essence of the linguistic system or are just views leading to newer and better forms of application in certain areas or more sophisticated ways for the analysis of a same fundamental core?

Philosophers, among other scholars of disciplines adjacent to linguistics, analyse this fragmentation rather pessimistically. Mario Bunge, for instance, writing apropos of the Congress of Tokyo, after discussing Wittgenstein's *counter-revolution* and Chomsky's *uprising*, states that the study of language today is fragmented in half a dozen of *different disciplines*, which are weakly connected with each other. For him these disciplines are: pure

linguistics, and applied linguistics.(Bunge, 1983; pp 9/13). Would this mean the end of a *mega-linguistics* and the reduction of *linguistics* to *grammar* (Bunge's *pure linguistics*), i.e., what we have called the "formal core"?

A scientific discipline is a scientific discipline, among other things, if it has a reasonably continuous history. A minimum traditional unity is necessary to appreciate stages and progress in the past and to think of the prospects for the future. If there is not a history there is not a scientific discipline. "*Every science grows from its past*". (Robins, 1990; p.4)

Evidently there can be breaks in this tradition, and new views may appear. But they must be true breaks.

Is there a true uninterrupted *tradition*? If not, were there true changes? What changes? What does "change" mean? What entity is required to deserve the name of a turning-point (or stage, or hinge, or perspective, or revolution, or counter-revolution...) and to be almost unanimously accepted?

Certainly sometimes innovations appeared. Leaders emerged, disciples followed. Rival schools competed. Was it true competition for a substantial issue? Or just a matter of minor personal rivalries?

The state of affairs reflected here is far from being negative. On the contrary. Our statement is that it is a conglomerate of positive things. That is why it seems absolutely correct to call this congress a congress of *linguists* (people who work scientifically in the field of *language*), but it would be not so adequate to call it a congress of *linguistics*.

Evidently almost everything has to do with *language* in the range of human activities, but not everything has to do with something like *linguistics* or even the wider *language sciences*. In this sense there is certainly no general philosophy or Weltanschauung which does not entail, explicitly or implicitly, a *theory of language*. But are these *theories* true theories of language or are they, rather, philosophical theories which, of course, include language within their framework? Humboldt's and Descartes's views are usually mentioned as characteristic of predominant opposite linguistic conceptions, although they scarcely could be considered linguists in a strict sense of the word. Or, more recently, Wittgenstein and Chomsky are quoted as "revolutionary" in the field of linguistics, while together with formidable insights in which they showed their genius they left the same ancient linguistic core untouched.

But let us have a quick look at certain steps in the past.

3.- A HYPOTHESIS.

The human language offers as one of its most special features that sometimes it is almost invisible, in the sense that it becomes so transparent that their users do not pay attention to its existence. *it is an invisible instrument*. Something like thought. You think, but unless you come back to your thought on reflection it passes unnoticed.

That is why many reflections on language may have been just invisible under the surface of the applications they were meant for.

From some other point of view this continuity seems to have been broken by abrupt changes. Maybe many reflections did not explicitly have language as a target object. Besides the degree of explicitness may have varied a lot during the history of linguistic thought.

Our basic hypothesis is that it would be wise to distinguish between

- * a *micro-history*, having to do with what we may call the *formal core* (*grammar*, in a very strict sense of the word) and
- * a *macro-history*, dealing with all other controversial points around language.

Usually, however, you must take a very precise point of view within the macro-historic framework to be able to have a clear and definite appreciation of the formal core as a whole.

4.- THE BEGINNINGS.

As far as we have any memory man was *homo loquens*. There is a complete coexistence between *man* and *use of language*. Independently of any theory or any reflection men had an intuitive ability to use this delicate instrument to speak and communicate with each other. The *theory* to account how this instrument was operated was transparent and invisible. They made *use of language*. Adequately.

Perhaps man's *intuitive reflections* on language appeared when taking his first steps in writing. Under the pressure, then, of practical needs, he started the lines of applications to commerce or interchange in general. A deeper reflection on the instrument led him to a more efficient analysis. *Texts* appear and foster material for further analytical reflections based on those primitive intuitions. Speculation also accompanied these practical applications.

