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Subjectivity in Language

In language as, they say, the instrument of communication, to what does it owe this property? The question may cause surprise, as does everything that seems to challenge an obvious fact, but it is sometimes useful to require proof of the obvious. Two answers come to mind. The one would be that language is in fact employed as the instrument of communication, probably because men have not found a better or more effective way in which to communicate. This amounts to stating what one wishes to understand. One might also think of replying that language has such qualities as make it suited to serve as an instrument; it lends itself to transmitting what I entrust to it—an order, a question, an announcement—and it elicits from the interlocutor a behavior which is adequate each time. Developing a more technical aspect of this idea, one might add that the behavior of language admits of a behavioristic description, in terms of stimuli and response, from which one might draw conclusions as to the intermediary and instrumental nature of language. But is it really language of which we are speaking here? Are we not confusing it with discourse? If we posit that discourse is language put into action, and necessarily between partners, we show amidst the confusion, that we are begging the question, since the nature of this “instrument” is explained by its situation as an “instrument.” As for the role of transmission that language plays, one should not fail to observe, on the one hand, that this role can devolve upon nonlinguistic means—gestures and mimicry—and, on the other hand, that, in speaking here of an “instrument,” we are letting ourselves be deceived by certain processes of transmission which in human societies without exception come after language and imitate its functioning. All systems of signals, rudimentary or complex, are in this situation.

In fact, the comparison of language to an instrument—and it should necessarily be a material instrument for the comparison to even be comprehensible—must fill us with mistrust, as should every simplistic notion about language. To speak of an instrument is to put man and nature in opposition. The pick, the arrow, and the wheel are not in nature. They are fabrications. Language
is in the nature of man, and he did not fabricate it. We are always inclined to that naive concept of a primal period in which a complete man discovered another one, equally complete, and between the two of them language was worked out little by little. This is pure fiction. We can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it. We shall never get back to man reduced to the animal whim of the existence of another. It is a speaking man whom we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man. All the characteristics of language, its immaterial nature, its symbolic functioning, its articulated arrangement, the fact that it has context, are in themselves enough to render suspect this comparison of language to an instrument, which tends to dissociate the property of language from man. Certainly in every practice the give and take of speaking suggests an exchange, hence a "thing" which we exchange, and speaking seems thus to assume an instrumental or vehicular function which we are quick to hypothesize as an "object." But, once again, this role belongs to the individual act of speech.

Once this function is seen as belonging to the act of speech, it may be asked what predilection accounts for the fact that the act of speech should have it. In order for speech to be a vehicle of "communication," it must be so enabled by language, of which it is only the actualization. Indeed, it is in language that we must search for the condition of this aptitude. It seems to us that it resides in a property of language barely visible under the evidence that conceals it, which only skillfully can we yet characterize.

It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of "ego" in reality, in its reality which is that of the being.

The "subjectivity" we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as "subject." It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that that "subjectivity," whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. "Ego" is he who says "ego." That is where we see the foundation of "subjectivity," which is determined by the linguistic status of person.

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use I only when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes you in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as I. Here we see a principle whose consequences are to spread out in all directions. Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse. Because of this, I posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to "me," becomes my echo to whom I say you and who says you to me. This polarity of person is the fundamental condition of the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence. It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. This polarity does not concern the "interior" of the "subject," but exteriority: "ego" always has a position of transcendence with regard to you. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to the context of the "subject." Opposing, and, at the same time, they are reversible. If we seek a parallel to this, we will not find it. The condition of man in language is unique. And so the old antinomies of "I" and "the other," of the individual and society, fall. It is a duality which it is illegitimate and erroneous to reduce to a single primordial term, whether this unique term be the "I," which must be established in the individual's own consciousness in order to become accessible to that of the fellow human being, or whether it be, on the contrary, society, which as a totality we would preside over, and from which the individual could only be disengaged gradually, in proportion to his acquisition of self-consciousness. It is in a dialectic reality that will incorporate the two terms and define them by mutual relationship that the linguistic basis of subjectivity is discovered.

But must this basis be linguistic? By what right does language establish the basis of subjectivity?

As a matter of fact, language is responsible for it in all its parts. Language is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise. We are of course talking of language in general, not simply of particular languages. But the concomitant facts of particular languages give evidence for language. We shall give only a few of the most obvious examples.

The very terms we are using here, I and you, are not to be taken as figures but as linguistic forms indicating "person." It is a remarkable fact—but who would notice it, since it is so familiar?—that the "personal pronouns" are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be. A language without the expression of person cannot be imagined. It can only happen that in certain languages, under certain circumstances, these "pronouns" are deliberately omitted; this is the case in most of the Far Eastern societies, in which a convention of politeness imposes
the use of periphrases or of special forms between certain groups of individuals in order to replace the direct personal references. But these usages only serve to underline the value of the avoided forms; it is the implicit existence of these pronouns that gives social and cultural value to the substitutes imposed by class relationships.

Now these pronouns are distinguished from all other designations a language articulates in that they do not refer to anything. There is no concept "I" that incorporates all the I's that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept "tree" to which all the usages of the word "tree" refer. The "I," then, does not denote any lexical entity. Could it then be said that I refers to a particular individual? If that were the case, a permanent contradiction would be admitted into language, and anarchy into its use. How could the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? We are in the presence of a class of words, the "personal pronouns," that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does I refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: I refers to the act of individual discourse in which the sentence is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which I designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the "subject." And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.

