

EXPLANATORY PARADIGMS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND REPORTING TO REALITY

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Abstract: *This article seeks to outline the polemics on the relationship between language and dialect and between language and social inter-action, and to present, in an analytical, synthetic and comprehensive manner, some theoretical models that provide explanatory patterns regarding the way in which language, as the basis of culture, is influencing how we relate to objective reality. First we will make a conceptual distinction on the relationship between dialect and language, we will review the philosophical premises of the issues addressed, after which the emphasis will move on the analysis of the language from four distinct paradigmatic positions: evolutionary, relativist, interactionist and constructivist.*

Key words: *dialect, language, culture, evolution, interactionism, constructivism, communication, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*

1. Introduction. Language and social action

“A person tells another "Good day"; she does not communicate anything about the day and still conveys a message of sympathy, of friendship or at least of attention. The one who does this is subject to a consecrated ritual, translating in fact his or her affiliation and interlocutor's to the same culture and respect for the habits of that culture (it is what invariably people in the village do, who "give good" to each other meet). This is even more evident in the communication.” (Dragan, 1996: 9).

Starting from simply writing this article and decoding it by a receiver, going through to receiving feedback from it, the communication process mediated by a common meaning system (language) representing a consubstantial part of academic activity. Starting from these inductive judgments, we can rightly ask whether there is at least one field of social action that goes beyond the framework of this system. In fact, as A. Touraine emphasized, a social interaction, to be existent, must translate into "communication through the use of symbolic systems, of which the most obvious is the language" (A. Touraine, apud Aluas and Dragan, coordinators, 1971: 19). We can legitimately ask if language is not precisely the sine qua non condition of sociability. How can we weave the social fabric of a society beyond a system of meanings shared by potential actors in social life? How could social institutions emerge if potential social status holders

could not generationally convey the solutions found to solve common problems? There are only a few questions that reflect the relationship between communication and language on the one hand, and social action, on the other.

Some authors go so far with this inter-conditioning that they only define social life itself by its communicational side. Without falling into the trap of linguistic reductionism, we must emphasize, from the outset, that social life, even if it is not limited to this process, would be impossible without issuing and accepting meanings set in messages as complex, varied, by the participants to the interaction. "The message is simply a set of signs made to evoke certain culturally learned answers. It is of course understood that these answers will be strongly marked by the cultural experience, the psychological context and the situation of the receiver." (Willett, 1992: 86-87).

In addition to the relationship between language and perception of reality, literature also brings to the forefront the interconditionality between language and culture, the elements of the latter (values, norms, beliefs, symbols, ways of thinking, acting, (Otovescu, 2009: 249), which is the natural language of the respective community and makes it possible for the social life to be written and transmitted through the articulated language. Otherwise, cultural fact cannot be, and it cannot be transmitted further than through language, as it itself is the result of creative forces in a culture. Indeed, the externality, objectivity, generality, and the power of coercion that characterizes language have prompted the famous French sociologist Emile Durkheim to easily put it in the category of social facts.

2. Dialect and language

The definition of language raises many logical and epistemological problems, given the multitude of disciplines that claim its study (sociology of communication, sociology of culture, psychology, semiotics, linguistic anthropology, etc.) and the variety of paradigms within the same discipline (in case of sociology, the language can be analysed from different perspectives, those that provide a satisfactory explanation for the evolutionist, functionalistic, interactive, constructivist and structuralist approach). One of the recurring controversies in the literature is the distinction between dialect and language. Here are a few definitions of the works:

- language = "structured system at the social level of sound patterns, with specific and arbitrary meanings." (Mihăilescu, 2003: 384)
- language = "any verbal or non-verbal communication by people, animals or even machines." (Marshall and Scott, coordinators, 2014: 412)
- language = a "human-specific communication system that uses sounds that are put together with each other in certain forms according to a set of rules." (Mihu, 2002: 120)

- language = “any system of signs and rules of use, capable of transmitting messages or meanings.” (Bulai, 2009: 62)

As can be seen, some definitions emphasize the processuality of language (language as a communication process), while others emphasize systemic character, its product (language as a system of signs). Regarding the relationship between dialect and language, Richard T. Schaefer (2008, p. 65) points out that the *language includes language, written signs, figures, symbols, gestures and non-verbal expressions*.