5.- THE FORMAL CORE.

Exploring in what we know about the origins of language use in the Far and Near East, and especially going backwards along the European tradition (cfr. Korner & Asher, 1995), we found more or less a same repeated short history. Use of a practical transparent instrument. A search for analysis to serve pragmatic purposes. This search, based on a few simple intuitions, led to a core of basic discoveries :

Mixed in many cases in a mist of philosophical thought the essential elements of a formal core emerged and later constituted what was generally accepted as *grammar*:

Words as analytic elements. Basic *types of words* (*nouns* and *verbs*). Accompanied by more or less implicit syntactic and semantic components, such as *subject / object*, *form / meaning*, *signifying / signified*... Maybe even the *double articulation* can be said to have been included.

By the end of the Stoic period the whole system of language we employ today for analysis (that core which is a coincident practical point of departure for everybody in the field of linguistics) was practically complete: *phonetics / grammar (morphology) / etymology*.

sophisticated techniques for analysis, different forms of application.

In the same way that a human comes linguistically of age in an astonishingly short period of years with respect to his practical linguistic needs (cfr. Chomsky, 1965, 1966), we can say that at least the Western tradition developed the basic explanatory linguistic system still in use in a very short period of centuries.

6.- THE FORMAL LINE.

From a set of almost implicit formal rules to the elementary distinction of parts of speech, taking into account “marked” characteristics and from that to cybernetic linguistics of machine translation techniques there exists certainly a long, long way.

But all the steps in this line of development are clearly of the same nature: formal and technological. With more emphasis on semantics or on syntax we have a long list of attempts to interpret the linguistic *system* in terms of mathematical formulae. From the classifications of the modistae to glossematics, distributionalism, generative grammars, stratificational grammar, tagmemics...

Either for the pure sake of analysis or for application, from teaching to commerce and multimedia.

Usually formal developments were linked to extralinguistic views, but not necessarily depending on them.

7.- THE MACRO DEVELOPMENT LINE.

Simultaneously with this logico-mathematic, combinatory syntactic line, coincident in the essential aspects as exposed by different thinkers, another line developed, more speculative, eclectic, having to do with wider contexts of discourse, which gave rise to innumerable famous controversies (*physis / nomos, nature / nurture, substance / form...*) which in turn were the source for a variety of models, views, approaches, trends, schools.

When *structuralism* was taken as the point of arrival of a perfectly definable linguistic science, then all the previous investigations were seen as steps towards this end. A typical example is Maurice Leroy, who establishes an orderly set of steps to reach a target: *ancient times / formation of the linguistic method / Saussure / the XXth century*. (Leroy, 1964}. Also more recent histories are Saussure-centered.(cfr.Gimete-Welsh, 1994). And probably from a quantitative point of view they are not wrong. When Sampson calls the XIXth century a Prelude (Sampson, 1980) he no doubts is thinking of structuralism as the point of arrival.

Now if we follow the course of the mainstream of linguistic work in the XIXth and XXth century we will see a series of different centres of interest dealing with diverse points of human sciences but all of them outside the field of linguistics and all of of them using practically the same linguistic core. What changed was exclusively the way of looking at it.

The ascendancy and prestige of mathematics and of the mathematized sciences (physics, astronomy, chemistry...) led "linguists" to try to adopt a similar model or at least to consider scientific only those aspects of language that accepted a considerable amount of formalization, for instance, phonetics, or something a bit more general, historical grammar (almost without a syntax). But evidently this was at the price of leaving outside of their scope lots of other aspects of language of fundamental importance or even essential to its understanding.

This strong positivistic input which was felt mainly in phonetics and dialectology produced an advancement not in the expansion of the linguistic system itself but in its consideration from outside as an objective, quantitative, abstract system.

At the same time the linguistic aspects that had been neglected were dealt with in three main adjacent fields:

- The field of psychology (Steinthal, Humboldt, Wundt) interested in national culture and thought and, on the whole, including all those aspects called *mental*.

- The field of anthropology, a science which turned from physical to cultural interests, and which developed especially in America, led by Boas and his disciples Bloomfield and Sapir, and having language as its main tool.

- The field of sociology in which the positivistic influence of Comte and Durkheim, among others, made an enormous impact.

