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## LINGÜÍSTICA COMO UNA RAMA DE LA FILOSOFÍA: POR QUÉ LA EDUCACIÓN EN LA LENGUA ES VITAL\*

Michael A. Miller\*\*

RESUMEN: La Lingüística, desde su nacimiento, ha estado engarzada con la Filosofía gracias a esa especie de filtro que el lenguaje tiene en la manera que los humanos forman y procesan la información. Este filtro puede hacernos ver que la tarea del filósofo por comprender los significados de la humana experiencia no puede ejecutarse sin tener en cuenta el medio sobre el que tal trabajo debe realizarse, es decir, el lenguaje. Comprendiendo la naturaleza del lenguaje en sí mismo y a través de una educación en el lenguaje, los seres humanos podrán estar preparados para efectuar avances radicales en la efectividad de la comunicación interpersonal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Filosofía, Lingüística, , educación, lengua.

Linguistics has long been classified as a branch of philosophy. However, the connection between philosophy- the study of the meaning/experience of life- and linguistics- the systematic study of language- often eludes our everyday thoughts and perceptions of both ourselves and the world around us. But how can the study of “language mechanics”, which seems, at first glance, to be totally devoid of any human emotion at all be linked in any way to the study and explanation of the human experience attempted by philosophers? How can we relate the work of the great masters of philosophy like Plato and Descartes to the average primary school language arts teacher? And better yet, why even bother?

Why bother, indeed. The defining characteristic that makes us uniquely human, which separates us from the “lower” orders of animals, is “language”. No other creature on the face of the earth, neither in its skies nor oceans has the same or even similar capacity for expressing themselves through the use of any sort of rule governed system of communication that is, at the same time, both limited (in its structure) and infinite (in its generative/derivational capabilities).

Even with this meager background in philosophy and linguistics we can begin to discern that the study of linguistics is actually the study of the one characteristic that makes us so uniquely human in the first place. All of our

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conscious thoughts, and certainly all of our verbal and written expression, take place within the medium of human language. Indeed, all areas of study, including philosophy, take place within the realm of human language. There is no escape for us from the phenomenon of language, for as soon as we lose or abandon one, we invent another seemingly out of hand.

We have already said that philosophy is the study of the meaning of life, the study of the experience of life; i.e., basically the study of our perceptions of life as we experience it and what those perceptions mean to us. Philosophy seeks to explain, using language, what exactly it is we are experiencing and what that means, or should mean, to us. Philosophy, therefore, demands a conscious understanding of the very nature of the human experience itself. However, a philosopher, just the same as a priest, psychologist, writer or storyteller, must first possess a conscious understanding of the framework in which the explanation of the human experience must be made. In other words, a philosopher – like many others – must first understand language in order to even begin his work. This is precisely because language is the definitive factor in conditioning those perceptions long before they ever reach consciousness, much less expression in thoughts (the internal use of language) or words (the external use of language).

Nietzsche said, «consciousness evolved at all only under the pressure of need for communication»<sup>1</sup>, basically meaning that consciousness arose out of the need to express something to someone else. Of course, at the dawn of the human race (i.e., the dawn of man's racial differentiation from other primates), much of that need for expression must have necessarily centered itself around immediate survival and coming to understand the mysterious and perhaps hostile world in which man found himself. This leads us to the very possible conclusion that language might very well have been the unique self-defense mechanism endowed man by Mother Nature. Everyone knows that lions have claws and birds have wings; so man must have language. But, just as Nietzsche postulated, language necessitates awareness, the capacity for reason, and of course the opportunity to use those abilities; which would make man remarkably dependent upon other men because of the social nature of his unique racial self-defense mechanism.

Continuing with primitive man - and here we must interject that throughout the history of man, a “primitive” language has always been much more complex than a “developed” or “modern” one - the need for something in order to survive is, of course, of the first order of importance,

of immediacy so to speak. However, that need must first and necessarily be brought into conscious awareness and then secondly translated into some means of outward expression, i.e., language (whether verbal, physical, or written). But, of course, even merely “being aware” of something has already somehow defined that thing. And language is nothing, if not the tool or ability that we humans use to consciously define the world both around us and within us.

