PROF. DR. O. F. BOLLNOW, TÜBINGEN

The Discovery of Language in the Philosophy of the Present* **

This paper is about nothing less than language and its vital position in the whole structure of human life, though we must direct our attention first to the most recent developments in philosophy; for it is here that we are confronted with the important phenomenon that language, after centuries of neglect relieved only by occasional bursts of overt mistrust, has come to the forefront in present-day discussion.

There were essentially two reasons underlying this lack of interest, not to mention mistrust or enmity, on the part of philosophers and scientists. One was that the meanings given to words were seen to be inexact, and this led to language being looked upon as a very imperfect tool, far too unsubtle to convey a strict process of thought. Words that sounded the same often had different meanings, whilst on the other hand there was often a superabundance of different words covering the same meaning. Nor was any help for this problem to be found in the introduction of more rigid definitions of the meanings of words, inasmuch as many of the words in a given language – and those precisely the most important ones – were not susceptible to any clear definition at all. Who was to give a clear conceptual definition of 'stand' or 'lie'? And then there was that element of nuance and connotation. But most fraught with danger – from the point of anyone striving after conceptual unambiguity – were those many figurative, transferred or metaphorical meanings that run [21/22] through language. Was it ever possible to define, from among the whole gamut of meanings offered by everyday usage, what was a leaf?

For all these reasons scientists tried to rid themselves, at least partially, of all these inexactitudes by recourse to one of two devices. The first was to impose strict definitions at least on their basic concepts, for which purpose they gave preference to neologisms and words of foreign origin, which had the advantage of being arbitrarily definable, since, as new coinages, they were as yet unencumbered by generally accepted meanings imposed on them by common use. The other – the one practised by modern logistics, was to create a language of symbols independent of spoken language, though this again is admittedly based on everyday speech. It is not my purpose here to enter into the question as to how justified this critique of language was, i. e. as to whether the alleged imperfections of language were real or merely imagined, or did not indeed constitute the peculiar excellence of language. All that I am aiming to do is to demonstrate the grounds for this mistrust.

The second reproach that has been levelled against language is that it forces thought into certain patterns by imposing on us the superstition or fetish that words must mean something: simply because language has a word for something, it was argued, it does not follow that this something exists. This seems to be particularly the case with abstractions or general concepts, though it could also be applied in the realm of syntax. As Whorf has pointed out, it is only because in Indo-European languages sentences are constructed on the principle of subject-verb-object that Western philosophy has been disposed to assume an identifiable agent for every action.

All this goes to explain why modern philosophy has paid little attention to language, and why none of its philosophical systems has accorded any decisive function to language. Those thinkers who did nevertheless concern themselves more intensively with language, such as

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Herder, Humboldt or Schleiermacher, were peripheral to the general development of philosophy and had little influence on it. And when language-study as a discipline in its own right got under way at the beginning of the nineteenth century, its early exponents had to establish their first principles for themselves, receiving no help from philosophers, who in turn took little notice of the language-scholars' findings. [22/23]

In recent decades, however, a decisive change has been observable. The philosophy of language has ceased to be a more or less separate discipline existing alongside many others, but has moved into the foreground of philosophy and is even beginning to take over that central position in philosophy previously occupied by logic and then, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, by epistemology. 'It is no longer a novelty today to claim that in the last few decades the question of language, and above all the question as to the meaning and significance of linguistic utterances, has come to occupy a central position in research'[1]

This truly revolutionary development requires a detailed presentation of its own. All I can do here, to illustrate my meaning, is to refer to a handful of names. The first of these is that of Cassirer, who devoted the first volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* to language. Taking up Kant's premise that cognition is not a process of mere mental realization, but an act of creative achievement, he extended it beyond the realm of pure acts of perception by showing that there are, alongside the forms of intuition and thought, others that he described as 'symbolic forms' like myth, art, etc., by means of which we give shape to our view of the world, and the most elemental of these is language. Language, he continued, does not merely depict a reality independent of itself, but shapes this reality, and we can be said to 'possess' this reality only in the form in which language conveys it to us.

Another name is that of Hans Lipps, unjustly consigned to oblivion. While in search of an 'hermeneutic logic', i. e. a logic that, unlike the traditional 'formal logic', tries to understand given entities by reference to the everyday situations from which they spring, he found himself elaborating on the power of language to shape life, especially the power of the spoken word to do this in its relevance to a specific situation. He spoke of a 'potency of the word', of the power of speech to give shape to reality.

Reference should also be made to Gehlen, whose main anthropological work *Der Mensch* develops a theory of language based [23/24] on its various 'roots', especially as regards its 'unburdening' function. The problems he was concerned with, however, lead in a somewhat different direction.

