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**'BEING-IN-LANGUAGE' AS A MODE OF HUMAN
EXPERIENCE LINGUISTIC FOUNDATIONS
OF PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS**

The intellectual uniqueness of Paul Ricoeur, one of the leading hermeneutic scholars, is hard to define when we take into account his prolific output, the wide range of problems he tackled, and his style of 'philosophizing', based on constant dialogue with tradition and contemporaneity, 'the roundabout way' of his analytic procedure, which tested different tools and methodological strategies. This type of 'philosophizing on the road' and extensive erudition would make it possible to accuse him of compilatory eclecticism and epigonism, if it were not for the clear and consistently developed theme which unites and distinguishes his path. Ricoeur himself tried to present it in his intellectual autobiography *Reflection faite*, and in the book-length interview *La critique et la conviction*, which was conducted by François Azouvi and Marc de Launay. Both books were published in 1995, ten years before Ricoeur's death.¹

The leading motif of Ricoeur's way of thinking can be, in my opinion, defined in simple terms as searching in the deep structure of different intermediate structures: signs, symbols, metaphors, texts,

¹ *La critique et la conviction* was translated into English and published in 1998 by Columbia University Press as *Critique and Conviction*. *Reflection faite* was translated by Kathleen Blamey as "Intellectual Autobiography" and published in 1995 in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Lewis E. Hahn, 1-53, Chicago: Open Court.

stories, hidden ‘ontological vehemence’ (*vehemence ontologique*). This drive, according to Ricoeur, justifies the move from philosophical linguistics—semantics and the phenomenology of utterances towards onto-anthropology of action, and allows direct analysis connected with the problems of language in the direction of the experience of ‘the world’ and men who live, act and feel in it. Ontology appears in Ricoeur’s writings as if ‘on the horizon’ of his analysis. It is a ‘promised land’ of hermeneutics, both in its critical and constructive versions. It is the problem of language intermediates which becomes foregrounded.

Ricoeur’s philosophy is based on the “conviction of the primacy of being in speech”, and its key concern is the objectified form of an utterance set in writing.

This insistence on scriptural meditation at least had the merit of definitely destroying in my eyes the Cartesian, Fichtean, and to a certain extent, Husserlian as well, ideal of the transparency of the subject for itself. In this respect, the subjectivity of the reader is no more the master of the meaning of the text than the subjectivity of the author. The semantic autonomy of the text is the same in either context. Understanding herself, for the reader, is understanding herself before the text and receiving from it the conditions for a self other than the ego that initially comes to the reading.²

The immediacy of the contact with the external reality and with oneself and others must therefore be—paradoxically—‘retrieve’ through reflections and interpretations of texts. Which assumptions—pre-judgments—were foundational for this key hermeneutical Ricoeur’s thesis?

The basic assumption is based on the conviction that all philosophizing is rooted in language, which is the dynamic ‘substance; of culture, and in the tradition which is relayed mostly through written texts, and also through actions, artefacts, works of art, institutions,

² P. Ricoeur, “Intellectual Autobiography”, op. cit. 37.

normative systems, etc, which could be treated as linguistic and narrative structures—texts and stories.

Hermeneutics is a research project directed at interpreting the text and elucidating the meaning of numerous intermediaries. Ricoeur firmly distances himself from absolutist and systemic temptations (he disentangles himself particularly strongly from transcendental idealism), develops critical dialogue with philosophical traditions, and makes allies of those thinkers who have supported hypothetical and ‘questioning’ (aporetic) research paradigms. His existential orientation allows us to call him a follower and an heir of the achievements of practical rather than speculative philosophy. He openly admitted it himself, he quoted many times in his works a famous dictum of Socrates: “unexamined life is not worth living” and supported a vernacular tradition of reflexive philosophy.³ In Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of ‘being-in-speech’, and as a result of it of ‘being-in-language’ and its written structures, it is not the practical application of theoretical considerations which is the goal, but an attempt to make sense of different models, rules, aims and ways of dealing with things as linguistic determinants of ‘being-in-the-world’: in the world of culture, of the social environment, history and tradition, but primarily in the context of interpersonal communicative exchange, which is necessary for subject’s self-recognition—(*soi-même comme un autre*)⁴.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is therefore based on the assumption—commonly accepted after the so called ‘linguistic turn’; of 1960s and 1970s—that the common ground for onto-anthropological investigations in contemporary philosophy is the area of language. The thing is that philosophy has neither a commonly accepted definition of language, nor a methodology to conduct research on such a wide area at the crossroads between literary studies, philosophy,

³ Ibid., 7 and next pages.