The idea of language as a survival mechanism- and here I make absolutely no reference to the outmoded “bow-wow” theory of the origin of language- is one that will perhaps allow us at long last to begin to define the human experience in concrete terms, if not eventually explain the mysterious nature of the human experience itself. Our success in this amazing venture into the very nature of the human experience will be made possible only by the radical demystification of our own long held beliefs regarding the mysterious and mystical nature of language as a phenomenon. By (re-)considering the concept of language as a survival mechanism, indeed as a very normal result of the very normal process of evolution, we can then begin the process of deriving the individual and collective conditions of the human experience as natural conditions derived from our own natural development - as language users - in and with the world around us. In the context of human evolution, language was a completely natural consequence of our development. Indeed, perhaps the natural consequence of our development. And being a natural outgrowth of a completely natural process, we should not set ourselves above or beyond the consideration that we are, in the very same moment, animal, natural, and completely understandable within the context of our own historical development as an adapted species. Just as is any other species in the world around us. And discovering that “nature”, discovering who we are is, of course, the end goal of philosophy- not to mention psychology, mythology, and religion as well. However, we must remind ourselves that both this stark demystification of the nature of language (and that of the typical concept of human nature) as well as any process of discovery based upon it may only be the first tentative step in a much larger, much longer, process of human development. Evolution, whether it be physical or psychological, does not work overnight. Mother Nature is very conservative, and we, as her offspring, are as well. These ideas, at this point in time, are merely conjecture and their development or disavowal should be approached slowly, tentatively, and with great intellectual care, lest we once again turn a

blind eye on a possible truth solely to save our own inflated image of ourselves as “God’s Chosen Ones”.

Taking the process of language as a survival mechanism, as man’s completely natural survival mechanism, leads us conceptually down the path of the development of who we are and how we came to be. We can postulate (as did Nietzsche) that need led to awareness, and that awareness in turn led to the expression of that need through language. Taking that expressed need we naturally arrive at two more conditions of the human animal; namely the need for the opportunity to express ourselves to someone else, and the possibility of that other human animal reacting to our act of communication (i.e., that expressed need). These conditions could be summed up by the concept of “man as a social animal”, and every philosopher and psychologist worth his snuff will readily agree that man is definitely a most social creature. But why?

Seeing all of these factors together leads me to think of Adam Smith’s work *The Wealth of Nations*. While Smith was dealing only with man’s economic activities, he also made several poignant observations regarding the nature of “economic man”. Smith states that the division of labor, which gives rise to the state of wealth and “general opulence” stems from man’s unique «propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another»<sup>2</sup> for what he both wants and needs to survive. He goes on to say:

Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to enquire. It is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals, which seem to know neither this nor any other species of contracts.<sup>3</sup>

We do know now that other animals do indeed cooperate. However, one could easily hazard to say that no other animal in nature can be seen cooperating at the level of complexity of that which man has achieved through the use of language, which, even according to Smith, is a subject very worthy of further enquiry. But we will return to the idea of cooperation later on.

If, indeed it is the case that language is our survival mechanism, then language in any form (and thereby consciousness and reason as well) is a social act between humans in the order of promoting our own survival. Language is the means by which man first shares his experience and then cooperates with other men to achieve not only his own survival, but also,

and perhaps sometimes inadvertently, the life or lives of those with whom he is cooperating, for no one seems to be truly altruistic all of the time. Man is unique because of language, but man's experience of the world around him is defined by, filtered through, or even limited by his use of language. And linguistics is the study of first, that remarkable phenomenon which allows man to survive in groups, i.e., language, and secondly, how man uses the unique capability to interact, i.e., survival.

Understanding language and how we use language is nothing less than understanding how we live - how we survive - from day to day. This being the case, linguistics then is the study of how we express, both in groups and individually, our experience of life from our own particular perspectives, and how we use that expression in groups to realize our needs and wants in life to promote our own survival.

