

Vico and the grounds of pragmatics

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Abstract

Pragmatics does not usually delve into historical material, looking for functionalist cues to understand the present approaches. Renaissance period is a right moment to look for such insights, because its furious reaction against scholastic grammar. In the baroque period, the standpoint unfolded by Giambattista Vico is perhaps the most interesting stance to evaluate contemporary philology and discourse research, for his important concern to link words and actions, even from a cognitive perspective. Recent researches, from both sides of the Atlantic, have recently valued the work of the Italian to overcome standard philological viewpoints in order to achieve a much more comprehensive system of explanation of knowledge and language, with deep philosophical implications. Vico thought (as modern pragmatics does) that reason and arguments are a positive acquisition of human knowledge, after a long chain of ties between emotions, actions and signs. The principles included in the *Scienza Nuova* look like the best way to incorporate historical material into contemporary pragmatic thinking.

Summary

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1.The uses of history

Crapanzano (1996), in a bright study on narrativity and the construction of the self, makes extensive use of Herculine Barbin's diary. Barbin documents her coming to terms with sexuality in the face of the rigid compartmentalisation of 19th century society. Barbin was brought up as a woman, suffering a severe distance from her hermaphrodite identity. Her gradual recovery of her masculine side, followed by the unfolding of a problematic sexuality, arrives finally at a kind of dramatic equilibrium, a process documented in detail in her diary. Crapanzano's discursive study is built around the critique of this mid 19th century text.

I allude to this case because modern pragmatics does not readily delve into such historical material, nor does it very often refer to studies and findings from other traditions. Crapanzano (1996) is a fine instance of the productive utilisation of texts, demanding our attention and questioning us on the uses of history.

Possibly the most notable instance of the use of history in modern times to explain or justify the opening of an intellectual breach is Noam Chomsky's *Cartesian linguistics*. While it is true that a linguistics historian could take issue, the direction taken by MIT's famous scholar was the correct one: the mentalist and logicist tradition on which the modern concerns of linguistics are based, taking over from Saussure's methodological *Cours de la linguistique general*.

Chomsky was solely interested in *pointing up a philosophic tradition*. He does not go into the history of linguistics to reveal the repercussions of Descartes' ideas on the specific treatment of language, nor controversies over the use of etymologies, or even the correctness or otherwise of the linguistic classifications currently in vogue (Droixhe 1978). Proceeding in this way, he situates himself at a different level of the current debate, achieving a revaluation of precedents, unprecedented until then.

Pragmatics and to some extent discourse analysis also have remained relatively aloof from problems of this kind. These disciplines emerged out of the new enthusiasm for oral language and new methods of accessing it and treating it, during the second half of the 20th

century. As such, they typically represent a different trend in linguistics, focusing on communication issues, and centred on the effects of context. The notions of functional diversity, situational variation, and meaningful underlying rules, have shaped research along lines that were not far distant from those proposed by Jakobson, Benveniste and Goffman.

But what point could there be in resuscitating precedents? Certainly, the alternative systematisation of researchers like M.A.K. Halliday suggests a kind of consolidation of *linguistic or pragmatic thought* quite different in its premises from those posited by Cartesian logic. To delve into the history of linguistics to look for clues means in the first place avoiding accusations of being pre-scientific: such accusations were routinely raised before Saussure's researches and the 19th century spread of philology. It also means having to locate and to define which topics are of interest, and what level of discussion the debate on precedence should take.

In any case, such investigation surely is worth the trouble, if an interesting social psychologist like Shotter (1993), in a clever study of the construction of talk and the role of the imagination, feels the need to turn to the Italian Giambattista Vico and his notions of common sense functionalism. That is the track that we will be on in the pages that follow.

