

FROM THE EDITORS

## ALIENATION FROM LANGUAGE?

Efforts to comprehend what language is and how its potential is used by human beings for the purpose of communication date back to the beginnings of philosophical thinking.<sup>1</sup> One might even venture to say that, in this respect, they might be matched only by insights into the nature of logic, which, interestingly, is also inherent in language. The fact that language makes communication possible turns out intriguing, if not fascinating, for thinkers regardless of their time. Moreover, the common belief that language indeed provides a communication tool is so strong that even in cases when linguistic communication fails, we prefer to speak about a wrong use of language and put the blame for the misunderstanding on one of the interlocutors (or on all of them) rather than question the presumption that communication by means of language is possible.

The author of the Biblical story about the tower of Babel must have been the first to observe the special connection between language and cognition: the builders of the tower spoke the same language, so they could understand each other well, which means that their ‘readings’ of reality were harmonious and consistent—indeed, that it was the case was reflected in their common decision to erect the construction. The confusion of language they experienced as a result of their hubris meant that they could no longer find understanding and distanced themselves from one another not only in the sense of geographical dispersion, but also cognitively: the common vision they once shared was replaced by a multitude of incommunicable views, and the basis for unity was lost (see Gn 11).

The insight shown by the Biblical author was apparently shared by Aristotle, who considered speech to be a faculty of special significance:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but

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<sup>1</sup> See *Companions to Ancient Thought 3: Language*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.<sup>2</sup>

To Aristotle, the capability of speech, characteristic of humans only, was the potential foundation of a structure even more powerful than a tower with its top in the sky, namely, the state. By distinguishing voice from speech, he pointed to the special mark of the latter: the power—grounded in rationality and enabling humans to make their own ‘readings’ of the world—to put forward propositions concerning reality. One might say that Aristotle’s philosophical outlook was marked by optimism expressed in his belief that, in their cognitive acts, human beings actually grasp reality, which exists independent of them, and that they are capable of expressing the contents of their cognitive acts in an intersubjectively comprehensible manner.

Although philosophy has repeatedly questioned the reality of human cognition, and thinkers argued whether what we actually cognize is reality or merely appearances of transcendental objects, or perhaps simply the contents of our own minds, and they occasionally questioned the possibility of an intersubjectivity other than that based on a convention, the functionality of language as a tool of communication was not put into doubt,<sup>3</sup> although its particular limitations were described, as for instance, in the impressive yet enigmatic conclusion of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the turmoils of philosophy and the historic breakthroughs in language studies and linguistics, among them the accomplishments made possible in the latest decades as a result of the rapid development of cognitive studies, it is still commonly believed—indeed taken for granted—that language comprises a phonetic component, i.e., a set of sounds which, combined with one another, have the potential of making up words, in the case of a particular linguistic act juxtaposed according to the syntactic rules. A command of language is, from this perspective, tantamount to the capability of generating original utterances, i.e., ones which have not been heard before. And indeed, such

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, 10, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> A venture like that would involve an antinomy: one cannot question the functionality of language as a communication tool other than by expressing one’s claim in language and by using language to put forward arguments to justify one’s claim.

<sup>4</sup> “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2002), 89.

a belief provides the grounding for various methodologies of foreign language teaching, whether the (unpopular today) grammar—translation method, the structural method (made popular in Poland in the late 20th century, owing to the textbooks authored by L. G. Alexander, W. S. Allen, and Robert O’Neill<sup>5</sup>) or others, such as *The Silent Way* or *Suggestopedia*. Despite the various manners in which the followers and practitioners of these strategies strive to accomplish their goals, their insights into the efficacy of foreign language teaching and learning necessarily presuppose the Aristotelian distinction between voice and speech, or in other words, between sounds which express emotions and sounds made for the purpose of communicating (complex) meanings. However, the distinction in question, which enables a different qualification of speech acts and random sounds, is foundational apparently not only for foreign language teaching methodologies, but also for culture as such. As the author of the story of the tower of Babel pointed out, however unintentionally he might have done so, culture is always created in language and always expresses the incessant striving for meanings and— through them—for the ultimate understanding of things.

