The argument*

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1. From 'language' to language practices

Grammar has conventionally sought to describe artefacts, namely languages as they appear already constructed by speakers and when relevant by official bodies of regulation (schools, academies, etc.). In this frame, language therefore designates standardised wholes associated with conventional communities of speakers. When we talk about "man in language", it is thus essentially through the stabilised markers that indicate his place (classically, the deictics). It is true that empiricist semiotics sees languages as sums of idiolects (Saussure asserted that language is only as a whole in the "mass"), but most often it does not go beyond this statement of principle, which meanwhile runs up against the classic aporias of emergence. How, in this case, do we go from the idiolect to the common language? From individual representation to meaning? The historicity of individuals, their "aperceptive mass" in Herbart's terminology, remains generally disconnected from the history of structures. "Language" has remained the horizon of diachrony, whether in the long term (the history of languages) or in micro-diachrony (called "discourse", "enunciation", etc.).

This disjunction was not historically specific to the language sciences. Much of early sociology was similarly built for the most part on the priority given to structures, and on the corollary thesis that groups have emergent properties, distinct from the characteristics attributed to individuals. These conceptual frameworks have tended to assume that subjects are subordinated to structures. The figure of the external descriptor contrasts with speaking subjects who are heirs to, or even prisoners of, a language that transcends them, or against social subjects enclosed in structures, or even doomed to a fundamental misunderstanding of their own actions.

This "ideology of structure" has long been the subject of numerous criticisms, often from the side-lines of the academic field devoted to language, which were more sensitive to actual language practices and their anthropological or social entanglements. Structures, or rather linguistic conventions, are then viewed as a semiotic resource that is certainly central but by no means exclusive within an always multimodal interaction.[3] The traditional perspective is reversed in favour of a bottom-up and emergentist perspective, as seen for more than a decade in approaches to both empirical descriptions of language contact[4] and their theoretical

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[3] Much work has been carried out in this perspective and it is hardly possible to cite it all. For a quick overview of some illustrative aspects in line with these aims, we suggest Nicolaï (2021: 47-73).
[4] The initiative (2007) of creating the *Journal of Language Contact* (JLC), which has contributed to the development of this field, is an example of this, and we recall the presentation text of its first issue: JLC Thema 1, 2007: 1-10.

reframing. We think of those authors who explore the vast territory opened by interactional sociolinguistics and its fringes, from the confines of ethnomethodology to discourse analysis via anthropology, such as Blommaert (2011), Gumperz (1982), Mondada (2006), Rampton (2005) and many others. See also Nicolaï (2012a, 2021).

In practice, these approaches intersect at many points with the long-standing achievements of dialectology[5] as regards the artefactual nature of the notions of *language*, *speaker* and even *native speaker* (this notion assuming the existence of more or less homogeneous language communities). The same applies to the emphasis placed on the role of individuals in the construction of the collective reality, which also recalls the paths once trodden by the dialectologist and father of creolistics Hugo Schuchardt who, in a famous polemic with Meillet, retorted that languages do not actually "exist", but only speaking individuals.[6]

2. Reflexivity, subject, signification and construction of a "meaning"

The activity of the actors is underlined in much contemporary work, not all of it dealing with language. The social anthropology developed by Fredrik Barth thus sees ethnicity as a cognitive category constructed by actors, who choose to endorse it or not.[7] From a similar but more "linguistic" perspective, we can also think of the phenomena of "code-crossing" (Rampton, 2005), "focusing" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), possibly" dramatisation" (*théâtralisation*, Nicolaï, 2001), or even Goffman's "footing" (1981). All these analyses simultaneously highlight the explicitly reflexive component inherent in linguistic and, more generally, semiotic behaviour.