2. The functionalist current

The idea of a rising line in linguistic research culminating in Saussure's *Cours* is plainly simplistic. I would prefer to look back at the coexistence of different ways of perceiving communication and the role of language, at different stages in the history of linguistics and philology. To mention only the Renaissance as a point of departure, the reaction of the humanists to the speculative grammar is perfectly documented in the essay by Joan Lluís Vives (1492-1540), *In Pseudo-Dialecticos* (1519). In this paper Vives, a native of Valencia, unleashes his argumentative fury (in accord with the innovative presuppositions of humanistic rhetoric) against the autonomous linguistics reflection of his time –daughter of pure architectural logic, as practiced in Paris and Oxford. On the other hand, what approach did Vives think was the correct one? We will not find it specifically in any work on languages or grammar. *Vives makes it very clear*, in various different places in his works, that his notion of language is inseparable from communication and learning, and that writing looks like as an historic support and as an aid for linguistic knowledge and analysis.

That is enough, if we are thinking in the functionalism tradition and the effects of context, but not enough if we expect a more intense study of these cause-effect relationships. Nor is it sufficient if we are looking for grammar problems and we wish to know the pragmatic rules that interact with them.

At the same time, Vives' essay points in an interesting direction: functionalism and the relevance of communication. This relevance is expressed well with the expansion of rhetoric knowledge, and shows the continuity between authors. Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444), to go no further afield, writing of translation, defended the idea that all words were interconnected in a fascinating way, forming a mosaic, warning of the ease with which we can fall prey of *faux amis* or *belles infidèles*. At the same time he stressed the necessity of having to hand the greatest amount of contextual and practical information (*De Interpretatione Recta*, 1426). Here we are far from grammatical analysis based on logic, such as would later to be posited as the basis of universal grammar.

The diversity of the functionalist tradition also puts us on the motivationalist track. For some reason, the extension of the arbitrariness hypothesis, linked to critical judgement and the positive analysis of language (the foundation, certainly, of the major task of grammatical reconstruction carried out in the 19th century), has pushed the motivationalist trends out to the periphery of research. The delicate issue here is that during the Renaissance and the Baroque period these were not simply peripheral currents and, in the absence of a consistent rational hypothesis, it is difficult to decide what forms part of the scientific endeavour and what not. In fact, motivationalism provided the basis for the association of forms and meanings that scholars and critics wove in their approach to the reconstruction of texts.

But to progress from text history to general linguistic knowledge is something different. Certainly Condillac (1715-1780) and his language of action is an interesting *point de repère* in this overview. His idea of the *functional and semiotic origin* of language is linked to the

motivationalist hypothesis, and to the rejection of abstract grammatical analysis. Condillac's language of action presupposes an active notion of context, an source for communication that has to do with the things being done. Condillac's approach, while practical, avoids Locke's theory of arbitrariness and recognizes the cognitive value of functionalist associations. A century later, the father of sociology *August Comte* would take this point of departure to found a biological (and functional) theory of language and to address the history of its evolution in terms of the history of signs.

3. Giambattista Vico's contribution

The Italian writer Giambattista Vico (1688-1744) is surely one of the most interesting links in the epistemological shift from scholarly tradition to modern positive research. In his *New Science*, Vico develops a theory of the *origin of human knowledge* based mainly on language. To confront the imposing Cartesian criticism over philologists and historians, *New Science* opens with a chapter about chronological and historical notes, apparently discouraging anyone seeking abstract principles or statements on method. Vico's idea was to base his hypotheses concerning the linguistic usage and social functions of language on solid historical criticism.

The central thesis of *New Science* is the *poetic or creative* origin of language. The second book is in fact devoted to this topic. Here we will find the best functionalist explanations of linguistic activity, reinforced with substantial sociological insights.

It is surprising that hispanic linguistics had not detected Vico's rejection of *Sánchez de las Brozas'* grammatical enterprise. Sánchez was one of the leading grammatical rationalists of the end of the 16th century. His line of argument was compatible with the (Aristotelian) idea of seeking logical causes for *syntactic principles* –very much in accord with what was to be studied in the 20th century under the more or less useful heading of *formal linguistics*. Sánchez' rarefied logicism reminds Vico of the fact that people speak long before they are able to attend grammar classes. "As if peoples who formed languages had first to go to Aristotle's school (...)" [SN44 455].