⁴ This is the title of the anthropological summa of Ricoeur published in 1990. It was translated by Kathleen Blamey and published in English by Chicago University Press under the title *Oneself as Another* in 1992.

linguistics, epistemology (including logic), semiotics and ontology.⁵ The problem of supporting one specific concept of language seems to be, ultimately, the problem of choice, and Ricoeur makes his choice in this manner, locating his own, hermeneutic research perspective in the frame of two dichotomous approaches to language, which can be, in simplified terms, described as: (1) the structural-functional approach, in which language is treated instrumentally, within a closed system of signs, built out of distinctive elements in their relational, synchronic, diachronic ordering and rules of its usage—codes and sub-codes; this is an approach characteristic of linguistic structuralism. (2) the dynamic approach, in which language is treated and described in terms of actual, multidimensional and multifunctional communicative events, it is open onto reality and its users—in other words it is a ‘form of life’—and is researched mostly from the perspective of subjective reference (semantic) and communicative intention and aim of utterance (pragmatic). While supporting the second approach, Ricoeur evoked two research orientations: linguistic phenomenology (of John L. Austin and John Searle)—the so called speech act theory, and the linguistic *theorie de l’instance du discours* of Emil Benveniste.

⁵ There does not exist any systematic, thorough description of the philosophy of language; written either by philosophers or by linguists. What is more, there does not exist (nearly) a complete bibliography of this field, or any anthology of texts with information about philosophers writing about language. And, finally there are not any competent and general introductions to this field. Books which have been published so far, even if they have in their titles phrases like “introduction” or “philosophy of language”, are usually not full introductions to philosophy as a whole, and at times they are even not philosophy as such. This allows us to make the statement that what is today called ‘philosophy of language’ is a group of loosely connected set of problems and research which deals (directly or indirectly) with language and which claims to be philosophy. [...] There are many reasons for the discrepancy between philosophy and language, They are of a historical (genetic) and systemic nature”—writes Andrzej Bronk in the book entitled *Rozumienie – dzieje – język. Filozoficzna hermeneutyka H.G. Gadamera, (Understanding, History, Language Philosophical Hermeneutics of H.G. Gadamer)* Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1988, 269. See also Étienne Gilson, *Linguistique et philosophie*, Vrin, 1969

Paul Ricouer put together these two—complementary, in his opinion—approaches, (1) and (2)—and in the starting point he accepts Benveniste’s view that:

There really are two different universes here even though they take in the same reality, and they give rise to two different linguistics, even though their paths cross all the time. On the one hand, there is language, an ensemble of formal signs, identified by rigorous procedures, ordered in classes, combined in structures and in systems, and on the other, there is the manifestation of language in living communication [...]⁶

The approach (2) preferred by Ricouer, which is both “theory of speech act” and the concept of “discursive event”, is based on the assumption that the basic linguistic unit in “real-life communication” is a sentence and not a single sign, or formally marked elementary signs (phonemes, morphemes, sems, etc)

It is in discourse, realized in sentences, that language [langue] is formed and takes shape. There language begins. One could say, in imitation of a classical formula: nihil est in lingua, quod non prius fuerit in oratione.⁷

Ricouer took from Benveniste the key notion of discourse, and from Austin/Searle the notion of speech acts as specific forms of human activity. The compilation of both these terminologies allowed him to develop his own concept of the dialectic conjugation of two aspects of linguistic utterance: an event submerged in fluid and volatile existential element with the meaning, understood as the connection of the speaker’s intention and sense, semantic content, which is built out of content and reference—the indicator of the subject’s referral.