This metacognitive component is also pivotal in Garfinkel's critique of the sociological cliché of the "cultural dope". According to Garfinkel, no social behaviour is devoid of meaning, and this meaning is always produced by the agents at the same time as their behaviour itself. From an ethnomethodological perspective, it is therefore important to explore the social world directly, without going through the institutions and structures, and to account for meaning as individuals collectively construct it, and not as viewed by the descriptor's transcending eye. The result is that all social activity is "accountable", since the actor can, by definition, account for it. The accountability thesis posits that what "goes without saying" is simultaneously what "is understood" and "can be said". Far from being doomed to constitutive ignorance, actors (or "members" in ethnomethodological phraseology) have an indissolubly pragmatic and reflexive competence – in their community, it must be stated, as "localness" and "competence" are linked.

By placing the reflexive activity of the individuals themselves at the centre of the analysis, bottom-up approaches claim to take thinking to the exact point where a Durkheimian type of sociology starts. Unlike dialectology, these approaches are not specifically linguistic but rather

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[5] Among many others, Gilliéron's Atlas in the French-speaking world or, in the German-speaking world, Schmidt's wave theory (1872) and Schuchardt's early theorization of language mixing (1884, 1888) come to mind.

[6] For details Samain (2019). Despite his insistence on the 'social character' of language, Meillet never freed himself from an essentialist background. Schuchardt's conceptions appear much more modern today.

[7] See Nicolaï (2021: 137-157) for reflections which, starting from the focus on the actor, act the rapprochement between building and capture of the dynamics of ethnic representations in social interaction (H. Barth) and the linguistic-language dynamics apprehended in an anthropolinguistic space where the place of the actor is 'signed'. In the same vein, also Nicolaï (2021: 19-31) who introduces Schütz' reflection.

part of a general semiotics interested in the instruments of cultural coding: when language behaviours are directly studied, they are considered more as communication strategies, possibly associated with a function of emblem (in the mastery of codes, the delimitation of groups, etc.). Notwithstanding this difference in emphasis, we note that the type of reflexivity thus mobilised seems close to that highlighted by the grammatical tradition, which has long underlined the metadiscursive, or even metacognitive, role of many grammatical morphemes. These morphemes have developed in the manner of an *internal* metalanguage, different in status and function from the scientific metalanguage.[8] At a more definitional level, the presence of a metasystematic function has also often been considered as constitutive of systems.[9] More generally, these challenges to the hegemony assigned to 'structure' are echoed in a wide range of contexts, sometimes far removed from the earlier fields. The abundant work of François Dagognet was thus a long and vigorous plea for surfaces and appearance in opposition to what he sometimes called the "vertigo of depth". The current revival of interest in phenomenology,[10] encouraged by better knowledge of Husserl's unpublished work, most likely reflects similar concerns. Some recent reappraisals of phenomenology also clearly endeavour to bridge two approaches traditionally considered irreducible, the phenomenology of experiences (*Erlebnisse*) along with their subjective and sensory dimension, and external empirical, neural or behavioural data. These are just a few illustrative examples.

Some linguists echo this emphasis on the *Erlebnisse*. We recall Guiraud's earlier work on the impressionistic lexicon, which might be worth revisiting today from a more constructivist perspective, such as that of Nicolaï (2019). The advantage over Guiraud's proposals is that it refocuses the motivation of the sign on the speaker himself, avoiding the pitfalls of neocratylism, and also suggests by contrast that the main, if not the only, utility of the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign, which has been a constitutive principle in linguistics, is the methodological abstinence it imposes when describing languages conceived as already constituted. However, the study of the impressionistic lexicon is by no means the only way to achieve a linguistic phenomenology, for at least two complementary reasons: on the one hand, the existence, at an early date, of explicitly phenomenological approaches to grammatical categories, such as Koschmieder's (1929) theory of tense and aspect, which is at least indirectly an heir of Husserl, and on the other hand, the recent but massive return of emotion in linguistic theories.[11]

3. Lead-in

We are at the heart of a theorising of action, but of a situated action that not only crosses several domains of relevance but leads to their transformation. With the collaboration of researchers from various backgrounds, this issue therefore proposes to study the forms which a *linguistics of individuals*, in the sense specified above, has taken, is taking, or could take today, that is, a

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[8] The case of the article is emblematic. Cf. the chapter on the article by Fournier and Samain in Colombat-Lahaussois (2019). In the recent literature, Erhrard & Magnus (2020) provide several illustrations of the internal metadiscursivity of languages. See in particular Samain in Ehrard & Magnus (*op.cit.*).