For Heidegger too, in his later development, language took on an ever greater significance. 'Awareness of the nature of language', he emphasizes, must 'acquire a new status. It can no longer be mere linguistic philosophy'[2], by which he means no longer a specific sub-division of philosophy with its own object of study. He summarizes the intimate connexion between language on the one hand and Being and Man on the other in the significant sentence 'Language is the house of Being. In its abode dwells Man'[3]. Faced with negligent use of language he stressed the educational problem of 'learning to live in the speaking of language'. In how far the image of a house in which Man can dwell may be meaningfully applied to language is a question that will still have to concern us in some detail.

1 cannot continue the list indefinitely, though many names still ought to be mentioned. Just as an indication of the growing significance attached to language in present-day thinking I will recall that language forms the subject of the third and concluding part of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode,* which according to the author's intention aims to comprise the totality of her-

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[1] R. Haller, 'Die linguistische Methode der Philosophie', *Wissenschaft und Weltbild* 18 (1965), p. 133. Cf. also O. F. Bollnow, 'Sprache und Dichtung', *Symphilosophein. Bericht über den Dritten Deutschen Kongreß für Philosophie,* Munich 1962.

[2] *M. Heidegger, Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit. Mit einem Brie! über den* 'Humanismus', Berne 1947, p. 59.

[3] Heidegger, *op. cit.,* p. 53.

meneutic philosophy, also that Liebrucks has written a comprehensive philosophy of language.

In this context it is not without interest to point out that a similar development is emerging in English and American philosophy, and this in turn is having an increasing effect on the philosophy of German-speaking countries. The existence of this Anglo-Saxon stream of language-orientated philosophy is particularly relevant to my argument in that, emanating as it does from a tradition of logic predominantly based on critique of language, it is nevertheless being increasingly drawn, in its own very different way, into the catchment-area of the German development I have outlined. I need only refer here to the turn taken by the later Wittgenstein. It was a complete reversal of his earlier position with regard to linguistic philosophy when he declared that philosophical problems were 'solved through an insight into the functioning of our language' and hence de- [24/25] manded a return to the 'rough ground' of language. The linguistic philosophy of the American Whorf is a completely different matter, with its 'principle of linguistic relativity'. It is clear, therefore, that this turning to language is not a specifically German development, but a movement with wider ramifications.

A few preparatory observations seem to me to be in order which – insofar as they can lay claim to be a philosophy at all – I should like to designate, rather daringly, as linguistic philosophy without (or perhaps I should say for the time being without) linguistic science. It will immediately become clear that this in no way entails a denigration of linguistic science. But it seems to me to be to the detriment of philosophical observation if it orientates itself too precipitately on the results of individual sciences, or indeed takes these as its starting-point. For there is indeed a whole series of important aspects of language that a purely philological observation is by no means capable of properly focusing on. Linguistic science is concerned in the first instance with objective entities, with words and the syntactic relationships that govern them – as it were, with the material which language uses to perform its function. That this should be so lies in the very nature of linguistic science as a discipline that is explicitly directed at this particular subject of study, namely language. But without attempting to circumscribe the possibilities of language too narrowly, there is a whole series of phenomena in linguistic life that are entirely independent of the means that language uses in the performance of its tasks (or, to put it more specifically, independent of the words that language uses in performing its tasks), and that nevertheless require an investigation of their own.

One aspect of language that I am thinking of here is the situations in which people meet in order to speak, and the forms in which they speak together or to one another. Another is the tone which people adopt in speaking to one another. Whether, for instance, one person speaks kindly to another or raises his voice in anger has nothing to do with the words he chooses in doing so – indeed the manner in which he spoke would be identifiable to a foreigner with no knowledge of the language. In addition, there is a number of specific typical forms of predetermined linguistic expression for which it is difficult to find an appropriate common designation.

All this must be sifted and sorted in various directions before [25/26] we can approach linguistic science with specific questions and try to evaluate its information pedagogically. Unlike the state of affairs prevailing in many other sciences like physics, chemistry, etc., language is not something we only find out about through science, but something we know from the outset from our everyday life: we all know what talking and understanding the spoken word is. And for purely methodical reasons, if for no other, it is from this immediately given understanding of language that we must start.

What emerges is a wide field for reflexion on the philosophy of language, reflexion on matters that are largely independent of the specific entities that are examined in linguistic science and which precisely for this reason must be dealt with *before* these. Obviously, the philosopher and the pedagogue who is using philosophical reflexions must be constantly referring to

empirical research and be prepared to come to terms with its findings; but in order to do this properly he must first of all have worked out his own question. Otherwise he will run the risk of being swamped by the rush of unprocessed findings that will hurl themselves on him, or of being deflected into a direction he did not intend. Language education itself would be misunderstood if it were conceived of as applied philology. For this reason in these relatively digressive provisional observations the questions must first of all be formulated before they can be investigated one at a time in their connexion with linguistic science.