Grosso modo, Vico's functionalism, conceived as closely linking languages and humanity, is in opposition to Cartesian inspired formalism and logic. It is also in opposition to the rationalist idea (so widespread in the 20th century) of conceiving poetry as a deviation from prose – of understanding poetic language as something more than everyday language activity, as something that is added and perhaps escapes us. Vico takes the term *poetic* in its classic sense, meaning *creative*. Uniting these different aspects, Vico's functional hypotheses have their point of departure in the principle of linguistic creativity, associated with the first human linguistic productions, which, evidently, are not (or were not) the elaborated prose of our written language.

It hardly needs to be said that all this runs counter to many of the presuppositions of modern linguistics –to the extent that such presuppositions differ from the strong functional hypothesis that we are outlining here. This creative origin, related to the informal and rough-hewn beginnings of knowledge, and with the first steps taken by mankind, looks like the union of a powerful fantasy and an initial event: in Vico's historiographical context, the exclamation of the first men in front of thunder, thinking of it as the manifestation of God. In a more mundane situation, a cry of fear.

According to Vico's thought, functions are transformed according to necessities and at the same time transform the type of knowledge. It is plain that prose here is the result of such a transformation, an evolution that underwrites rational thought, just as the alphabet is a transformation of the first writing using signs. Vico connects linguistic and stylistic transformations with the evolution of writing, in a *magnificent historical tapestry*.

A powerful transformation indeed is that which produced the first linguistic sign. Vico applies rhetorical knowledge to the analysis of language. The first *poetic characters* naturally *image forth the contents*, as "[the fact] of the first men of the gentile world conceiving ideas of things in terms of fantastic characters of animated substances, (...) and of expressing themselves through acts or objects that have a natural relationship with ideas (as for example, the act of scything three times or taking three ears of corn to mean "three years") and thus explain themselves through the use of natural signs" [SN44 431]. Thus, it would be a mistake to think of a generalised arbitrariness: "In the question of common languages, the fact that they communicate through conventions has been taken too much for granted by

philologists. If languages had natural origins they must have articulated meaning naturally" [SN44 444].

The idea of poetic characters, therefore, is linked to the formation of meaning and nascent states: "It is showed that the first men, as the children of mankind, not being able to form intelligible genres, had the natural need to invent or contrive poetic characters for themselves, the latter being types or fantastic universals, in order to reduce the particular species, as true models or near perfect ideal portrayals, each one reflecting its genus" [SN44 209]. What is most interesting here is that this operation upon fantasy is the foundation of fables and myths and the background of meaning we still find in popular language, since: "The poetic word, contemplated here by virtue of this poetic logic, circulates for long stretches within historic times, like the great rivers flow a goodly distance into the sea, and keep the waters of the sea sweet where the violence of their current takes them" [SN44 412]. Vico does not let pass unnoticed the relationship between common language and literary construction, nor the pertinence of narrative in the origin of discourse, a theme more recently thrown into relief by modern pragmatics.

The functional approach designed by Vico takes into account three orders or states which are also three levels of cognitive relevance, and which we could relate to three corresponding states in the history of communication. Vico refers to the language of gods, the language of heroes and the language of men. The first comes down to us from the creation of the world, and only remnants survive; the second is that of fantasies of heroic ventures, symbolic and oral; and the third is represented by vernaculars, codified in writing and conventional. This graduation enables us to harmonise what we know of the expansion of writing (and its successive transformations, from the sacred or hieroglyphic to the articulated or alphabetic), with their corresponding social orders, and the unfolding of rational knowledge, indisputably linked with vernacular languages and conventionalism. The diversity of languages is the result of the human activity: "Through the very diversity of the nature [of languages], they have saved the same utilities or necessities of human life in different aspects, (...) in the same way so many languages have been shaped in one way or another. (...) For example, we may still observe that the cities of Hungary are named in a different manner by the Hungarians, by the Greeks, by the Germans or by the Turks. And the German language, (...) transforms almost all the names of foreign languages into its own native ones (...)" [SN44 445].

