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LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS AS AN ANALYTIC TOOL FOR THE STUDY OF (ORIENTAL) CULTURES

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University of Rome "La Sapienza"

Linguistics has a unique status with respect to the other sciences. What makes it so special is that its object of investigation *and* its tool of research are one and the same thing, i.e. the human language. Nothing similar happens in other disciplines. Thus, e.g. physics has to do with reality, but the reality is not the analytic *tool* of physics. Language is something that everyone possesses, in the sense that every healthy normal adult human is able to speak perfectly at least one language, i.e. his mother tongue. Moreover, our knowledge of the language, be it innate or not (which is a matter of a long standing debate that we are not dealing with here), is deeply embodied in our brain. Metaphorically speaking, our body has an internal "organ" devoted to the grasping of linguistic material in a highly automated way. It is so instinctive and unconscious that sometimes it leads to unwanted consequences. Thus, when we are exposed to articulated speech, in whatever language, we cannot help but try to understand it. It even happens that one "understands" – or better: misinterprets – even foreign speech only because our brain considers every utterance as a possible source of information. In other words, before acknowledging the failure of the communicative process, our brain makes every possible attempt to give a sense to the acoustic information arriving via the aural channel (conformingly with P. Grice's *cooperative principle*, which assumes speakers to be rational cooperative language users, cf. Grice 1975). This fact is at the basis of the phenomenon of the so-called "popular etymology" (the *Volksetymologie* of the German comparativists) consisting in a morphological and/or lexical adaptation of a foreign word to the habits of one's own mother tongue in order to give it some acceptable meaning and a transparent internal structure. It is in this way that illiterate Christian people during the Middle Ages misinterpreted the words of the Latin Mass, giving some acceptable and comprehensible meaning, often with ironic or even derisive intentions, to the obscure Latin formulae. For example, Boccaccio attests in his *Decameron* the popular saying *verbo caro fatti alle finestre*, lit. 'dear verb, look out the window', mocking the statement from John 1:14 *Et verbum caro factum est* 'And the Word was made flesh' heard during the Holy Mass.

While popular etymology is a harmless spontaneous phenomenon based on a naïve conception of similarity between words and sounds, the mental

processes standing behind it can also lead to some undesirable conclusions if used in a scientific discourse. The above-mentioned predisposition of the brain to interpret any linguistic material often generates in non-specialist speakers an incorrect impression of mastering every linguistic fact or phenomenon, only on ground of their speaking skills. This is, obviously, a misconception. As modern linguistics shows, the speakers do not usually have an objective view of their language (and least of all on language in general), if without specific scientific training they take their intuition as their point of departure. But thanks to the "special" nature of language studies, what is obvious in other sciences is not so in linguistics. Who could ever claim to know the laws of physics only because s/he *is* a physical body, has mass, carries out movements, clashes and interacts with other bodies, consumes energy etc.? Still, many people make claims about linguistic facts only because they *know* a language.

Instead, the truth is quite the opposite. The speakers do not really control their language, but are controlled by it. They do obviously control the communicative acts they produce, but they have no direct influence on the set of grammatical rules that a language is really made of. Instead, it is the grammatical rules that – partly at least – determine our linguistic behaviour. Therefore, as every other law of nature, these rules have to be investigated analytically, discounting whatever our intuition might suggest. Modern linguistics gives us the tools for such an analysis.