At the same time, and even within the historical framework pervading the atmosphere of that period, a strong tendency was emerging towards the constitution of an autonomous general linguistics with the central idea of *system*, making more explicit the primitive conception of an organized set of elements (the fundamental core). Here we have Georg von der Gabelentz, Hermann Paul, and finally and especially, Otto Jespersen.

Ferdinand de Saussure elaborated a very orderly and ambitious program for the scientificization of linguistics. Many ideas were derived from Russian formalism and contemporary positivistic sociological views. His fundamental instruments to transform linguistics into a true respectable science were two:

- + to dichotomize several concepts: *synchrony* / *diachrony*; *langue* / *parole*; *signifying* / *signified* and giving scientific validity only to the first component of the pair.

- + to insert the true linguistics (what remained after the pruning) into the wider framework of "*semiology*".

Nothing changed in the fundamental core except the way of looking at it.

The Saussurean movement put linguistics away from XIXth century biology and history. Besides the World War I meant for the most of Europe a kind of liberation from Germany even in this sense.

After the War many different structuralist schools emerged: Geneva, Prague, Copenhagen, Paris, London, America...

Each of them showed particular characteristics but all of them shared a common credo with some main features: *langue* was taken as an object over *parole*; *abstract* realities of language over the *concrete* ones; *social* events over the *mental* ones; *form* over *meaning*; *written language* over the *oral* one; *synchronic aspects* over the *historical* ones...

The exception to these features was the London School which never was so extremist in the matter of the dichotomies. The Americans showed also a great independence and some particular development.

When *autonomy* no longer was the priority and the boundaries between the tools to achieve it (the dichotomies) became looser, a complex web of interdisciplines arose, always taking language as the object but applying to it the points of view of other disciplines and facing it with a clearly extra-linguistic attitude. Sometimes these views are very rich and enlightening and potentially full of possibilities for application. This is the case of socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics.

Practically every sector of science today needs linguistics as a support. Epistemologists believe that the scientific thought is the private property of its creator and only becomes a social property if it is communicated through language. Since the science consists in a system of statements (linguistically expressed), epistemology must necessarily adopt a linguistic approach. (Klimovsky, 1995, pp.23/24).

8.- STATUS QUAESTIONIS.

With lots of omissions (more than we would have wanted) we have completed the rough picture of the past we intended to make before to look at our own time once again.

Today we are witnesses to the last years of a century and of a millennium. Even if it means nothing special from a scientific point of view, all the same there is a sense of novelty and as if something important was awaiting us

It is a commonplace to call this time the period of postmodernism and of poststructuralism, postindustrialism, postcapitalism...The use of the prefix *post-* is an easy simplification at hand to mean that certain previous labels are no longer adequate enough. But they do not mean anything in particular.

In the field of postmodern linguistics perhaps the main characteristic is that there is not a mainstream. Not a single point of interest is hegemonic. It is very different from times when, for instance, "philology", enjoyed academic, institutional and social prestige, or when in the 20s or 30s "structuralism" was supreme (in spite of the coexistence of other views). Today, just in case, the characteristic is "fragmentation".

Besides, maybe a great difference consists in the intellectual background of the linguists themselves. Up to very recent times most of them had certain unifying roots:

- a classical background (deep knowledge of Latin and Greek);
- a rigorous philological formation;
- a direct or indirect dependance on de Saussure's Cours.

areas.

The great philosophical trends, from Plato and Aristotle on, are naturally the wide frameworks in which the deep linguistic controversies occurred. Those controversies of ancient Greece are still at work, as active as always, in full force and vitality. But sometimes they appear in disguise under different theoretical or technological apparels.

To take only one explicit example, let us remember the well-known controversy of Royaumont between Chomsky and Piaget.(Piatelli-Palmarini, 1983). There, with the presence of the most famous representatives of biology, cognitive sciences, epistemology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication sciences, epistemology, social thought, philosophy, medicine, artificial intelligence, mathematics, ethnology, the philosophical views of all times were discussed and analysed: empirism, rationalism, descriptivism, functionalism, innatism, positivism, constructivism, behaviourism, pragmatism, environmentalism...All the issues at stake were of a wider range than that of "linguistics". But in spite of this *language* was always there at the core of every discussion. Chomsky's rationalistic and innatistic view was at stake, not his generative grammar. This belongs to a different level of analysis, to the level of what we have called the analysis of the formal core.

