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TWO TEMPORAL BOUNDARIES OF SPEECH

Summary

A chain of signs, however long it may be, has a beginning and an end. This apparently banal proposition is in reality non-trivial because a systemic rule is associated to each boundary, the initial and the final. The initial rule implies that the chain of signs is not premeditated by the speaker. The final rule implies that the chain of signs is not retained in the memory of the participants. In other words, in a dialogue, the elements and forms of the chain are not construed by the speaker before being uttered because the chain of signs is unpredictable, even for the speaker. For the final boundary, a few exchanges suffice in the dialogue for the participants to have forgotten the precise elements of a preceding chain. Speech then, is impromptu and ephemeral. We shall describe and try to deconstruct these two boundary rules by means of language games (Wittgenstein), regarding translation, lexical hesitations, will, witticisms, reading and writing, and so forth. We will develop the first question of non-premeditation at length, but we will only try out a few counter-arguments on the non-conservation theme. In concluding we will offer glimpses of the question of closure of the dialogical time.

Non-Premeditation of Speech

In a dialogue, does the speaker choose his words and then utter them? Does he control the elements of the chain and their relationships? Does he compose it before saying it out loud? Clearly, the answer is no: the chain is neither premeditated nor assembled by the speaker. We shall have to carry out some counter-arguments (though not felicitous) in order to draw attention to this simple fact of language: speech is an improvised act that does not arise from deliberate construction. If we pay close attention, we observe that the chain emerges spontaneously, in an impromptu fashion, without any voluntary or reasoned preliminary combinatorial work: it turns out to be assembled without our having assembled it. In its elements, the chain uttered is not announced. It comes without our awareness, without warning. In other words, the act of speaking is not a construction, but a surging forth. Let us subject these assertions to the scrutiny of language games.

Stories and Songs

Singing a song presupposes that the words have been learned by heart in advance. In contrast, telling a story does not presuppose that the words used are known in advance. Examples 3 and 4 (marked ?!) are deviant.

- | | | |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | | I can sing that song; I know the words. |
| 2 | | I can't sing that song; I don't know the words. |
| 3 | ?! | I can tell that story; I know the words. |
| 4 | ?! | I can't tell that story; I don't know the words |

Narration cannot be reduced to a chain of words that one knows by heart, for in order to tell a story, one has to speak and not simply recite.

- 5 Tell me that story and don't leave out a single detail.
6 ?! Tell me that story and don't leave out a single word.

The act of telling does not depend on a text given in advance. Thus even when we are telling a story we know, we are no less deprived of advance information about the words that make up the chains. This is the reason why the same story told is never the same as opposed to poetry or song which have a fixed textual form..

Indeed, entire sentences may be premeditated and memorized in advance, well-chosen fixed expressions may be used to good effect. We may also deliver a speech in formulaic language or by spewing forth terms learned by heart. Still, we nevertheless acknowledge that, while quoting, citing, or phrase-making may belong to the arts of speech, they are not parts of its basic principles.

Speech and Will

The words in a chain are not chosen one after another by the speaker. No conscious agency controls the advent of the chain in the form it takes. Intention (even an aesthetic intention) can play only an indirect role. Will has very little to do with the practice of language. And it is probably because chains are not premeditated that it is so difficult to speak in public, so hard to say what needs to be said with the right words. In this familiar exercise, the

speaker notices that language is not a docile instrument, but a strangely unpredictable and reluctant reality.

7 Say what you intend to say to me,
 8 ?! Say the words you intend to say.
 9 ?! Say the sentences you intend to say.
 10 ?! I have said all the words that I intended to say.

The speaker does not construct the chain. His/her awareness of it reaches him/her as he/she speaks. Thus we can sustain our use of words, but we cannot predetermine them. For example, if I want to tell Albert that I plan to meet his children at the airport, and that the matter is thus settled, there is no doubt that I know what I am going to do before I say it, but there is also no doubt that I do not know in advance the words I am going to utter or the form of the sentences I am going to produce. In other words, we do not speak by drawing on a stock of expressions adaptable to the situation at hand. The property of non-premeditation precludes associating the speaker with a prior constructive and conscious intention.

Mastery of Speech

We have been told all our lives to "think before we speak." But even if we were to weigh our words as we speak, we could not predict them. Even under the injunction "Think about what you are going to say, think about how you are going to say it, and choose your words carefully," composition is not what is at stake; inscribed within each subject, language is at work all by itself. Unquestionably, before we begin to talk, it is good to know what we are

talking about. If we fail to meet this condition, we are generally subject to reproaches of the following sort: "you don't even know what we're talking about," "you don't know what you're saying," or "you're off subject." Indeed, effective speech requires preliminary, thoughtful and even premeditated knowledge. If an orator gives a speech, a class, a lecture, or a sermon, this knowledge has to be put in oratorical order: still, the arrangement of speech arguments (rhetorical *dispositio*) is independent of the exact arrangement of words in sentences.