The above characterized insight was interestingly developed in the early 20th century by Edward Sapir, who described the mechanism of discriminating between voice and speech.<sup>6</sup> Sapir observed that the sound made in blowing out a candle<sup>7</sup> superficially resembles the *wh* sound of such a word as *when*. Whereas the former is merely a physical by-product of a directly functional act, the articulation of the sound transcribed as *wh* and being a phonetic component of an actual word has no direct functional value, but is “a link in the construction of a symbol, the articulated or perceived word *when*, which in turn assumes a function, symbolic at that, only when it is experienced in certain linguistic contexts.”<sup>8</sup> Sapir’s attention was drawn to the fact that while each act of blowing out a candle is functionally equivalent, the *wh* sound, appearing in numerous words of English which have absolutely unrelated designata and different meanings, does not show the same functional equivalence in all these cases. Thus Sapir concluded that conscious articulation of even the simplest sound which is an element of a meaningful word, be it a consonant or a vowel, involves a complex psychology of association and an implicit knowledge of speech patterns which enable the speaker to make (and comprehend) utterances. Therefore, Sapir claimed, the psychology of phonetic processes is

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. L.G. Alexander, W. S. Allen, R. A. Close, R. J. O’Neill, *English Grammatical Structure*, Longman, London 1975.

<sup>6</sup> See Edward Sapir, “Sound Patterns in Language,” *Language* 1, no. 2 (1925): 37–51.

<sup>7</sup> Sapir meant “the sound that results from the expulsion of breath through pursed lips.” *Ibidem*: 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*: 38.

unintelligible, unless we have a general ‘map’ of the sounds used in a language, describing the patterns in question.<sup>9</sup> A speech pattern embraces the possible ways of the articulation of a given sound which do not affect the meaning of the word(s) where the sound in question appears.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, a speech pattern embraces the entire range of the articulations of a given sound which do not affect the meaning of the word(s) in which the sound appears. The discovery of the existence of such ‘patterns’ in language, which were at the time called ‘phonemes,’ made it possible for Sapir to bring out the fact that the sounds of speech have a higher and different status than that of random sounds conceived merely as results of a specific manner of articulation or as acoustic images: speech sounds provide material for symbolic expression in particular linguistic contexts.<sup>11</sup> It is owing to the existence of such speech patterns that we can understand each other, although everyone articulates particular sounds in ways determined by the anatomies of their vocal tracts and thus specific to themselves, not infrequently showing speech defects.

The theory proposed by Sapir encouraged researchers, today called phonologists, to continue the analysis of speech sounds and, so to speak, ‘factorize’ them in order to find their elementary distinctive features.<sup>12</sup> Somewhat ‘laid aside’ was Sapir’s insight prompting that the phonetic component of language is merely its ‘costume’ and that what determines its essence is its symbolic element, the conceptual aspect of language, as we would call it today, which is directly (or perhaps in an indirect way?)<sup>13</sup> related to reality. It might be true, though, that just as speech sounds may be considered as clusters of features semantically relevant in the process of articulation, the concepts which lie ‘at the bottom’ of the words that express them are specific clusters of insights into reality and their representations and together render the overall cultural

<sup>9</sup> See *ibidem*: 40.

<sup>10</sup> A native speaker of Polish who does not have a command of English will probably pronounce the English words ‘bad’ and ‘bat’ in an identical way, in both cases rendering the final consonant as voiceless—the phonetic norm of Polish actually prompts such an articulation. However, in the case of English, a pronunciation of ‘bad’ with a voiceless ultimate consonant would violate the existing speech pattern and render a meaning different from the intended one (any of the multiple meanings of ‘bat’), thus introducing a semantic confusion.

<sup>11</sup> See Sapir, “Sound Patterns in Language”: 50.

<sup>12</sup> Whereas *d* is a voiced dental plosive in Polish, it is an alveolar consonant in English, although it still preserves the features of being voiced and plosive. See, e.g., Roman Jakobson, C. Gunnar Fant, and Morris Halle, “The Concept of the Distinctive Feature,” in Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Merville-Burston (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 242–58.