From the above, there are three broad approaches to the relationship between the spheres of *dialect and language* concepts:

- a) dialect is synonymous with language;
- b) dialect is subordinate to language;
- c) language is subordinate to the dialect

Identifying language with the dialect, or subordinating the language of the dialect, raises serious difficulties in working with these concepts. We consider more convenient the second approach, according to which language is “any system of signs and rules of use capable of transmitting messages or meanings”. (Bulai, 2009: 62). Language, understood as any significance code, has a much broader extension than the language, the latter being just such a code among many others. Mathematical language, for example, can be understood by all people with expertise in the field, regardless of the natural languages spoken by them.

In other words, an equation can be decoded by both a Romanian and an English, French or Portuguese, regardless of language. Another example of language that transcends the boundaries of natural languages is road language. In the social reality there is a multitude of sign and signal systems, language being just such a system, even if it is the most important.

A second problem is the assimilation of nonverbal language into natural language. Mihăilescu (2003) limits the language, understood in its sense as a synonym for the term *dialect*, the existence of the phonetic dimension, with a similar approach operating Mihiu (2002). Schaefer (2008) substitutes nonverbal communication for natural language. In favour of the American sociologist's approach, the variability of non-verbal elements (gesture, mimics) could be argued against the verbal elements of different societies. Otherwise, nonverbal language varies depending on units of meaning in words, including a supportive function of verbal communication: we use gestures and mimics to accentuate the meanings of words. On the other hand, contrary to Schaefer's conception, the existence of cultural universals can be argued (many facial gestures and expressions have unanimously recognized meanings, such as smile or crying), but also the false implication that the variation of nonverbal language legitimizes his classification the scope of the concept of *dialect*. Traditions, rites, norms, etc. they also vary from one culture to another, but this socio-cultural variability does

not allow us to assimilate them as part of the language of that culture, even if it is stored and transmitted through it.

Mihu (2002, p. 122) makes a particularly relevant observation regarding the definition of language in a broad sense, like any sign system, and in a narrow sense, as a natural language: "The vision of the language as "ensemble of signs and symbols" is a very wide one, in this case encompassing various arts considered as languages, science regarded as a better or worse language, animal language, gesture. If we overcome the verbal area (narrow language), we are in front of an object whose limits are very difficult to predict (if not impossible). Such an object could be assimilated to that of all social and human sciences and disciplines, if not the subject of all sciences in general." In this sense, in order to overcome the previously discussed terminological controversy, we will use interchangeably dialect and language concepts, referring to language as that system of signs and rules of use that substitute verbal, para-verbal and nonverbal elements.

Language is the main depositor of culture and at the same time it is the instrument through which we can know all other elements of the culture of a society. Norms, values, beliefs and symbols are encrypted in meaningful words and sentences that underpin social interactions.

Dialect can be analysed from a double perspective (Schifirneț, 2004: 98): dialect as a sound system and dialect as a means of communication. While the first approach is specific to the studies of cultural sociology and linguistic anthropology, language analysis as a means by which communication is realized, understood in the broadest sense "as sharing, involves the sharing of information signs" (Walleit, p. 81) being specific to sociology of communication. Such an approach is specific to the sociology of the language, internationally consecrated by Alfred Schütz, Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Luckmann, and, at the national level, by the student of the Gusti school, Traian Herseni. See in this regard the "Sociology of the Language" (1976), in which the Romanian sociologist starts from a seemingly trivial but legitimate observation of the sociology of the language as an autonomous discipline: there is no society without dialect, as there is no language be or have not been spoken in a society.

3. Premises of Language philosophy

The interest of thinkers for language and communication is not closely related to the emergence of socio-human sciences as separate research fields. Until the nineteenth century, many exegetes emphasized, although not in a scientifically validated manner, the importance of the relationship between words and reality, the variability of languages in the context of cultural variability, the remarkable relationship between language and knowledge, etc. We will

outline three contributions that have played a decisive role in the emergence of the sociological perspective of language analysis:

a) Platon's Contribution

Plato is the first philosopher who, in the *Kratylos* dialogue, offers a comprehensive explanation of the etymology of words, instilling, without building a satisfactory conceptual apparatus, the relationship between the word as the basic unit of the language and meaning. His approach, however, does not focus on this report, which it refers to rather in the alternative, but on the etymological origin of the terms: although we operate with meanings fixed in words, we do not know who fixed these meanings. Plato wonders whether the names given to the objects were randomly chosen, or established by a divine authority. Towards the end of the dialogue, he opts for the second possibility, arguing the rationality on which the relationship between the sign and the signal is based, and which could not occur without the interference of the deities. Another contribution of this philosopher is found in the *Timaios* dialogue, in which the theory of mimesis is developed. For Plato, "mimesis acts on two plans. First of all, this term designates nature's imitation of ideas. These, which remain immutable, equally constant with oneself, and which represent the essence of metaphysics, have served as models (paradigms) of the Demiurge in creating reality." (Nedelcu, 2013: 19-23).