Word-for-word Translation

Certain languages are quite familiar to us, and others less so. In less familiar languages, we still manage, through translation, to construct word-for-word chains by knowingly applying rules we have learned. In such extremely awkward cases, we may premeditate an entire chain before we utter it. But this word-for-word premeditation in a less well-known language relies on the non-premeditation of a chain in a more familiar one. In word-for-word translation, the speaker applies rules at one point and utters the terms assembled at another, whereas in real time. The subject speaks his own language without having premeditated the chains of words.

Witticisms

Insults burst forth like missiles; they hit their targets especially when they are original. To be sure, it is possible to have a catalog of ready-made insults

in reserve, but at the opportune moment the difficulty of selecting the right one ruins the maneuver. In order to insult someone with a witticism, we must be in good form; we must be eloquent. Eloquence is an artistic state that confirms (if confirmation is needed) that one can refine the lack of premeditation, but cannot be exempt from it. A witticism worthy of the name must be unprepared and timely, for preparing one in order to place it at the right moment is precisely not to have any wit. In principle, the premeditation of chains is forbidden in the social protocol of speech. In dialogue, the speaker is required not to repeat. Anyone who cheats is quickly denounced. A witticism outstrips our awareness of it since the speaker and the listener(s) get it all at the same time, the speaker having no prior awareness of it. In other words, when we speak, no one of us has a head start on the chain, not even the speaker. The speech chain is an act in real time. Before its advent, it has no existence, and no one has any prior knowledge of the signs it contains.

Lexical Hesitation

Someone who hesitates while speaking says: "I'm trying to find my words," or "How can I put it?" In the course of the speech, he pauses, marks a break and the chain is interrupted. In its place another chain is installed where he declares his difficulty. Hesitation is marked by a comment clause; the beginning or the end is lacking: "I don't know how to say this," "I don't have the words," and so on. Someone who hesitates may also keep his interlocutor waiting by not knowing how to begin. He might be experiencing the social

pressure of the non-premeditation of signs. Thus, he tries to say something, he takes it back, he asks for time out, he repeats himself and craves to give himself a head start on a future that he is not managing to control. The listener exercises over him the tyranny of requiring a clear and orderly speech that respects temporal limits. Thus the person who hesitates while speaking seems to want to take control of the language, as in writing, proceeding by suspensions and erasures. He says that he is looking for the right word, or that he is seeking one that will express his thought. He may also say that he did not mean to say what he said, that he chose his words badly, and so on. But this type of argument in which speech turns back on itself in no way implies that the speaker is constructing his expression in order to go on and recite it. In short, speaking is not a practice of searching and assembling.

The Act of Writing

Let us extend the rule of non-premeditation to writing. "I burn with impatience before a blank page," the composer Stravinsky said. To be sure, while prose may flow of its own accord for some, for others it is laborious (cross-outs, revisions, syntactic inversions, endless readings and rereadings). But for both groups, whatever the work involves, prose is a matter of waiting. The writer does not go off to look for words or formulas in some memory register: he waits for them to appear (for Wittgenstein, language must speak for itself). Prose can be (re)worked, but cannot be forged. The writer is not a "composer" the way a typographer is, even if the letters he uses are written in

sequence. From immemorial time, poetics has known that will is out of play in inspiration. In place of it, poetics venerates Muses and invokes the Heavens.

11 The lines come from God and not from human power. (Ronsard)

12 The visible and serene artificial breath of inspiration on its way back to heaven. (Mallarme)

The position of the writer is that of a first reader as writing consists in reading what has just been inscribed. Similarly, neither the composer composes note by note nor the prose writer assembles words as notes and letters reach the blank page already assembled. Thus, eventually the chains are sorted out, completed, and amended, but not composed. As in anyone experience's, this first reader is above all a filter and a judge.

Synchronous Point

In dialogue, speech is imposed on everyone simultaneously. The speaker discovers the chain at the same moment as his interlocutors. The property of unpredictability implies that the speaker is deprived of prior knowledge of his own speech. Thus in a dialogue, the following cases are deviant:

13 ?! Paul heard what she said before Alfred did.

14 ?! She heard it after Paul said it.

15 ?! She said it before Paul heard it.

16 ?! She heard what she said before everyone

The participants of a dialogue hear the chain simultaneously, whatever degree of attention each of them might be paying. From the simplest utterance to the subtlest witticism, the speech act brings the participants

together in a single moment of perception. In other words, the advent of the chain is a synchronous point.

- 17 ?! Alfred hears before (or after) everyone else.
 18 Alfred understands after (or before) everyone else.

Synchronous co-presence constitutes a concrete point of communication. It is clear that this simultaneity of catching the chain's advent is incompatible with a division of time between a sender and a receiver, as suggested metaphorically by the classical schemas of communication. The synchronous point which undifferentiates the hearers is totally opposed to a model of transference between a sender and a receiver. Participants in a dialogue are brought together in a single "intuition of the instant" (Bachelard, 1962).