[9] For Lotman (1999), for example, self-description is constitutive of the semiosphere.

[10] Either from a naturalistic perspective (see Petitot, Varela, Pachoud & Roy (eds.), 1999), or from a more Merleau-Pontian perspective (e.g., Cadiot & Visetti, 2001).

[11] See Lüdtke (2015) for a recent overview. One quote among many (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011): "Notions such as 'sensitivity' or 'feeling structure' are potentially much better than 'competence' at capturing this relational positioning among a number of identifiable possibilities."

linguistic of social actors with their concrete temporal dimension. While this dimension has been given many different names and forms over the past centuries, from Herbart's aperceptive mass to Bourdieu's hysteresis, it has often been judged irrelevant in the language sciences. Some questions, among many others, could and should be addressed.

1) Our preamble recalled the implicit consensus that linguists describe languages, implying that general semiotics lies at the boundary of "linguistics", and that they are not *ex officio* qualified to look at other semiotic systems (cybernetics, biosemiotics, etc.). At the same time, however, this hampers a purely linguistic approach to the semiotic dynamics at work in languages. (Creolistics being more of an exception than a model here). What then do linguists, *as linguists*, have to say about phenomena of emergence? In this context, they must no doubt rethink the boundaries of the field of language and/or their field of competence[12] to give priority to the general process embodied in the semiotic dynamic with its reflexive dimension and its historicity.

More precisely, the aim is to understand this process with considerations of other approaches that also focus on the historicity proper to the emergence of meaning, on the distance necessary for the constitution of signs, and on how subjects-actors validate and collectively adopt the representations they construct in the present. We will thus consider the dynamics of the construction of norms, the contextual semiotisation of interaction and (as a matter of course insofar as they help to model the emergence of meaning) the perspectives opened up by interactional (socio)linguistics,[13] along with those that are part of the socio-anthropological legacy, or those that incorporate ethnomethodological reflection.

2) It was then stressed that reflexivity is a part of the language mechanisms themselves. Using an old medieval terminology, Nicolaï distinguishes between "secular actors" (the speakers) and "regular actors" (the descriptors-prescribers of languages). However, since both participate in the constitution of the common language, the question arises of how far this distinction refers to a real disjunction or to a merely methodological one.[14] This issue can start from banal observations: parents who spontaneously correct their toddler's utterances, adolescents who integrate generational idiolanguages (which perforce involves more or less conscious imitation of the other members of the group), etc. But we know that this cannot be reduced to simple questions of mimicry and integration, for it also intersects with the above phenomena, which, from "crossing" to "focusing", from "footing" to "dramatisation", modulate the way in which these actors adjust their posture while speaking, and finally contribute to the actual common language they engage in.

It is important to define the type of metacognition performed, which in this case applies to norms and interaction, involves affectivity, and whose nature and aims therefore seem

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[12] In the first case, it is a question of broadening what is meant by language, in the second of broadening linguistic analysis.

[13] An epistemic approach that is obviously posed, imposed and sought at the same time. In other words, it is both 'self-evident' and 'not self-evident', hence the brackets around 'socio'. Cf. Nicolaï (2012b).

[14] Using different material from that which led Nicolai to distinguish between 'secular' and 'regular' actors, Samain distinguishes between 'internal' grammar (i.e., the cognitive strategies actually used by speakers) and 'external' grammar (i.e., the set of grammatical and/or linguistic categories derived from scholarly discourse. Samain's thesis is that learned categories are legitimate in themselves, but that they are artefacts and that these two 'grammars' are incommensurable. See in particular Samain (2000).

different from the abstract metacognition of the "regular" actor. The next step is defining the type of "language" object thus constructed. Some clarifications are useful here.