Moreover, as scholars have been discovering again and again, the language-based evidence often has a very strong probative force. The complexity of grammar goes so far beyond simple intuition that no average speaker could ever succeed in counterfeiting a linguistic fact. For this reason, language can be used – while literature, art, psychology etc. usually cannot – as a crucial evidence in order to prove, or to disprove, some extra-linguistic hypothesis or historical fact. As an example I should quote a famous demonstration, provided by Zaliznjak (2007), of the authenticity of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign* – or *Igorlied,* as this xii-century Old Russian epic poem is also called – which has been repeatedly claimed to be a forged composition of late xviii century. It turned out that the language of the *Igorlied* yields such a great quantity of non-self-evident, precise and refined linguistic features, that not even the most brilliant falsifier of the Romanticist period could have ever concocted it (especially if we remember that the suggested forgery predates the beginning of historical linguistics as a science, and specifically of Slavonic philology). For example, the language of the *Igorlied* adheres perfectly to the intricate distributional rules of enclitics in Old Russian. These rules are by no means obvious, and have been inferred only recently, through the comparative linguistic analysis of a great amount of Old Russian texts, most of which were even undiscovered at the time of the supposed falsifier. Moreover, the enclitics occur so frequently that the falsifier could never have set them up in the correct way by only a casual arrangement. Among other strikingly authentic features

of the *Igorlied*'s language are many words and expressions that had been completely unknown to scholars until the discovery of the Old Russian birch-bark epigraphy from the ancient city of Novgorod, deciphered and fully understood only in the last two decades.

Note that the demonstration in linguistics is probabilistic in nature. We could, strictly speaking, imagine a superhuman capable of anticipating two centuries of philology and historical linguistics in order simply to compile a false ancient epic poem in the vein of the Ossianism of the time, in such a perfect form as to deceive even modern scholars. However, to accept the authenticity of the *Igorlied* is far more likely and economic, so that the falsehood claim can be considered disproved. Yet, there are a few critics arguing still today against Zaliznjak's brilliant demonstration of the authenticity of the *Igorlied*. Noticeably, there is almost no linguist among the proponents of the forgery thesis, but mainly historians and scholars of literature. Their argumentation is mostly based on an impressionistic, aesthetic or literary analysis of the *Igorlied*'s language and style: they take an arbitrarily chosen element which seems *similar* to something else and consider it the demonstration of the falsehood thesis; every linguistic feature inconsistent with this thesis is simply disregarded. But in this way, as often happens to average speakers, they simply underestimate the incontrovertible importance, regularity and complexity of the linguistic structures and the probative force of linguistic proof in general.

This capacity of linguistics to go beyond the boundaries of the language *per se*, to discover new facts about the material world or human culture, must be viewed as one of the most surprising and stimulating results of this discipline. For a long time this has been the direction in which many linguists have headed with their research. I should cite some of them as our source of inspiration. The Russian semiotic school (led by Ju. Lotman and his students in Moscow and Tartu) or the less-known, but of no minor interest, Italian school called Semantic critics (started by Rome-based historical linguist A. Pagliaro and his student W. Belardi, cf. De Mauro 1996; Belardi 1992) are worth mentioning. Most of these scholars, though being paramount connoisseurs of general and/or historical linguistics, were not exclusively interested in the pure and self-purposed analysis of the linguistic structures in themselves. Thus, the fact that some languages, such as Proto-Indo-European, did or did not have certain phonemes, morphemes or other grammatical structures, was not necessarily considered appealing or informative in itself. Instead, one of their principal goals consisted in applying linguistic tools of investigation to the discovery of new facts or to the demonstration of new hypotheses about extra-linguistic reality. The versatility of the study of language as a heuristic tool, and its interdisciplinary usefulness, were proven only when one discovered that a linguistic phenomenon can lead to some important consequence concerning some real-world entities or events. This is, indeed, the perspective that has been adopted by the participants of the present Panel. And it could not be

otherwise, given the multidisciplinary approach of the Conference as a whole, which would be incomplete without the analysis of language.

Another point to underline is the question of *grammars*, which provide data for at least three of the papers of this Panel. As a matter of fact, the formal description of a spoken or a dead language is, in itself, a very interesting matter of investigation under a kind of "meta-theoretical" viewpoint. Because of the special nature of linguistic science mentioned earlier, every grammar is a description of a linguistic system made by means of another linguistic system. This possibly results in a clash of two contrasting languages. In other words, a modern linguist, as well as an ancient grammarian, is always subject to the influence of his/her own mother tongue (or, more generally, grammatical tradition). The author of a grammar projects his/her own linguistic structures onto the described language, which may not necessarily possess those structures. Therefore, a description of any language is always also an indirect testimony of the grammarian's mother tongue (given that it is not the same as the target language).