Non-conservation of Speech

Let us introduce the second property of non-conservation of speech. One chain gets uttered. Then others follow. Now let us pause and go back to the first chain mentioned. We can observe, in the ordinary protocol of dialogue, that there remains no trace of it; we have in no way lost the thread of the discourse, but we have not retained the chain of signs, or worse, it has disappeared forever. The chain appears and has to disappear. That I have followed a conversation very closely does not presuppose that I have learned it by heart; not that I cannot memorize it, but it is not necessary to do so in talking.

- 19 I remember everything you say this morning
 20 ?! I remember everything sentences you say this morning
 21 I can report our entire conversation
 22 ?! I can report all the sentences of our conversation

The participants in a dialogue do not expect their speech to be conserved.

Apart from cases of memorization and recitation, speech is only fleeting and ephemeral.

Thus, the speech chain is also bounded at its end point: beyond this point, its trace gradually disappears. Just a few exchanges suffice to leave us incapable of quoting accurately what was said. Moreover, we have to admit that we show little interest in doing so. Put differently, the chain is produced in order to be obliterated, since its preservation is not required for the comprehension of discourse. Let us try some counter-arguments as "Reading a book" and "Good or bad faith".

Reading a Book

Reading a sentence from a page in my book, I admit that I have not memorized the sentences of the preceding page. Of course I could have done so, but this is obviously not the right way to read. Thus, reading, an intelligent activity par excellence, does not conserve chains.

- 23 ?! I have just finish to read my newspaper but I have not memorized it yet

In the activity of reading, one chain of words replaces another and disappears in turn when a third appears. In the process of reading, the values

of the previous chain are transformed by the reader into contextual elements of the current chain. In other words, the transformation of a chain into a contextual elements of a succeeding chain defines the process of reading. In fact, contrary to common sense which says that a context contains its object, reading, as the contrary, inscribes the context within the boundaries of the chain being read. Once the process of contextual integration has been carried out, the chain, except in cases of deliberate memorization, disappears forever.

24 ?! I know when I stop remembering the last sentences of the preceding page

The act of reading divides the text in two zones (chains already read / chains not yet read), zones to which the reader does not have access. Although materially printed, this data is out of range during the reading of one chain. Thus for each chain the reader has to integrate as context the entire preceding text. If I pick out randomly a sentence from a book I have not read, its meaning would stay open. To be in the textual closure (a text is a sui generic totality for Hjemslev), one is expected to read the sentences one by one, integrating the previous sentences into the current one and so forth. If we get stuck, while reading a chain, it is because the integration of the context has not been achieved properly. The philosopher Montaigne notes this provision in forceful terms. He writes: "It is the careless reader who loses my subject, and not I." We conclude from this injunction that the text and its reader must be exemplary in order to form an effective dialogical couple. This requirement looks excessive, no doubt, but it brings out the very nature of

the reading contract: the reader demands that the text be clear, and in return the text demands that the reader pay attention. Whatever the case, we observe that the graphic chains are not conserved in the activity of reading. Just like our spoken words, they are ephemeral, and their conservation is by no means necessary to the effectiveness of discourse. The obliteration of the chain correspond to an irreversible forgetting. Moreover, we conserve words in writing precisely in order to preserve a memory of them which the memory of reading neglects.

Speech Recollection

In a dialogue, the alleged recollection of a chain of signs is difficult to establish without the presence of a third party who can attest (by notation or recording) what was said. The quoted speech is most often a loose and unsatisfactory paraphrase of the original formulation.

25 _You said that if Albert came on Tuesday he would see Suzy
 _ No, my exact words were "if Albert wants to see Suzy, all he has to do is to come on Tuesday
 _ No, no, you said quite precisely "since Suzy is here on Tuesdays, he can see her if he wants to
 _ I never said he would see Suzy.
 _ I never said you said it.
 _ But you just said it.
 _ Oh, come on!

Good or bad faith are not simple moral attitudes for they depend in large part on the systematic character of the chain's disappearance. In other words, the memory mode of language is not that of stockpiling. The property of non-conservation indicates, on the contrary, that such a post-enunciatory function has no status.

The final boundary of disappearance is neither marked, nor even remarked. Indeed, the mark of such a phenomenon should be logically excluded, for it would be strange, if one could be a conscious witness to the process of his own forgetting. Intense concentration would hardly do the trick. The terminal boundary being precluded, there remains just one effective, the initial one. This initial boundary then plays a dual role: it marks the end of one act of speech and the beginning of another.

Some conclusions

Thus the act of speaking —the sign of a subject's freedom, power, and knowledge— is oddly placed outside the control of that very subject. The speaker is not the one in command. This may sound paradoxical: when I say "give me my money back" am I not choosing the words of my sentence? If I myself am not choosing them, then who is? Wittgenstein and Benvéniste would answer that it is language at work. Wittgenstein : "language takes care of itself ", Benvéniste : "the subject is a product of language activity" not its producer. For in a language game, the speaker is less an agent than a value which is at stake.