<sup>13</sup> The issue in question is currently the focus of debates on the borderline of linguistics and epistemology. See e.g. *The Conceptual Mind*, ed. Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 2015).

experience of an individual and of a community. In this sense, a person's native language is the most tangible expression of her conceptual universe: the image of her mental landscape which is irreducible to the psychological aspect. Perhaps such is precisely the reason why the artificially constructed language Esperanto is considered as an unsuccessful experiment and why the effort to gain a near-native command of a foreign language on the part of an adult person whose mind has already been shaped by the image of reality conveyed by her mother tongue is practically doomed to failure. In the latter case, the target language turns out 'foreign' not only in the phonetic sense and not only due to its counterintuitive rules of grammar, but also, and above all, because it conveys a different image of reality expressed by means of concepts which are not fully comprehensible to the learner (it is worth adding that also grammatical structures are not devoid of semantic component). Whereas concepts used in various languages might be similar or even grasped by means of the same or related names, their contents are not identical, since each language is rooted in a specific cultural experience. Moreover, the link language has to this experience is so strong that the evolution of culture inevitably triggers the evolution of its language.<sup>14</sup> One can undoubtedly speak about an intersection of meanings which makes it feasible for a 'linguistic outsider' to gain a functional command of a foreign language enabling practical communication, yet in the case of a scholarly dialogue within philosophy, or the broadly conceived humanities, such common element turns out insufficient, since the object of scholarly exchange is normally the 'borderlines' of meanings: the liminal spaces and threshold concepts, which are by no means identical in various languages.

The lack of correspondence between apparently identical words in different languages is best visible in the case of translated texts, which occasionally give impression of being impervious and exhibit an unnatural register.<sup>15</sup> The reason is the fact that what they convey is a blueprint of the words used in the original rather than a rendition of their meanings, which have thus remained obscure to the reader. Translations in a way demonstrate how important the precision of language is and they demand full responsibility from those who do them for

<sup>14</sup> It will suffice in this context to refer to the different meanings of the Polish word "narodowy" and the English "national," or to the controversy over the phrase "Polish death camps." See Henryk Duda, "Wyrażenie 'Polish death camps' i jego innojęzyczne odpowiedniki: Komentarz lingwistyczny" [The Expression 'Polish death camps' and Its Equivalents in other Languages: A Linguistic Commentary], *Ethos* 32, no. 1 (125) (2019): 251–68.

<sup>15</sup> The issue in question has been raised in reference to the existing translations of important philosophical texts. See, e.g., Radosław Kuliniak and Dorota Leszczyńska, *Spory wokół polskich przekładów dzieł Immanuela Kanta z lat 1795-1918*, part 1 (Wrocław: Atut, 2015); Ł. Kociołek, "Echo w starym gmaszysku. Kilka uwag przy okazji nowego przekładu Heideggera," *Machina Myśli: Magazyn poświęcony filozofii, nauce i sztuce*, <http://machinamysli.org/echo-w-starym-gmaszysku-kilka-uwag-przy-okazji-nowego-przekladu-heideggera/>.

each word they use, as well as the ability to account for the presence of any given word in the entire text, as well as for every particular instance in which the word in question occurs.

Whereas the ethos of the translator is rooted in the fact that making the thought of a foreign writer available to international readers is reasonable on condition that the translation is faithful to the original, it demonstrates that the *sine qua non* of all language communication in the sense described by Sapir and extrapolated to the semantic component of language is precision, regardless of whether we think of a casual conversation or of a manuscript of a scholarly work in this context. While seeking for a paragon of concern for this aspect of language, one might think of Joseph Grand, a character in *The Plague* by Albert Camus—Grand is a clerk in the Municipal Office whose attention throughout the epidemic is focused on the efforts to produce the best possible sentence opening the book he is planning to write. “How I’d like to learn to express myself,”<sup>16</sup> he would tell doctor Rieux. On one occasion Grand confessed: “Evenings, whole weeks, spent on one word, just think! Sometimes on a mere conjunction! ... It’s easy enough to choose between a ‘but’ and an ‘and.’ It’s a bit more difficult to decide between ‘and’ and ‘then.’ But definitely the hardest thing may be to know whether one should put an ‘and’ or leave it out.”<sup>17</sup> In particular, Grand refers to the role of language as a conveyer of the ontic truth which manifests itself in a cognitive act. “He’d never dream of handing that sentence to the printer in its present form. For though it sometimes satisfied him, he was fully aware it didn’t quite hit the mark as yet.”<sup>18</sup>