Appropriation and contamination are, therefore, features of human languages, which are never abundant enough or rich enough for the things they designate [446]. This essential relationship between word and action, the epistemological basis of Vico's thought and the correlations he traces, also provides the ground of his proposal for linguistic analysis. The creation of languages shadows or reproduces the creation of knowledge. After the natural, emotional origins, interjections followed, "Utterances voiced with the force of violent passions, which are monosyllables in all languages" [SN44 448]. A progressive order generated the parts of speech: pronouns, particles, prepositions, and lastly nouns, necessary for the constitution of sentences. "Finally, the authors of language created the verbs, as we see among the children, who develop nouns and particles but leave out verbs" [SN44 453].

While he is not giving a strict grammatical explanation, Vico's observations about this or that aspect of linguistic usage are particularly interesting, to the extent that they allow us to follow the functional trail of the relationship between language structure and language user. Vico goes on: "Names awaken ideas that leave clear vestiges, particles (which mean modifications) do the same; yet verbs signify movements, and bring the notion of before or after, measured against the indivisible present, something which philosophers themselves find extremely difficult to understand. And there is a physical observation which more than proves what we are saying, and that dwelling amongst us we have a good man, gravely afflicted with apoplexy, who remembers names or nouns, but had completely forgotten the verbs." [SN44 453].

Vico is not a grammarian. Nor does he take his linguistic insights much further than this. But he takes pains to establish the relevant connections: "Even the verbs that are generic over all the others –such as "sum" from to be (...), "sto" of those things which are static, "eo" of movement (...), "do", "dico" and "facio", which channel all actions, (...)– must have arisen from the imperatives; because in the family state, impoverished in language as it was, parents would speak and give orders to children and family members (...). These imperatives are monosyllables, as they have come down to us (...)." [SN44 453].

His functional view has the advantage of being highly coherent and of presenting an historical synthesis full of relevant observations. The downside is that (from our contemporary point of view) he does not subject the empiric material to any positive proof. However, Vico was writing before the great development of 19th century philology, and the modern resurgence of interest in oral data, with the 20th century *linguistic turn*. In its favour, on the other hand, he has the anti-Cartesian viewpoint of evaluating language in its historical context, and his radical refusal to consider it in isolation, related to the singular value he accorded to the word and the organisation of meanings, in human activity and in society as a whole.

For Vico the original poetry (= *creation*) is the outcome of strict historical necessities. Rather than an ornament it is a clear and direct way of tackling things, moved by passion, which the symbolic language elaborates and which, as a result of the commonplace confusions of vernacular languages, we find difficult to capture when it comes to us in written form. As compensation, however, vernaculars pave the way for criticism and the development of reason, assisted by the articulated written medium. In this way an inverse proportion is achieved: "The more robust fantasy is, the weaker its rational thought" [SN44 185]. In any case, the three cognitive orders coexist and we could say that they became interwoven: "As the three began at the same time, the heroes and man (because it was men that fantasised the gods and believed that heroic nature was a blend of the nature of the gods and that of man), in the same wise the three languages began at the same time (understanding always that writing accompanied them)" [SN44 446].

This functional genesis is also the genesis of rhetorical figures. Vico continues with the analysis of written genres and styles, to reinforce his functional hypothesis of the origin of verse –which we find encoded in the very etymology of the word *prose*. Undoubtedly another of his interesting finds is the relation he establishes between rhetorical figures and historical styles, based on the four classical figures, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Vico roundly asserts that irony is the mode akin to rational reflection: "Irony certainly could not have emerged other than in the times of reflection, since it is formed on the false by virtue of an reflection that takes on the mask of truth." [SN44 408]. This is true to the extent that metaphor constitutes the natural mode for the transformation of sense and passions, which is the source of fables: "So that all metaphor derived in this way is a fable in little" [SN44 404].

Vico considers that the two intermediate modes, metonymy (in which things that appear together may end up being referred to in the same way), and synecdoche (which transforms the particular into general), as transitional modes in the rhetorical construction of human languages, which ends up creating figures with reverse meaning, such as irony, as we have said, that belongs to rational mode.