Language is so organized that it permits each speaker to appropriate to himself in entire language by designating himself as I.

The personal pronouns provide the first step in this bringing out of subjectivity in language. Other classes of pronouns that share the same status depend on their turn upon these pronouns. These other classes are the indicators of size, the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the "subject" taken as referent: "this, here, now," and their numerous correlative, "that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow," etc. They have in common the feature of being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the person of discursivity.

It is easy to see that the domain of subjectivity is further expanded and must take over the expression of temporality. No matter what the type of language, there is everywhere to be observed a certain linguistic organization of the notion of time. It matters little whether this notion is marked in the inflection of the verb or by words of other classes (particles, adverbs, lexical variations, etc.); that is a matter of formal structure. In one way or another, a language always makes a distinction of "times"; whether it be a past and a future, separated by a "present," as in French [or English], or, as in various Amerindian languages, a preterite-present opposed to a future, or a present-future distinguished from a past, these distinctions being in their turn capable of depending on variations of aspect, etc. The line of separation is always a reference to the "present." Now this "present" in its turn has only a linguistic fact as tree refer to. The "I," then, does not denote any lexical entity. Could it then be said that I refers to a particular individual? If that were the case, a permanent contradiction would be admitted into language, and anarchy into its use. How could the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? We are in the presence of a class of words, the "personal pronouns," that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does I refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: I refers to the act of individual discourse in which the sentence is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which I designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the "subject." And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.

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is the real utterance, not the personal verb form that governs it. But on the other hand, that personal form is, one might say, the indicator of subjectivity. It gives the assertion that follows the subjective context—doubt, presumption, inference—suggested to characterize the attitude of the speaker with respect to the statement he is making. This manifestation of subjectivity does not stand out except in the first person. One can hardly imagine similar verbs in the second person except for taking up an argument again verbatim; thus, you must suppose that he has left is only a way of repeating what “you” has just said: “I suppose that he has left.” But if one removes the expression of person, leaving only “he supposes that . . .” we no longer have, from the point of view of I who utters it, anything but a simple statement.

We will perceive the nature of this “subjectivity” even more clearly if we consider the effect on the meaning produced by changing the person of certain verbs of speaking. These are verbs that by their meaning denote an individual act of social import: swear, promise, guarantee, certify, with locutional variants like pledge to . . . commit oneself to . . . In the social conditions in which a language is exercised, the acts denoted by these verbs are regarded as binding. Now here the difference between the “subjective” utterance and the “nonsubjective” is fully apparent as soon as we notice the nature of the opposition between the “personal” of the verb. We must introduce “third person” as the form of the verbal (or pronominal) paradigm that does not refer to a person because it refers to an object located outside direct address. But it exists and is characterized only by its opposition to the person of the speaker who, in uttering it, situates it as “non-person.” Here is its status. The form he . . . takes its value from the fact that it is necessarily part of a discourse uttered by “I.”

Now I swear is a form of peculiarity in that it places the reality of the oath upon the one who says I. This utterance is a performance; “to swear” consists exactly of the utterance I swear, by which Ego is bound. The utterance I swear is the very act which pledges me, not the description or act that I am performing. In saying I promise, I guarantee, I am actually making a promise or a guarantee. The consequences (social, judicial, etc.) of my swearing, of my promise, flow from the instance of discourse containing I swear, I promise. The utterance is identical with the act itself. But this condition is not given in the meaning of the verb, it is the “subjectivity” of discourse which makes it possible. The difference will be seen when I swear is replaced by he swears. While I swear is a pledge, he swears is simply a description, on the same plane as he runs, he smokes. Here it can be seen that, within the conditions belonging to these expressions, the same verb, according as it is assumed by a “subject” or is placed outside “person,” takes on a different value. This is a consequence of the fact that the instance of
Analytical Philosophy and Language

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS of language generally arouse a certain apprehension in the linguist. Since he is little informed about the movement of ideas, the linguist is prone to think that the problems belonging to language, which are primarily formal problems, cannot attract the philosopher and, conversely, that the philosopher is especially interested within language in notions that he, the linguist, cannot make use of. A certain timidity in the face of general ideas probably enters into this attitude. But the aversion of the linguist for everything that he summarily qualifies as "metaphysical" proceeds above all from a more and more vivid awareness of the formal specificity of linguistic facts, to which philosophers are not sensitive enough. It is thus with all the more interest that the linguist will study the concepts of the philosophy called analytic. The Oxford philosophers have devoted themselves to the analysis of ordinary language, as it is spoken, in order to renew the very basis of philosophy by freeing it from abstractions and conventional frames of reference. A colloquium was held at Royaumont whose object was precisely the exposition and discussion of this philosophy. According to one of its representatives, J. O. Urmson, the Oxford school grants to natural languages the value of an exceptional object that merits the most elaborate investigations. The reasons were clearly stated. It is worthwhile to quote them:

...The Oxford philosophers, almost without exception, approach philosophy after a very extended study of the classical humanities. They are thus spontaneously interested in words, in syntax, in idioms. They would not wish to utilize linguistic analysis for the sole purpose of solving problems of philosophy, since the examination of a language instructs them for itself. Hence these philosophers are perhaps the more ready for and more inclined to linguistic distinctions than other philosophers.

For them, natural languages, which philosophers usually stigmatize as awkward and unsuited to thought, contain as reality an abundance of concepts and the most subtle distinctions, and fill a variety of functions to which philosophers ordinarily remain blind. In addition, since these languages