For Plato, reality has not only been created by the Demiurge based on a series of later imitated models of nature and art, but the latter is also responsible for the remarkable correspondence between this reality and the design words. Throughout the Middle Ages, the analysis of the relationship between language and reality will continue in relation to divinity, according to the dominant paradigm until the dawn of modernity. Christianity will largely abandon the beliefs on which the Platonic theory of mimesis was built, but will recurrently underline the belief that "God created man as a spirited being, endowing it with the possibility of acquiring language." (Vlăducă, 2013: 112). The Christian vision, which postulates the existence of a preprogramme of acquiring the language inherent in human nature, will be contradicted for two centuries by evolutionary theories and the various theoretical formulas that have been embraced by operative conditioning, and in the twentieth century partially rehabilitated by American linguist and psychologist Noam Chomsky, which sets the basis for the theory of transformative generative grammar (Miha, 2002: 98).

b) Johann Gottfried Herder's Contribution

Johann Gottfried Herder, philosopher of culture, historian and poet, sets out a new theory of language, which will be widely presented in the *Treaty on the Origin of Language* (1772), a theory that aims to explain not only how it develops and develops language, but also the functions it performs socially. Herder is

therefore much closer to the modern approach to language than his predecessors: for him language is a human, not divine, creation that has major consequences on individual and social identity. Language is defined by the thinker recalled by his cumulative character: people have invented words to designate certain perceptible realities through the senses (initially through the auditory sense) that they have generationally transmitted, thus enhancing and enriching the spoken language within a community. The German thinker analyzes the animal and human languages antithetically, arguing that the first one has an instinctual basis, and the second one a rational (*besonnen*) basis, with a man having a "sphere of life" (*Lebenssphäre*) far more extensive than the unfathomable. Other philosophers, such as Jacob Grimm, Hajim Steintal, Lazarus Geiger and Ludwig Noiré will elaborate theories on the origins of the language.

c) **Wilhem von Humboldt's Contribution**

Wilhem von Humboldt is a Prussian writer and statesman, acknowledged for his contributions to the study of language. Unlike his predecessors, Humboldt is not so much interested in the theoretical dimension, theological or metaphysical speculations, the empirical analysis of language, starting from the principles of positive philosophy that governed the first half of the nineteenth century. Humboldt conducts dozens of research trips to make a comparative analysis of spoken languages in different corners of the world. A precursor of linguistic relativism, he is the first thinker who unequivocally affirms that the way of thinking of a people, of understanding and decrying reality, is influenced by the language that it possesses. Another idea launched by Humboldt and developed by scholars of the twentieth century is the necessity of forming a common universal language (scientific language), which makes it possible to develop knowledge at the level of all humanity, beyond national boundaries.

4. The evolutionary conception

With the *Origin of Species* (1859), the famous thinker and scientist Charles Darwin would orient scientific knowledge in an irreversible direction. From the perspective of classical evolutionary theories, "language is based on various anatomical structures that have evolved specifically. These include the vocal device in the mouth and throat that has been specifically developed in humans to serve speech and is not the same as other primates. They also include central brain structures." (Cosmovici, 2005: 273). According to this approach, human language is nothing but an evolved version of animal language. I. Vlăducă (2013, p. 109-110) raises a series of epistemological problems of this theory:

- “the statement is made as if the speech had existed before (in reality or in intent) and the vocal apparatus would have developed to serve the speech;
- does not show on the basis of which information has developed the anatomical structures that make it possible to speak;
- relying only on incidental factors, cannot explain the remarkable correlation between these structures (from the mouth, the larynx and the brain);
- can not explain the remarkable correlation between the vocal and auditory apparatus;
- does not explain why only one species is able to speak.”

It is true that both the arguments and counter arguments of the theory presented are highly controversial. In the last decades, the researchers' attention has moved away from analyzing the evolution of the phono-articulator, analyzing the evolution of the linguistic system as such. In two recent papers, sociologist A, Bulai (Partenie, Bulai, coordinators, 2016: 199-224 and Bulai, 2018) identifies four ways of reporting to reality, depending on the evolution of language, ways that, although they have emerged successively, exclude each other:

- a) **Non-linguistic reporting** - is specific to non-believers, and is based on associations that are memorized by stimuli and responses, but without the implications of certain realities.
- b) **Linguistic reporting** - the emergence of language as a system of meanings presupposed the establishment of a dual regime of reality: an existing, perceptible, spatial and timeless reality, and an inexistent, virtual, ascetic and temporal (a real universe of significance, having the property of nonexistence, which makes it possible to relate linguistically to the existing reality).

