



Language and Culture: Linguistic Evidence of a Natural Reciprocity and Some Lessons for the Future

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Abstract

The link between language and culture is a natural bond, depending on the same reasons the language exists for. Language is a semiotic device. It is a system of signs and the true nature of every sign is to be a value originated by a culture. Only the value that a culture acknowledges to a signifier and a signified makes their relationship – otherwise arbitrary toward reality – necessary in the language and makes the sign the seemingly faithful mirror of the known world. The process occurs in the mind and it is of metaphorical kind: something becomes something else in accord to an imaginative scheme, which warrants the likeness under the power of a cultural model of world knowledge shaped by a society. Therefore, multilingualism is multiculturalism and vice versa, always and everywhere. Some linguistic examples, in the Indo-European languages history, will confirm this indissoluble relation and its historical value.

The comparative diachronic methodology is applied to the cultural reconstruction of the meaning of some Indo-European root words. The exemplification concerns few words in modern languages and points out their etymological-semantic transformation in relation to a cultural change in question. Different Indo-European languages interpret the same meaning in different ways, without replacing the linguistic form. New accepted meanings signal new ideas, appearing from a cultural model of the known world, and they become therefore the most reliable witness of the history of human thought.

The theoretical conclusion is that multilingualism is a resource, in Europe and elsewhere, which must not be neglected. It is, indeed, the synchronic mirror of a

plurality of ideas about the same things, which today, in a globalized world, is a very precious intellectual wealth. Besides, it is the guarantee of the historical memory of a cultural past whose knowledge is the true, inalienable patrimony for the future of our society.

Key words: Language; Culture; Multilingualism; Memory

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INTRODUCTION

Between language and culture there is a natural, indissoluble bond, like the one between thought and language. Indeed, without the world's intelligence named thought, no language could have existed in the history of mankind. Language is a communicative skill whose space, in the social environment, is a semiotic one (Saussure, 1921). Through language, and its semiotic properties, reality becomes the meaning of an idea - generated by a biochemical process (Kolb & Whishaw, 2009) – which all the speakers can understand. The process is a typical metaphorical one (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Something becomes something else without changing its nature but only its aspect in relation to imaginative schemes of the world named by a culture in use.

The mechanism is simple and universal. The human imagination of the world, stimulated by perception (Johnson, 1987), is structured by the mental synapses whose features compose the network of knowledge stored by memory (Duffau, 2011). The connection type and hierarchy of images conceived represents the so-called mentally acquired values: Social, interactive patterns of

imagination, which regulate the onset of new ideal paths in conformity with the standard accepted and shared by society. The values make up a set of stereotypes, which constitute the culture of every historical society, responsible for the collective mind and individual behaviour. They condition, indeed, the vision of the world established by the type of experienced knowledge of things, and they are transferred to future generations through education, customs and laws. Only when their authoritative role is questioned by new events, the values change and their system can be modified. Such systems, which are the cultural heritage of every society in any time, owe their maintenance to communication, which permits their acknowledgement and diffusion.

The meaning of words transmits the sense of things for a society of speakers, and discloses the values they live by. Words are the most reliable link between ideas – sited in the human mind – and things in reality (Langacker, 2000). They are a metaphorical product – just like ideas – and a perceptible product – just like things – and their role is to make both coincide, imaginatively, in the quick time of the linguistic sounds which a culture recognizes as pertinent signs of the correlation between ideas of things and real things. A metaphor, certainly, because nothing in the sounds is identical to the things imagined if not in the imagination of the speaker — apple does not have in the fruit any reason to be called “apple”, neither in the pulp nor in the colour and so on; so that in Italian its name is “mela” — and nothing in the idea, on the other hand, is like the sounds of the words into which it translates its own meaning.

1. MULTILINGUALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

Thus, a double metaphorical process – in the language and in the mind – is the simple device that allows language to communicate the values conceived by a culture, and the speakers to understand them. Therefore, multilingualism is multiculturalism and vice versa, in the entire world. Any issue of multilingualism must so be tackled from a multicultural point of view, able to explain what the linguistic differences mean in the world’s individual and social understanding, and how their cultural value conditions people’s thoughts and lives.

Today, globalization has brought down the barriers between nations and people. Differences in languages seem to be a weak signal of the former geo-political gap between people, which global communication has filled. While they are, really, a signal of cultural differences expressed by the socio-cultural history of regions and nations, and based on a different system of values people live by. Whatever is the purpose of our attention to the topic, this issue cannot be disregarded if we want to approach multilingualism in a correct way.

Especially when at stake is the reciprocal understanding between people living together or close one to the other. In that case, to know the cultural value of linguistic expressions, beyond their formal appearance, which can be misleading, is the preliminary step towards allowing communication to be authentic and respectful of others. That is, obviously, the fundamental requirement for the progress of mankind in the world and for peace.

2. SOME LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

European linguistic history throughout the centuries – both in the multilingual dimension and the monolingual one, diachronically and synchronically together – proves well the change of value which words have undergone over time because of cultural changes that have taken place, although they have remained the same in themselves. A few examples are enough to prove our point.

The word *hierarchy* is a linguistic loan from ancient Greek *ἱεραρχία*, a name compound by *ἱερός* and *ἀρχία* a later form of ancient Greek *ἀρχ-*. The modern translation is about “a reciprocal relationship of supremacy and subordination” and it refers generically to every up-down graded relationship between persons or things. The meaning, nevertheless, is a subsequent meaning, appreciating only the subject’s position in a functional or working scale, excluding any lexical transparency of the original ideal reasons of the word. Indeed, the ancient Greek *ἱερός* means “holy”, and it refers to a supernatural divine power, which does not regard men. The history of the word is a long one, which begins from the Indo-European remote age and crosses both the Western and the Eastern I.E. dominion. The former, the ancient meaning of the word, seems to suggest the idea of a strong quickness, so rapid and forceful as to appear like a supernatural quality, out of human reach (Chantraine, 1968). *ἱερός*, is said in Homer to be the extraordinary force (*μέγος*) of the strongest heroes, in agreement with the Skt. *isiréna manasa* (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1937), in its turn connected to Skt. verb *isnati* “set in movement” (Ramat, 1962). So, a mysterious, prodigious power, which inspires fear and reverence in men, is most likely the prehistoric imaginative value of the I.E. word’s root. The Osc. *aisisis* “sacrifice”, Palign. *aisis* and U. *erus* “god”, OHG. *era* “honour” describe well the cultural assessment of this human experience of the world, and its religious epilogue over the centuries.

The nominal compound *ἱεραρχία* is late (5th-6th A.D.), and its literal meaning “chairmanship of holy” testifies a new dimension of the religious imaginary, becoming evidently a matter of management during the Church establishment by Christianity throughout the centuries. The bishop is *ἱεράρχης* of a community of believers

because he administers the sacred rites by which the Christian liturgy interacts with God. Its government's power comes from a divine source - God - whose mysterious and inscrutable will the Pope warrants.

The ἀρχ - choice too is gleaming a cognitive feature today hidden. The Greek word is the historical outcome of I.E. *h₂r-sk- (Beekes, 2010), from which rises the verb ἀρχω "to be the first", "to begin" and "to rule" in Homer, and the substantive ἀρχή "beginning, origin" (Il.22.16; Od. 8.81) and later "reign" (Pi.O.2.64). The progressive series of meanings suggests an ideal translation from the value of "beginning" to "head", passing, most likely, through the idealization of origin as the source of power, perhaps on the model of the family, and assigning to one the symbolic representation of superiority in a scalar range.