This happens quite often even today in modern linguistics, which is still very closely tied to its European roots, although recent typological studies attempt to overcome this pitfall and to elaborate descriptive principles and methods that are valid cross-linguistically. Thus, one of the most important conceptions of one of the most influential modern theories, the Generative Grammar, namely the notion of *configurationality* (which supposes that the object Noun Phrase is syntactically contained within the Verbal Phrase, while the subject is not, see FIGURE 1), is well attested only in some European languages (best in English), while the more a language is distant from Europe (either geographically or culturally), the less likely it is to be configurational (in order to clarify the notion of configurationality I should mention that the configurational languages are supposed to have quite a rigid word order, which is more or less the case everywhere in Europe, but not in a great number of extra-European languages). The fact that most of the "exotic" languages are non-configurational should suggest that this conception is biased by an excessively Eurocentric approach, and therefore should be abandoned or, at least, reformulated in a more universal and less restrictive way.

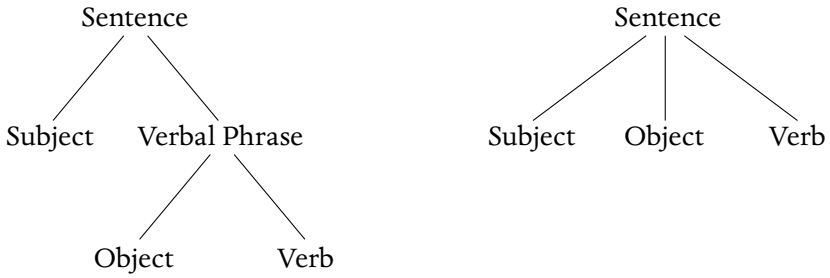

FIGURE. 1. Configurational and non-configurational syntactic trees.

This situation becomes a real challenge for scholars when it comes to languages that are structurally extremely different from the so-called "Standard Average European", or simply the European *Sprachbund* (see HASPELMATH 2001). And this is often the case with "Oriental languages", although the latter is nothing but a geographical approximation with no definite linguistic meaning. Sometimes modern typological approaches have already developed analytical tools versatile enough to fill the gap between "us" and "them". For example, whereas the European theory of the *parts of speech*, dating back to Greek Antiquity, is unsuitable for many extra-European languages, today that theory has been defined on new ground so that it not only applies to any "exotic" situation, but also better explains some apparently well known and long studied cases (as shown by L. Alfieri in his paper).

The ancient grammars sometimes tell us more than their literal content. Even when they are highly conservative and prescriptive, the indirect witness that they bring allows us to posit many plausible hypotheses regarding the language spoken by their authors. The highly conservative, almost artificial, orthoepic prescriptions of Late Antiquity tell us much about the real state of affairs in Late Greek phonology, if we read them with enough linguistic acumen (see C. Vessella's paper on this topic). On the other hand, ancient grammars could be, in some cases, very insightful, reaching a point of sophistication that modern linguistics reached only a few decades ago. This fact, in its turn, might be used as a clue for the reconstruction of the compositional history of a millenary sacred text (as A. Keidan hypothesizes in his contribution).

A pure linguistic analysis of the data can also lead to some very non-intuitive conclusions concerning the material culture and the history of the populations that spoke the languages under consideration. Thus, such a simple phenomenon of apparently lesser importance as the inventory of cases in a language could be used in order to gain some possible insights to the prehistory of the ethnographic situation in Europe. Even though some of the most extreme conclusions of L. Kulikov's paper on this topic might seem too speculative and excessively far-reaching, what is noteworthy is the method adopted by the author (similarly to all of the other authors of the present Panel): language and linguistics are used as a very good heuristic tool for the analysis of the real world data and for the confirmation or rejection of many extra-linguistic hypotheses.

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