To reject the naive scientism of linguistic theories that assimilate structures to empirical properties of things themselves, it is sufficient to counter them with the "externalist" objection that "languages" exist, strictly speaking, only in the technological tools that at the same time instrument and construct them (dictionaries, grammars, etc., cf. Auroux, 1998). Formulated in such a schematic way, and notwithstanding its prophylactic usefulness, this argument cannot account for the mechanisms of emergence, nor for the functioning of language norms as they exist independently of any instituted metalanguage.[15] From a more strictly theoretical point of view, it correlatively overlooks the logical distinction that underlies, for example, the sociology of Luhmann, who draws a distinction in principle between society as a *system* of relations and objective groups of individuals.[16] There is a difference in nature between these two levels, according to Luhmann, who reminds us that law is not a set of norms, but instead the way in which such a set can be created from law itself. In other words, past the externalist loophole, the objections to sociological substantialism concern the difference (and articulation) between *clusters of individual strategies*, as analysed by sociolinguists, and *general objects* – for example, law in Luhmann's view, but the remark applies equally to languages. This is a challenge no emergentist thought can ignore.

3) Finally, it is important for the historian of science to contextualise phenomena such as ethnomethodology or, in another context, the renewed interest in phenomenology or affectivity. In other words, must the relative simultaneousness of the different approaches that aim to put the subjects' experience at the centre in the construction of meaning, and/or of the common, be regarded as fortuitous or as a theoretical conjunction? Can they also be part of a longer history? Historians of linguistics remember the unresolved debate on the status of languages, as attested by the polemic between Meillet and Schuchardt.

4. What can be stated?

Apart from a few bibliographical references, such is the argument proposed to the contributors to this issue. Thanks in particular to Nicolaï's work, whose article begins the volume, the notion of *semiotic dynamics* has now become part of the conceptual vocabulary of semiotics, but speaking of *linguistics of individuals* might seem a paradox for two undoubtedly related but distinct reasons. The first almost trivial one is that the idea of "language" has been, and remains, intuitively associated with the idea of "structure", of "speaking mass" or (from the nominalist perspective of Sylvain Auroux) with the technological artefacts that realise it, that is, grammars and dictionaries. For this very reason, language is much more seldom associated with "individuals". Referring to the *language* of individuals remains, however, compatible both with a classical dialectological approach and with an empiricist sociology that would see groups as

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[15] We distinguish, of course, between the object "language" as it is constructed in particular by Western knowledge, and in general in written languages, and *conformity to norms*, which is a much broader and deeper phenomenon. Every individual in every society learns to "say it right". The European idea of language is much more specific.
[16] For Luhmann, who has been influenced by cybernetics, society is made up of relationships and not of individuals. It should be added that society according to Luhmann is somewhat like Türing's machine, which has been repeatedly pointed out to be a machine principle and not a real machine.

mere aggregates of individuals and, consequently, actual 'languages' as the normalised products of more or less stabilised idiolects. But the coordinators of this issue, and this is the second reason, wished to consider not only the *language* but also and foremost the *linguistics* of individuals,[17] to take into account the contribution of reflexivity they regard as inherent in any language activity. In very general terms, the point was to ask what the linguistic actor creates, how he creates it, and what theory he *simultaneously* constructs of his own activity. These three aspects are an integral part of the semiotic dynamic.

The contributions that follow are diverse in orientation – descriptive, theoretical, epistemological, and, in one case, clearly historical. Besides this undeniable diversity of methods and/or objectives, they all address the way in which languages and effective language practices, reflexivity, signifying and meaning-making are joined together, and thus the way in which individuals and what they construct in order to "signify" are both institutionalised and transformed. This issue of *Signifiances* concludes with a synthesis that aims, rather than to present the contributions of each paper, to pinpoint instead their cross-cutting aspects, some expected, and others that have emerged only with hindsight.

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[17] For linguists, individuals are most often "speakers". This designation tends to assimilate the concrete speaking individual to a more or less generic "subject" (a user?), who "implements language". This assimilation is only a petition of principle, especially illustrative of the enduring hegemony of *the ideology of language*.

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