Knowing existent reality by socially consecrated meanings is a conventional one: the nonexistent reality retains only the attributes of the palpable reality that the participants in the interaction consider relevant. But it is essential that the complexity of describing the existing reality built by the corresponding meanings is never complete. In other words, for any object, called, say, "rose", regardless of the number of attributes that we define, they will never fully encompass the actual reality to which it refers. The name of the rose will never represent more than the socially significant minimum. (Partenie, Bulai, coordinators, 2016: 205) In other words, when we present such a flower, we are only interested in the presence of certain attributes established by the social convention: a certain smell, a certain colour, a certain shape of the petals, etc.

A botanist will distinguish between dozens of species of the same plant, will be able to differentiate it from very similar plants, but also fit into the same category plants that have nothing to do with each other at the level of common sense. In conclusion, the significant matrix with which we operate to know the

actual reality retains only the relevant attributes in a given sociocultural context. A housewife who makes a jam of roses, notes the author, will be interested in other attributes of the object designated by the term rose, "such as the size of the petals, a certain aspect of their freshness or maturity, certain colors, shape or number of roots and so on." (*Ibidem*, p.206)

- c) **Institutional reporting** - the institutionalization of certain practices has been preceded by the process of modeling, which can be seen as a transition from the simple signification of reality to its construction, that is to its reproduction (by modeling) in meaningful terms. (*Ibidem*, p. 208) At this stage the social norms, values, statuses and social roles of individuals, their social qualities appear and operate.
- d) **Theoretical reporting** - the great theoretical systems of philosophical, theological and scientific fact appear.

In conclusion, the presented model advances the idea of moving, in evolutionary manner, but with remarkable constructivist valences, from the memory to the linguistic level, respectively from the aptitude of the modeling and the institutional order to the consecration of the theoretical models of reporting to reality.

5. The Relativistic Conception

The fact that the language we are talking about influences the way we relate to reality is by no means a novelty. It was intuited by Plato, Herder, Humboldt, Ferdinand de Saussure, but without being explicitly formulated. The first thinkers who will explicitly postulate the existence of a link between the language, its grammatical and lexical structures, and the way we think of reality are two linguists from the first half of the previous century - Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. The hypothesis of the two, later developed in the hypothesis of linguistic relativism, states that dialects do not divide the reality outside the language in the same manner (Pelz, 1996: 35). As examples, Whorf refers to the multitude of terms used by the Eskimos to define the snow (*Ibidem*).

Besides the lexical dimension of the language, the grammatical dimension also influences the relation to reality: an interesting example is English, which distinguishes a multitude of categories of the past and the present, corresponding to a certain type of relation to the temporal dimension of reality (Mihiu, 2002: 115). In German, word-forming is particularly interesting. By putting two distinct words (considered primary words) we can get a compound word: the term Kühlschrank, for example, which means a fridge, is made up of the primary words kühl (cold) and Schrank (cabinet). These compound words come in many instances to contain seven or eight primary words, being extremely long and difficult to translate. We may ask whether this lexico-grammatical engineering does not correspond to a way of perceiving reality in terms of "simple objects"

and "composite objects", the latter being constructed by putting the attributes of the former into a chalk.

Another example is Chinese, in which, although there are no structures for expressing the past, present and future; there are inversible relativity structures in most languages. "A physicist even asserts that a Chinese child, due to the language he is learning from his first years of life, could understand Albert Einstein's theory of relativity better than any European physicist, simply because the Chinese have a sense of relativism assumed at the level of the language. Language learning therefore presupposes the learning of relativism." (Bulai, 2009: 63). This assertion has been confirmed by numerous research conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and linguists. The relationship between memory and language, between the variety of vocabulary and spontaneity, the ability to update some iconic representations and the language formulas acquired during the socialization process was emphasized. For example, comparative studies between English-speaking and Zulu-speaking populations (Carroll and Casagrande, 1958) highlighted the differentiated perception of chromatic nuances based on the linguistic luggage available to respondents to designate different nuances. Thus, the variations of the words that designate the chromatic nuances in the two languages analysed radically influenced the ability to differentiate colours at the level of objective reality. From the foundations of symbolic relativism, Pierre Bordieu's theory on the role of symbolic capital on the social success and general evolution of the individual in social life was also claimed.