Linguistics, then, is the study of how humans share and survive; how humans share their needs, wants, desires, thoughts and experiences of life with each other in the aim of bettering themselves (usually by bettering the group they belong to or associate themselves with) in the larger community of humankind. Linguistics is the study of how we live - i.e., the means by which we secure our own survival, which is of course the preliminary requirement for studying why we live. This is why linguistics is and has always been considered a branch of philosophy.

As to the question of why language education is vital we must return to the very nature of human communication. Ideally, every attempt at communication is an attempt to meaningfully share some experience, condition, need, or desire that the communicator believes is necessary for his survival and promotion. However well or poorly that attempt at communication is, we must recognize that it is essentially an attempt to express or share something that is perceived - consciously or no - by the speaker as integral to their very being. This so, we can say that communication is the transmitting, on various psychological levels, of how we experience life on a daily basis, how we have experienced life up to the present, how we are experiencing life in the present, and how we expect, or would like, to experience life in the future. And, of course, effective communication is the effective transmission of all this experience.

Speaking on the perceived decline of the English language, George Orwell said in *Politics and the English Language*:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious

action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse. [...] Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: [. . .] But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, [. . .] It [the English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. [. . .] If one gets rid of these [bad] habits one can think clearly [. . .] the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.<sup>4</sup>

Orwell argues that effective communication, and therefore effective thinking, reasoning and even understanding can be learned. We might also comfortably postulate that effective communication and all of its accompanying components and/or benefits can be taught in much the same way as any other field of human knowledge or academic endeavor.

Just as it is imperative for the philosopher to understand the tools with which he is working, i.e., language, thought, perception, etc., so too do we, as “ordinary” humans, need to understand the characteristics and process that make us uniquely human. Nature may have originally intended for humans to use speech through cooperative social collectivity as a survival mechanism against other species and the world at large for our own promotion, however the battlefield has long since been changed. In the modern world, humans compete against other humans, i.e., within our own species. And in the absence of cooperative social collectivity only language remains. Yet this in itself may be our greatest redeeming quality.

Returning once again to primitive man, cooperative social collectivity was forced upon us by the necessity of competing against stronger, faster, and often much more fearsome predators for our place in the world. In such a context concerted group effort was the only recourse available to primitive man if he was to ever find that place in the world that Mother Nature had reserved strictly for him. Collectivity and cooperation allowed man to survive and then (begin to) conquer the natural world around him. Speech made that all the easier. But that was true only so long as all the members of the social group were actively engaged in competing with the outside world or supporting those select few who competed in the outside world for the social group as a whole. This set of circumstances is exactly Carl Jung’s “symbiotic relationship” in which a husband and wife are, for all intents and purposes, the mirror image of the other and complementary only so long as



they are both engaged outward (against society in general) in the name of the family. In the advent that husband and wife must face each other in the home without the unifying force of the “outside world” as either the enemy or the measuring stick by which all familial activity is given value, then the familial unit of husband-wife/father-mother breaks down into utter chaos. This also seems to bear through for competing groups of humans at many different levels of social organization and complexity.

Turning to modern man, we can see that the vast majority of us are no longer engaged outward against a “non-human enemy” for the purpose competing for or securing his own immediate survival. More typically we are engaged with each other in all manner of activity that is not directly related to the immediate physical survival of either ourselves or our social group. It is obvious that no man is the same both in the office and in a true life and death struggle to protect and preserve his own life or the lives of the members of his social group. This modern set of circumstances where, more often than not for most of us, one day flows relatively easily into the next quite readily lends itself to an inward reflection (Jung’s facing inward<sup>6</sup>) that was not available to our primitive ancestors.

This inward reflection, once acknowledged, holds as its subject not only our “selves”, but also all of our “non-survival” activities and all of our relationships with the other humans in our lives. Having lived in “complementary distribution” with the other humans of our social group (i.e., work, school, bar, social clubs, etc.) any inward reflection has the remarkable tendency to force us into a rather chaotic questioning of ourselves, everyone else, and the very meaning and purpose of our existence. This in turn may lead to what some scholars call the general breakdown of the social fabric that weaves everything together into a unified whole, but this would only occur in the face of a general ignorance of how we as individuals may successfully enter into, experience, and emerge from this potentially disastrous process of our own psychological development.