⁶ È. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale, Problems in general linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek, 2 vols. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami, P 1971.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

To mean is both what speaker means, i.e. what he intends to say, and what the sentence means, i.e. what the conjunction between the identification function and the predictive function yields. Meaning, in other words, is both noetic and noematic.⁸

The intentional message of a speaker and the semantic content of an utterance create a dialectic unity of the discourse's universe. According to Benveniste:

[...] The sentence belongs to discourse. It is even by discourse that it can be defined: the sentence is a unit of discourse. We find confirmation of this in modalities of which the sentence is capable; it is everywhere recognized that there are declarative statements, interrogative statements and imperative statements, which are distinguished by specific features of syntax and grammar although they are based in identical fashion upon predication. Now these modalities do nothing but reflect the three fundamental behavior of man speaking and acting through discourse upon his interlocutor: he wishes to impart a piece of knowledge to him or to obtain some information from him or to give an order to him. These are three interhuman functions of discourse that are imprinted in the three modalities of the sentence-unit, each one corresponding to an attitude of the speaker.⁹

The linguistic analysis of Benveniste seems to be closer to the philosophical style of Ricoeur, but he also referred to the theory of speech acts, which interprets the dialectics of an intentional event and meaning according to the assumption that each utterance is at the same time an activity—a speaker at the same time 'does what he speaks', giving the utterance a certain locutionary power—when he does something by the very act of speaking, or illocutionary—when he achieves something through saying something, and

⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth, 1967, 12.

⁹ Benveniste, *op. cit.*, 110.

perlocutionary—when through saying something he achieves certain effects.¹⁰ This approach allows us to gauge the above mentioned ‘ontological power’ and a move from the level of linguistic analysis to the level of existential event, and further on—to the level of onto-anthropology.

Phenomenology of language describes speech events in categories of empirically experienced facts with an intentional component. From the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology, interpersonal communication is constituted first all through the intention of mutual understanding—act of allocution (connotative function in Roman Jakobson’s terminology). Ricoeur saw here an important aspect of the dialectics of an event and meaning:

[...] But for an existential investigation communication is an enigma, even a wonder [...] what is experienced by one person cannot be transferred whole as such and such experience to someone else. [...] The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived [...] The instance of discourse is the instance of dialogue. Dialogue is an event which connects two events: that of speaking and that of hearing.¹¹

What we have here is the intentional manifestation of the sense of utterance in the communicative act, and as a further consequence of this with the operation of its objectivization, which allows the transition from speech to writing

¹⁰ This seemingly clear differentiation, similarly to the differentiation of statements-assertions affirmative and descriptive, which have logical value and performatives, utterances of cusative character, which are beyond the dichotomy of true and false, they can be either fortunate or unfortunate, were subjected by Austin to a close scrutiny in the context of concrete ways of language usage. In the light of this analysis the dichotomies presented above turn out to be fuzzy, and assertive statements almost always contain *implicite* a certain perfective aspect. Austin dealt with these issues in *How to Do Things with Words*.

¹¹ P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, op. cit., 15-16.

[...] Moreover it can be said that this dialectic [of event and meaning] is made obvious and explicit by writing. Writing is the full manifestation of discourse.¹²

Immediate contact between a speaker and a listener—discourse as an existential event disappears, but being preserved in a literary text it becomes a cultural fact, which could be assessed by all. “What we write, what we describe is the noema of the act of speaking, the meaning of the speech act, not the event as event”.¹³

Ricoeur’s understanding of a text implies the following assumptions, hermeneutic pre-judgments: (1) establishing language as discourse, in other words of connecting events and meanings of utterances, (2) establishing discourse as a speech act and as a text—artefact (writing), (3) establishing the meaning of text as a ‘world project’, the structure and sense of which could be interpreted, (4) establishing a text as a necessary intermediary in the process of the (self) understanding of human identity during the process of reflexive reading. Reading a text is not a copy of a dialogic speaker/listener relationship, and reader’s reception does not imitate an immediate response to a statement which has just been heard. Freeing a text from the power of circumstances—of a conversation—detaches it from subjective and objective constraints and from a context of an utterance. Both meaning (content) and reference in a text become autonomous—instead of an immediate presentation of the ‘world’ in real speech, here we have the representation, ‘realistic’ or ‘fictitious’, of the presented world. An author’s place is taken by a narrator, who on the basis of more

¹² Ibid., 25-26.