We must be on our guard against a misplaced simplification. It is not the case that philosophy has the task of laying the foundations on which the individual sciences then build, and which, once they have been laid, have the nature of finality, thus giving rise to a one-sided structural relationship between philosophy and the individual sciences. There is no real justification for any such one-sided view of the individual sciences being established on principles previously laid down by philosophy, though such a view was frequently held in previous times, especially by idealistic systems of philosophy, and is held in some quarters even today. On the contrary, we have come more to acknowledge the extent to which philosophy is thrust back on the work of individual sciences. The findings that philosophy itself comes up with, as a result of its own enquiries, have merely the character of provisional drafts that can then be confirmed, modified or even overthrown by the work done in the individual sciences. [26/27] New and completely unexpected connexions can be brought to light in the process, connexions inaccessible to the earlier philosophically fundamentalist approach. It is only in the – by its very nature – never-ending alternation between discovery of new facts and reflexion on these facts that any progress can be made in the sciences, for it is only thus that philosophy can keep a sufficiently open mind on matters of principle.

This is the reason why I spoke above of our preliminary observations being 'largely' independent of individual research-endeavours in language-study. The philosophical 'foundation' is not to be understood as in any way definitive or as a structure progressing one-dimensionally, but as something having the character of a set of preliminary ideas that guide our understanding. These preliminary ideas are to help us to see clearly the phenomena that we are dealing with, to define the scope of our investigations, and to a certain extent to make an inventory of the questions to be dealt with, all of which is necessary before we can get down to individual research. But at the same time it is in the nature of an anticipatory draft of this kind that it should be anything but immutable, indeed on the contrary that it should be permanently accessible to correction through renewed contact with reality. What I have in mind is the necessarily circular relationship of preliminary ideas as an anticipatory aid to understanding, and deeper knowledge, always ready to be extended by and more firmly grounded on new experience. Nothing is final, everything continues to depend on further experience, particularly on new findings from specialist research in the field of linguistic science. There is, in other words, no escape from the hermeneutic process of all philosophy, and this new and permanently provisional venture into a 'linguistic philosophy without linguistic science' can only be understood against the background of this kind of circular relationship.

This would condition the structure of the kind of linguistico-philosophical fundament I have in mind. It would not be possible for it to start out from the separate components of language, i. e. from words, and to try to rise from these to higher structures, and then finally to examine the way these structures are applied in the actual contexts of life. What it would have to do is precisely the reverse: to take the totality as its starting-point and to try, through a process of increasing concretization, to find its way down to the separate components. But this totality of [27/28] language is not to be sought on the level of objectivized language, but in the everyday situations in which people talk to one another, and what this new study must then do is to examine the different kinds of speech-situation, whether dialogue or monologue, with regard both to their function *in* life and their inner form. Moreover, we can leave aside at first questions about the 'material' with which language is working, since an understanding of the

'achievement' of language is largely independent of this.

Only then should this new study turn to what is actually spoken, to what emerges from the flow of speech in the form of larger or smaller entities, from small utterances like proverbs or slogans to more copious entities like works of literature, identifying the means, the 'material', so to speak, of which language avails itself in shaping these entities. Here an approach seems not entirely unthinkable that sets out in principle from the entities as a whole, especially as regards their role in the total context of life (since that too is possible largely without taking into account the actual linguistic means), only then lowering its sights to the individual words and the way they are juxtaposed, as it were to the 'elements' of language. But another approach seems to me more appropriate – one that sets out from the achievement of the words – not, to be sure, on a purely linguistic level, considering them, for example, as components of sentences and other larger contexts, but in their function as vehicles for transmitting the speaker's view of the world or interpretation of life — and then turns to more general questions about the role of language in the world we have built for ourselves and in the way we realize ourselves. A certain arbitrariness in approach will be unavoidable, inasmuch as the individual parts can never be integrated into a linearly developing structure, each being in effect only various aspects, each of which fixes on the totality of language, only from a different point of view, each of which, in other words, has its own original approach and at the same time implies the other approaches.

Pioneering work in this field has already been done by Hans Lipps. I feel a moral obligation to take up his ideas and save them from oblivion.

Bibliography

H. Lipps, *Werke.* Vol. 2: *Untersuchungen zu einer hermeneutischen Logik,* Frankfurt 1976, and Vol. 4: Die Verbindlichkeit der Sprache, Frankfurt 1977.