All of this leads to the question, *Are the outward engaging processes of self and societal organization against an external (non-human) adversary that we have all unconsciously supported up to this point in time the same as the inward questing processes of man against himself in the search for personal meaning?* I think it obvious that the only answer to this question would be a whole-hearted and resounding “No”. However, one possible solution to this very human problem is speech itself. Just as learning a foreign language often leads to a much deeper knowledge of a person’s own

native language, so too can learning how to use one's own language for purely expressive purposes lead to a greater understanding of what one is expressing and, therefore, oneself.

Effective language use hinges on understanding the concept of expressivity, for is not expressivity the original purpose of language in Mother Nature's overall design for the remarkable capacity for speech?.

I will not begin a discussion on language teaching methodologies or the various good or ills derived from any one or group of methodologies as this would only serve to open one of the many nefarious versions of Pandora's box extant in the academic community today. Rather, we should consider the impetus for language itself, expressivity. Much like a gun that cares nothing for or is even aware of its intended target, the expressive factor of language cares nothing for what it is directed at or against. But just as a primitive hunter relied on his aim to ensure his success in the hunt, so too do all modern humans depend upon their skill in expressing themselves through the use of language in insuring their successful promotion in the human dominated world both around and within them. Modern man's very survival depends on his effective use of language with and against the other language users that surround him every day. Without successful language education their will be no successful interaction, and without successful interaction at a level of social complexity unavailable to other animals man may very well find himself in direct competition with those animals once more.

With the worldwide upsurge in balkanization in recent years it is obvious now that the nature of human social organization has already undergone and continues to undergo radical changes from even the status quo of so little as 500 years ago. The very conception of social organization at both the conscious and unconscious levels is under radical revision all over the globe. This in itself is neither good nor ill - only inevitable. But when this process of development breaks out into bloodshed, violent protest, war and genocide, then something within our own very natures has failed, and failed miserably. The original biological impetus behind language was cooperation for survival, not, as Adam Smith conjectured 250 years ago, the other way around.

My own belief in the devious nature of Mother Nature has led me to hold the firm conviction that cooperation is the root survival mechanism of all mankind, and that language, awareness, and reason are all derived from our own intrinsic social nature. However, if language is the means by which we humans effect that necessary cooperation, then its importance at this

stage in the course of human history and development is primary if we are to develop any further.

Language education is of the utmost importance as the entire nature of human social organization slowly struggles to shift its perspective from outward looking to inward looking. The only hope for making this successful transition in the very nature of human social interaction is by first understanding the means by which we as humans interact, i.e., language. Successful education in this very human field will, at long last, open the doors to human psychology and emotional development by making every individual (within the limits of his particular capacities) an aware and responsive observer/participant in and of his own life and experiences.

Only by successful dialogue, both with ourselves and each other, will we ever begin to unravel the multi-faceted nature of the human animal, for the human animal has and always will run in packs. We must begin the task of unraveling the nature of the human animal by somehow beginning to unravel both ourselves and each other at the very same time. Only language will allow us to do this peacefully and successfully. Without proper language education the human race will be left like lost little children walking through a deadly minefield all alone in the dark, never understanding why or how we failed as the flames of our failure engulf us all.

## Notas

- <sup>1</sup> Hollingdale, R. J. (1977): A Nietzsche Reader. Penguin Books, London, p 65
- <sup>2</sup> Smith, Adam (1976): An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Book 1, p 17
- <sup>3</sup> Ibidem
- <sup>4</sup> Monfries, Helen: An Introduction to Critical Appreciation For Foreign Learners. Macmillan, London, p 7 \*Year unknown.
- <sup>5</sup> Storr, Anthony [editor] (1983): The Essential Jung. Fontana Press, London, pp 160-161
- <sup>6</sup> Ibidem