¹³ Ibid., 27. Obviously, Ricoeur was not acquainted with the field of research in Humanities developed by Anglophone scholars and connected with the notion of ‘Orality’, which analyses literature (including philosophical texts) from the perspective of traces of oral forms. If Ricoeur had read Walter J. Ong, it could have supported his interpretative horizons aiming at “recovery of vivid speech” in written texts. See, for example, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London-New York 1982. Also Erick A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write. Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Yale Univ. Press, 1986.

or less reliable information—included in the text or acquired from elsewhere—a reader may identify partly and virtually with an author. Anyway, while dealing with texts we cannot avoid interpretations. The diversity of interpretations, that is of the new forms of discourse, results in the situation when new conditions for reader’s receptions begin to take place. Ricoeur claimed”

Hermeneutics [...] remains the art of discerning the discourse in the work, but this distance is given only through the structure of the work. Thus interpretation is the reply to the fundamental distanciation constituted by the objectification of man in works of discourse, an objectification comparable to that expressed in the products of his labour and his art.¹⁴

This ‘alienation’ is also the feature of the ‘world’, which in texts becomes ‘picture-of-the-world’—a reader cannot literally ‘live’ in it, s/he can ‘relate’ to it as a ‘virtual’ participant and thanks to it discover a ‘new possibility of being’. The text as artefact, on the strength of its autonomy, creates a distance between everyday reality and the presented world, between an author and a reader and, finally, between both of them and its own immanent structure and meaning. It is no longer the ‘private property’ of its author, and now it belongs to the countless potential readers and to each culture within which it is reinterpreted as a historical document, a work of literature, a scholarly or a philosophical text. However, it does not allow itself to be ‘owned’ by the one who reads and interprets it.

“The problem of writing becomes a hermeneutical problem when it is referred to its complementary pole, which is reading. A new dialectic then emerges, that of distanciation and appropriation.”¹⁵ This ‘new dialectic’ is the result of the permutation of two aspects of interpretative acts: distancing (*distanstation*) and of appropriation and application (*appropriation et application*). If distancing is an act

¹⁴ P. Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, 138.

¹⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, op. cit., 43.

of reflection and interpretation, appropriation and application are acts of an existential nature—thanks to them the text is once again grounded in the reality of life and becomes an intermediary of participation in culture.

[...] the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance. Interpretation brings together, equalises, renders contemporary and similar [...] It takes the place of the answer in dialogical situation in the same way in way that ‘revelation’ and ‘disclosure’ takes the place of the ostensive reference in the dialogical situation [...] As appropriation, the interpretation becomes the event [...].¹⁶

Assimilation covers both ‘proposals of the world’ as well as the ‘self-knowledge’ of a reader.

Ultimately, what I appropriate is the proposed world. The latter is not behind the text, as a hidden intention would be, but in front of it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is to understand oneself in front of the text. It is not the question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self. Which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. [...] The self is constituted by the ‘matter’ of the text.¹⁷

Assimilation is not—as is the case with direct communication—an intersubjective relationship, but is the reception of the picture of the world conveyed through the text [...] “appropriation is no longer understood in the tradition of philosophies of the subject as a constitution of which the subject would possess the key.”¹⁸ We can draw the following conclusions from the remarks presented here, the final authority in the process of “self-understanding

¹⁶ P. Ricoeur, “Appropriation”, in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, 185.

¹⁷ P. Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation”, op. cit., 143-144.

¹⁸ P. Ricoeur, “Appropriation”, op. cit., 182.

of oneself in the context of the text" is, according to Ricoeur, an intermediary medium in the linguistic cultural circuit, not self-awareness of "I"—either in the Cartesian version of *ego cogito* or the epistemological version of the transcendental idealism, or the voluntarist version of self-identification as a subject of moral law in the spirit of Kantian metaphysics of categorical imperative. Ricoeur did not side also, so it seems, with the substantial concept of a person in classical metaphysics, because it slips too easily either into solipsist—narcissistic—psychological introspection, or too rashly enters the field of the onto-theological doctrine of man as *imago Dei*. However, is not Ricoeur's hermeneutic dialectics too similar to post-modernist historical reductionism, which 'dilutes' the subjectivity of 'I' in problematic—in terms of its ontological and cognitive status—cultural and historical hypostasis of 'the world of texts'?