It is worth noticing the various ways in which positivism is intermingled with many steps in recent linguistics. (cfr. Wandelfels, 1997).

A remarkable feature today is that certain dichotomies which in a way may have been considered overcome reappear in a more sophisticated form. For instance, the pair *individual / society*. The role of the individual, or better, of the individual's "free will", that had been set out of the scope of scientific linguistics, being not a part of *la langue*, was timidly inserted by Halliday's concept of *social man* (Halliday, 1979), and semantically neutralized by Chomsky's *creative aspect*. (Chomsky, 1965).

Another aspect to be taken into account in connection with this "postmodern linguistics" is that of the concept of an *umbrella* discipline. It is a comprehensive concept, not so precise, not so concrete as that of a mega-discipline. Is linguistics a part, a subfield, a branch of the communication science. Most linguists would answer negatively. On the contrary, the body of communication sciences, historically, received a lot from linguistics.

But no doubts linguistics is under the *umbrella* of the communication sciences. It is at the mercy of this point of tension "between physical and immaterial webs, the biological and the social, nature and culture, technical devices and discourse, economy and culture, micro- and macro-perspectives, the village and the earth, the actor and the system, individual and society, free will and social determinisms". (Mattelard, 1997, p.10; translation is ours).

It is a network of tensions. Does this mean a return to structuralism? A newer, richer, disideologized structuralism?

Sometimes a sense of confusion arises, at least a terminological confusion. For example, when we take two recent little books from OUP belonging to the same series of Introductions, one devoted to Linguistics and the other one to Pragmatics, we find a lot of overlappings. The books are excellent from a practical point of view and the overlappings seem to be almost

semiotics. (Widdowson, 1996) (Yule, 1996).

9.- CONCLUSIONS.

On the whole, in what precedes we have tried to restrict our focus as much as possible to the home field, i.e., something that in a way or other can be called linguistics, even though risking to lose a certain amount of perspective. We, however, have considered it more scientifically honest not to intrude on the area of professional philosophers or epistemologists. It would be convenient, perhaps, to check up our conclusions with theirs.

Having this in mind, certain remarkable points can be selected which, of course, would deserve further investigation.

* The history of linguistic thought seems to be as old as mankind. The subtitle of an invaluable recent history of linguistics (Koerner and Asher, 1995) "*From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*" expresses this idea in a very concrete way. At least we know that it is as old as our most ancient written records. At the same time we notice that neither *Sumerians* nor *Cognitivists*, up to now the respective points of departure and arrival chosen by the authors, are terms to denote what we would call "linguists", that is to say, specialists in the study of language sciences.

* Along this long history, coextensive with the history of mankind, three recursive cycles can be visualized. They are more the product of an insight to make the exposition clearer than the fruit of a minute data-collecting process. And in many cases they intermingle with each other. These recursive periods are:

a) A period of **germination**, in which there is a growing interest in a language-centered discipline. It enjoys social and academic prestige; it feels secure of its own object, method, and limits; and it tends to spread its influence and features out on the field of other disciplines, becoming the "scientific" model of the time.

These were, for instance, the period of the flourishing of *philology* in a considerable part of the XIXth century and of an "*autonomous*" *general structuralist linguistics* after World War I with its proliferation of "-emes" and its intrusion on many other social sciences.

b) A period of **absortion** when the influence of some other discipline is so great on the conception of the linguistic system and process that the latter takes not only its framework but also its procedures and explanatory basis from the former one. Such, for instance, was the development of *philology* itself under the pressure of evolutionary biology during certain stages of its course or of American linguistics within the framework of cultural anthropology. It is emblematic with respect to this view the opening lecture at the First International Congress of Semiotics by a recognized and confessed linguist as Roman Jakobson who accepts and advocates the leadership of semiotics (Jakobson, 1975) as a culmination of the Saussurean program.