Thus, the etymological analysis of the modern word *hierarchy* reveals the cultural progression - from the former, supernatural environment to a religious distribution of tasks until the modern and laic system of work, without memory of its own ideal past - of a kind of organization whose lower principle is a supremacy accepted by an immaterial reason, proceeding only from an otherwise unaccountable spiritual belief; motivated, instead, from a faraway, cultural heritage, whose memory has been lost over time.

So, the linguistic etymology explains a way of living and working of modern society otherwise unjustified in the natural human state, if not related to an early religious idealization of the world - accompanying, with its changes, human history through civilisations - social life has been fashioned in compliance with and owing to many cultural reasons.

Other words are a good example of how a cultural heritage can be forgotten because life and customs have changed and, nevertheless, remain embedded in linguistic memory from past time, until the language they were used by remains itself in memory. The name of Croatia, *Hrvat-* is alike to Iranian *haurvo*, whose meaning is "keeper"; to Greek ὀράω "I see", οἶδα "I know"; to Latin *servus* "servant" and "slave", and *observo* "I watch" (Ernout & Meillet, 1951). All words rise, indeed, from the same I.E. root *swer-. The coincidences signal an old history in the Indo-European area, accompanying Eastern and Western people. A history telling the different socio-political decline of the same, natural human capability of looking and, consequently, interacting with things according to different ways, codified by a culture. In Roman society a keeper of things belonging to others is said servant - just like the word Croatia - and with the same word that in ancient Greek civilization meant knowledge.

The French *madame* is the same word as the ancient Italian *madonna*. Both are the diachronic products of Latin (*mea*) *domina*, feminine of *dominus*, whose semantic

field turns on *domus* "home" (Cortelazzo & Zolli, 1979). The metaphoric translation from a material reference - the domestic setting with its activities - to the effects it is subjected to - a consequence of the sovereignty imposed on a community of persons - is underlined by the Latin possessive *mea*, joined at the name, whose subjectivity points out the sense of subjugation experienced by the subordinates. The medieval Italian *madonna* is expression of a courtly reverential feeling, extolling the feminine heavenly charm; an inexhaustible source inspiring the poets. The *Madonna* par excellence is obviously, in Christianity, the Mother of Jesus: Transcendental sublimation of motherhood, the only power allowed to woman and reason for devotion. The French *madame* continues the courtly tradition, although deprived of the feminine gender reference, linguistically reserved to the generic name of women: *femme*, whose derivation from Latin *femina* - with the same etymological root of Latin *fello* "to suck" and *filius* "son" - underlines breast-feeding as the distinguishing feature perceived between men and women.

CONCLUSION

The examples could go on, because all the Indo-European languages are the historical outcome of a continuous remodulation words' meanings - keeping unchanged the signifiers, notwithstanding the wear and tear of time - of which modern languages are the best evidence; and changing their value as regards new ideas conceived, or new emerging aspects of old ideas (Belardi, 2002). Of both, the words are the linguistic synchronic mirror and, together, the historical document, diachronically committed to a linguistic memory of a past which is our true cultural patrimony, and the best lesson for a future of awareness.

The Indo-European languages, indeed, are the proof of how and how much multilingualism is a resource that does not lose the historical memory of Western culture history through the centuries - since its remote origins - and does not arrive unprepared at the encounter with future intellectual challenges, knowing well how to distinguish between newer and older ideas of the same things. And it is between reality and words that every historical culture speaks.

Owing to their metaphorical value, words - all the words of every language in every place and time of people's lives - are the fundamental key to acknowledge and understand a forgotten world vision, perhaps, by today's men, but without which modern life would not be what it is. A heritage of knowledge, skills, experiences, learning, emotions and thought deposited in many different words, mankind cannot renounce it without losing the feeling of complexity and beauty of the world. That is the presupposition for a positive approach to every

unforeseen human event that can happen, everywhere and always.

The plurality of languages, indeed, is not only the evidence of the variety of aspects through which reality can appear to our eyes, but it is, too, the incontrovertible proof that we can continue thinking of the world in ways that tomorrow are different from today.

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