An attitude reverse to Grand’s might be found in the postmodernist attempts at a deconstruction of language, in particular of the language of metaphysics, made with the intention to demonstrate its liquidity which apparently reflects the liquidity of reality as such. Whereas the effort in question might not result merely from following “an intellectual fashion,”<sup>19</sup> the cognitive results of the practices it involves frequently turn out unintelligible.<sup>20</sup> Introducing ambiguity into the discourse (in particular into the academic one) and invent-

<sup>16</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Markowska, “Gramatologia jako projekt polityczny: Dekonstrukcja i kwestia sprawiedliwości,” *Idea – Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych* 20 (2008): 5.

<sup>20</sup> Bartosz Brożek quotes an extract from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s postmodernist work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as an instance of conceptual nonsense expressed in language. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2009). See also Bartosz Brożek, “Najdłuższa rzeka Afryki,” in Bartosz Brożek, Michał Heller, and Jerzy Stelmach, *Szkice z filozofii głupoty* (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2021), 109. Examples of similarly incomprehensible texts, including the title of Jerry A. Fodor’s seminal book, can be multiplied. See Jerry A. Fodor, *The Elm and the*

ing neologisms comprehensible merely to their creator, who simultaneously disregards the set phrasemes, result in a specific alienation from language: the condition we deal with whenever language stops being a safe ground for an exchange of ideas.<sup>21</sup>

In the life of a society, the ‘power of speech’ in which Aristotle put so much trust might then surreptitiously transform back into the ‘insignificance of voice,’ and the process in question starts once words become deprived of their conceptual meaning and begin to be used merely as expressions of emotions. One might say that language gets uprooted in such cases and turns into a set of random narratives. It is then that we face the danger that the most powerful among them will overpower the others and subordinate them to itself.

In his Paris lecture of 1935 Robert Musil said: “Today politics does not derive its goals from culture, but brings them along itself and parcels them out. It teaches us the one and only way to write, paint, and philosophize.”<sup>22</sup> The subsequent experience of Nazism and Communism, systems marked by a language of violence, abuse, and manipulation, only confirmed how deep the insight of the Austrian writer was.

Speech, the opposite of voice, does not stop being subject to diverse pressures also in contemporary times and, as a result, language as such frequently becomes truncated. On the one hand, it is challenged, if not demanded, to show axiological neutrality and incorporate the absurdities imposed by political correctness,<sup>23</sup> while on the other, it confronts the dictate of popular culture which makes its way into all the spheres of life, forcing its linguistic standards. Thus it is important to remember the words Lewis Carroll as if prophetically put into the mouth of the creature he called Humpty Dumpty: “When *I* use

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*Expert: Mentalese and Its Semantics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> We certainly deal with another situation in the case of artists approaching their audiences by means of the language of art, which, however, is also rooted in the potential of language conceived as a set of concepts and a communication tool, yet using symbols other than words.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Musil, “[Lecture. Paris] 1935,” in Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 265.

<sup>23</sup> In the US budget project for 2022, for instance, the word “mothers” was supplanted by “birthing people.” See *Budget of the U.S. Government: Fiscal Year 2022* (Washington: The White House, Office of Management and Budget, 2021), 18, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/budget\\_fy22.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/budget_fy22.pdf). On the ‘shaping’ of modern English by the rules of political correctness see Michael Knowles, *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2021). In his work, Michael Knowles included a dictionary of phrases and concepts which have so far functioned in English but are now excluded from everyday use or subject to a change of meaning, as well as those created so as to meet the requirements of the new linguistic correctness. See *ibidem*, “Appendix: Glossary of Jargon,” 239–49.

a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.... The question is which is to be master—that’s all.”<sup>24</sup>

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The present volume of *Ethos* includes papers showing various insights into the current state of a broadly conceived language of culture. The authors examine its functioning in such diverse domains as philosophy, theology, fiction, poetry, drama, and cinema, and use the most current linguistic approaches in their scrutiny. The articles we have compiled, which bring out the truth-value of language, point to its power to render reality unambiguously, yet always in a new way.

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis Carroll, “Through the Looking Glass,” in Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 364.