Typical examples are *psycho-linguistics* and *socio-linguistics*. Though here we can easily notice that the balance is rather unstable, in favour of the first component, language becoming merely an instrument.

* In the whole history of linguistic thought there are a lot of very particular factors which have exerted undeniable influence on the linguistic field, an influence sometimes stronger than that of ideas. Let us just mention Humboldt, de Saussure, Chomsky, as personal names, and Germany in the XIXth century, Geneva, Chicago, the MIT, as placenames. As if it were a kind of “magic”.

* A very difficult point is the clear appreciation of the value of terms which have been transformed into labels. Their meaning was not constant in the course of centuries. At least from the point of view of fundamental connotations. Such, for instance, *mentalism*, *positivism* and *idealism* (as applied to language), the term *linguistics* itself. Not to mention the terms employed as “metalanguage”: *langue*, *parole*, *symchrony*, *diachrony*, *competence*, *performance*, etc. Besides “metalanguage” with respect to “language” is a bit of a vicious circle. (cfr. Semantische Hefte, 1974).

Sometimes translations into different languages contributed to make the problem worse.

* In matters of emphasis even if there have been many different and simultaneous peaks, we can visualize a kind of see-saw between what we may call the micro-linguistic aspects and macro-linguistic ones. That is to say, there have been periods or geographical areas in which the predominant line of research and general interest was placed on the “formal core” and techniques for its analysis. In other periods the focus was on more global aspects and the linguistic core was just lying there, accepted but not in the middle of the scenario. With respect to this it seems very interesting and important to pursue the line of going deeper into into some medieval facets of linguistic thought. (cfr. Law, 1993).

* Our suggestion is that if we want to have a coherent view of the development of linguistic thought without false appreciations of apparent turning-points, we must conveniently distinguish at least two utterly different aspects:

a) A *micro-history*: Reduced to the evolution (or expansion ?) of the basic descriptive explanatory system. A history extremely short in comparison. Based directly on primitive *use*. Limited to a few radical intuitions. It has to do with elementary logico-syntactic mechanisms for the organization and expression of thought. Much was implicit at the very beginning but if we want a history of progressive explicitness we can say that the main concepts had already been explicitly set up by the IIIrd century BC. The rest represent *enrichments*, *adjustments*, *enhancements*... The fact is that nobody else attempted to take an absolutely new point of departure. Of course, there was progress in this line but there was never a turning-point.

b) A *macro-history*. Views and models integrating explicitly prominent aspects of particular Weltanschauungs. Here we find a plurality of areas that can be mentioned as specialized activities and interdisciplines having *language* as one of their components.

In this macro-historic view there have been many important *peaks of interest*. Their recognition does not mean the acceptance of a turning-point in the development of linguistics. They can be simultaneous, successive, recursive, cyclic... They are just a matter of *focus*.

postmodernity really mean from the point of view of the linguistic area? Is it a new period? Is it the preparation for a new period? Or just one transition more? It is undoubtedly a moment of crisis.

If we consider the *micro-historic* aspect nothing seems to be in prospect.

From a *macro-historic* point of view maybe we can distinguish at least four attitudes:

- * To go on working in specific areas paying just a general attention to the rest. Many of these areas are the ones selected for the XVIth Int. Congress of Linguists (cfr. Third Circular, 1997).
- * To be observers and accept the *umbrella* of the communication sciences, giving and receiving concepts and suggestions. (cfr. Baylon / Mignot, 1996).
- * To consider this a moment of crisis and fermentation and try to analyse critically all aspects. (Sfez, 1995).
- * To explicitly recognize the predominance of language today (a generalized nominalism?), stating that every social phenomenon is a linguistic phenomenon, facing this with Nietzschean "optimism" (in the preliminary page of the quoted book there is a dedication), and considering this approach "the true turning-point". (Echeverría, 1997).

Our modest view is that this is a period of **intensive absorption** from every field. This absorption must not turn into control. To prevent this there must be a deeper and deeper research on the roots of the linguistic essential core.

It is our conviction that if we want linguistics to be scientifically respectful we must:

- 1.- keep faithful to the *micro-historic* linguistic tradition, and
- 2.- adopt a true linguistic perspective within the *macro-historic* framework.

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