One of the discussions currently held in the scientific community is the question of the framing of the theoretical model developed by the two thinkers in an epistemological category. Most authors considered that we are talking about a hypothesis, being too little empirically and logically supported to talk about a theory. In our opinion, the explanation of the Sapir and Whorf linguists is not a hypothesis, but an axiom, since 1) claims the assumption of categorical validity 2) as formulated by its founders, the statement raises great difficulty in testability and falsification to could talk about a hypothesis.

Starting from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the second half of the twentieth century gave birth to new theoretical models in the context of the civic movement for human rights (Schaefer, 2008: 67). Feminist sociology, for example, tries to demonstrate how language can perpetuate sexist stereotypes. For example, the policeman concept, by the term man in his structure, induces the idea that this profession is dedicated exclusively to men. The same argument we encounter in the case of the critical race theory, which argues the existence of linguistic structures that would condition the perpetuation of racial stereotypes, giving the example of the term black polysemy (*Ibidem*).

Thus, the theories of linguistic relativism have become the basis for public policies adopted in many states. For example, in the case of Romania, it was

promoted at the legislative level to replace the term "Gypsy" with "Roma" to reduce the discrimination and stigmatization of this social category considered vulnerable. However, the effectiveness of these policies, though hard to measure, is increasingly questioned. They start from the axiom that the vocabulary we use influences our perception of reality, but it raises this axiom to an ideological, speculative and unknowing level of political correctness. It is absurd to think that you can solve social problems by changing their name and establishing a new system of desirable linguistic codes, established in relation to a purely ideological and arbitrary criteria and not based on sound scientific conquests.

6. Symbolic Interactionism and Constructivism

Although starting from the same premise - the role of social interaction - interactionism and constructivism are constituted in distinct theoretical and methodological directions of analysis of social life: while symbolic interactionism emphasizes interpersonal interaction mediated by symbolic systems shared by participants, constructivism starts from social interaction to explain how social reality is built, both subjectively and objectively, giving, unlike interactionism, greater importance to the macrosocial dimension of reality.

Charles Horton Cooley and Georg Simmel, precursors of the interacting trend, are the first sociologists who have highlighted the importance of communication processes in small social groups and in the diadic and triadic relationships. The cornerstone of interactionism is, however, the interpretative directions drawn by the German sociologist Max Weber, who surprised in his theories about social action the importance of understanding the meaning (*Sinn*), an idea taken over and developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, action and social interaction implies a mutual exchange of significance with symbolic value. The symbolic interactionist paradigm has laid the foundation for new perspectives of language analysis, understood as a symbol system, and of the communication process, as a premise for interpersonal interaction. The contribution of Edward Hulett Jr., in the "A Symbolic Interactionist Model of Human Communication" (1966), provides an extensive analysis of interpersonal language and communication, starting from the principles of symbolic interactions.

Herbert Blumer links the language of interpretation, arguing that people, in their relationship to reality, interpret the actions of the other actors. This interpretation is carried out in a communication process mediated by a common system of meanings, with the observation that these meanings do not evade themselves in the process of interpretation (Grosu, 2000: 35).

Moreover, the theory of circular reactions grounded by the American sociologist, as well as that of channelling impulses, originates precisely from the

postulate of the communicative nature of the process of social interaction. Social interaction is not only a change of significance, but also the permanent modification of these meanings by adapting to the answers given by the participating actors (Bădescu, Dungaciu, Baltasiu, 1996).

In a work that has already become classical in the constructivist sociology of "The Social Building of Reality" (1966), sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann offer new theoretical valences to the study of language and social interaction (Berger, Luckmann, 2008: 54-68). Constructionists place the language between external and constraining faculty and the subjective human action of social actors. According to the mentioned authors, social knowledge is divided by language into two broad categories: the common stock of knowledge and the specialized stocks, the latter being monopolized by specialists from different spheres of expertise. If I have problems with the refrigerator, for example, I know I need to get in touch with an electrician, but he does not have the specialized information he has. Another point highlighted between these pages is that our experiences are categorized in general categories that have meaning both in the objective and the subjective plane. If someone tells me that she has problems with a mother-in-law, and then I place it in an objective category - that of those who have their mother-in-law problem - but the interaction will also have an inherent subjective dimension: I will begin to give advice either based on my experience life, or based on the recipes available in the common knowledge pool. Language allows the transition from concept to category and thereby structuring social reality.

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