4. Other research into the colloquial

The point is that, with this great functional fabric or tapestry, Vico furnishes us with enough elements to understand the patterns of pragmatic and sociolinguistic variation we observe in our immediate context, making is relevant to the present discussion. Thanks to Vico we can perceive more clearly which elements enter in the warp and weft of human functional organisation: the initial and spontaneous nature of the emotions and passions, the ordering and reflexive role of writing, the relation between history and rhetorical styles, or the cognitive nature of metaphors –including those that arise out of colloquial speech.

This multifactored functionalism was recently spotlighted by Jürgen Trabant and Marcel Danesi, on the two sides of the Atlantic. Trabant (1996), writing out of the German tradition of linguistic critique, related to humanism and hermeneutics, sees a connection between Giambattista Vico and Leibniz, Herder and Humboldt. Trabant is interested in the Vickian idea of outlining a *mental dictionary common to all nations*, together with the particular stance of the Italian in conceiving of the dictionary in terms of thematic cohesion. Trabant also looks at the relationship between memory, fantasy and ingenuity, viewed as historical and cognitive functions, taking up these lines of approach from the New Science. His revision of Vico's linguistic approach takes him toward a basic semiotics, which sinks its roots into history, to become a powerful science of language. Danesi (1993) connects these contributions with modern cognitive pragmatics, and with a necessarily non-structuralist and non-arbitrary semiotics, i. e. a semiotics of senses and fantasy. In Danesi's formulation,

language is not exactly the object of study, but rather a part of what he is looking at. The basis of communication lies elsewhere, in the mind's capacity for transformations, and in the organisation of the senses and perceptions – in verbal form or otherwise. The advantage of Danesi's approach is that it presents us a Vico brought up to date, accessible to the interests of linguistic research, and particularly permeable also to everyday metaphor.

Both writers, Danesi and Trabant, support Vico's idea of incorporating a theory of knowledge resting on the nature of language, in no way seen as a structure, but rather as an activity, i. e. in terms of use. Vico consistently maintains, from his early writings in Latin onward, that linguistic research could and should create clarity and distinctions in philosophical thought. Perhaps the most interesting point is that we have here an authentic research programme, spread out over the whole of his work, concerned primarily with words, a programme which started out from the shaky etymologies of his time to go on to construct a notional and pragmatic map –around linguistic functions.

It has been said all too often that pragmatics is the waste paper bin of the disciplines, that takes in all that the other theories reject. The waste paper basket analogy may be charming, but hardly inviting. To underline the systematic side of research has its merits. To think that there could be a theory, with its corresponding scientific (philosophical) implications, that takes into account the intermittent and novel perspectives to approach colloquial language, making use of stylistics, looks like a welcome circumstance. What Vico presupposed above all is a system. The fact that this comes down to us from the 18th century is in itself of no little interest.

All this lead us to the reconsideration of our consolidated habits facing the vernacular, perhaps thinking about ordinary language in a different way, with its necessary involvement in contexts of day-to-day usage. Undoubtedly, this process helps to make ordinary expression less dramatic (and less penalised). In this sense, we should need to go back to the Renaissance discussions on language in order to find rational defences of ordinary language, against the typical bookish dismissal of the latter. The French humanist and cabalist *Charles de Bovelles* (1478-1567) might perhaps serve as a good illustration of what we mean. Bovelles (*Liber de Differentia Vulgarium Linguarum*, Paris, 1533) supports the freedom of evolution of vernaculars, as a product of a country's customs (*patriae consuetudinem*), in a kind of original and studied *laissez passer*. He maintains that it is a mistake to castigate the vices of the mother tongue –since such fluctuations are to be found in all the vernaculars. While we might differ from him in his openly liberal attitude, we have necessarily to appreciate his positive evaluation of ordinary languages, and the considerable contrast it makes with the more normal tendency to despise the colloquial. This is a fine way to incorporate historical material into contemporary thinking.

5. References

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