Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

AN ASPECT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND MENTAL STRUCTURES

Andrei Petru BARNA[1]

Abstract: *One of the problems the EU has brought about is that of the language all the community members will communicate in with one another. In the Western civilization including the European countries and the United States, it is English that has increasingly been imposing itself, to the detriment of French, as early as the middle of the last century. The Humboldt's theory on the existence of some structural connections between language and culture or ethnicity, taken over by scholars in various fields who are referred to in this paper, points out the interdependence between language, thought and psychosocial personality, and at the same time, the threats entailed when a language imposes itself. Moreover, the use of technical languages implies changes in the human thinking. Confronted with these objective laws, the author of this paper asks himself what is to be done.*

Key words: *lingua franca, western civilisation, language, psychosocial profile, formalisation of thought.*

1. Introduction

To state that the idea of a United Europe has brought about more problems than it solved is certainly a truism.

Thus, if things are heading for an end as much spectacular as beneficial, in so far as regards the higher education and scientific research, by i) the subscription of almost all of the member or future member states to the sole educational system comprising two basic educational cycles, ii) the generalization of the transferable credits system on account of the similarities created among the curricula, and iii) increasingly frequent mobility among students, teaching staff and researchers due to their common objectives, we cannot state the same thing about the need to find a common language, a «*lingua franca*», in general, and a compatible technical and scientific language able to satisfy all the members of the multinational community about to be born.

2. Lingua Franca in the Western Civilisation

If we make a short incursion into the history of civilizations, including of course the Western one, i.e. the civilization developing on the European territory and in the United States, the assertion that the language of the dominant power imposes itself as the lingua franca is absolutely valid. In this respect, it is known that from the 17th century to the end of the 19th century, it was France the one giving the

[1] Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)

lead in Europe, the French language overrunning the other national languages, imposing its political, administrative, military, scientific languages and even its turns of phrase.

We have been witnessing for some decades to a general regress of the French language and to its gradual replacement by English, as the lingua franca of the Western civilization and therefore of the world. This can be only partly accounted for by the huge expansion, in the 19th century, of the British Empire, trade and finance. The determining element was the sudden appearance of the United States as a dominant political power.

It should be noted one more difference between the manner the French language exerted its influence in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the manner the influence of the English language is exerted nowadays. Although spoken by a minority elite French had a long-term profound influence upon the vocabulary and sometimes (as in the case of the Romanian language ...) upon the syntax of a large number of European languages. Occurring in a society with more democratic structures and at a moment of the civilization when the most national languages have already lived their classical ages in literature, the influence of English seems to restrict itself at the level of vocabulary and in specific fields which will be drawn along the page. (Spengler, Toynbee, Djuvara)

3. Language, Thought, Psychosocial Profile

Language is an instrument to represent reality, this being perceived independent of the language is an assertion that seems to be true at first sight. For instance, when Buhler (Buhler 24) defines language saying that "*someone talks to someone about something*" that something talked about has an existence and a form independent of the fact that it is the subject of a discussion. But there are also philosophical judgements that bring seriously in question the independence of the language on the reality in discussion. With certain elements of pragmatics in the building process of the word meaning as the starting point, it comes to assign to the language not only the representation function but that of creating the reality, the world (Morris, 265). The issue of the influence the language exerts upon the conception we have about the world is not new in philosophy. Kant asserted that space and time are ways of the human spirit to perceive reality, and are «superposed» by the human spirit upon the objective reality; only with the aid of "glasses", the perception modalities, can the objective reality be recognized (they can actually deform reality). Herder reproached the Kant's Critique of Pure Reason with the complete disregarding of the language. In its turn, language influences the perception modalities.

When Humboldt writes that: "*Language is the formative organ of thought*" (Humboldt, 55) the conception saying that language is an accurate reproduction of reality comes definitively to an end. Humboldt also mentions: "*The subjective activity of thinking is the one creating the object, for there is no thought that can be considered as the pure receptive contemplation of a previously designated object. The activity of assigning some meanings has to form a synthesis with the inner activity of spirit... For such a thing language is essential*" (Humboldt, 102) And further on: "*The reciprocal interdependence of thinking and verb obviously shows that languages are not means of representation of an already known truth, but means to discover a truth ignored by then*" (Humboldt 41).

Such thesis implies without question some consequences, with multiple

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)

implications. If the perception of the world, or of the truth about it, cannot be conceived without the aid of language, it might be immediately deduced that language is one of the elements determining the conception about the world of the members of the linguistic communities speaking it. The next step is that each different language thus brings about different conceptions about the world, within the various linguistic communities of its members. Humboldt saw very clearly the consequences of his thesis: "*the mental features and the development of one nation's language are so closely linked that, knowing one of them, the other can be deduced, for the intellect and language allow and take only forms reciprocally compatible. Language can be considered an outer expression of the nations' spirit. Language is their spirit and their spirit is language. They both are rigorously identical*" (Cassirer).

Therefore, the image a man receives by knowledge (Kant) or by language (Humboldt) depends not only on the nature of the perceived object, but it always implies an active contribution of the individual, too. As Cassirer suggests, it is not about imitation (*Abbild*) but about creation (*Urbild*).

The characteristic way each language organizes itself in order to express its own "*conception about the world*", is what Humboldt terms "*the inner form of a language*".

Humboldt's thesis was resumed and developed within several fields, aiming for different goals.

The names of some scholars as Weisgerber in linguistics, Sapir and Whorf in ethnology, Cassirer in philosophy, and of others can be mentioned. As early as 1931, Weisgerber worded the basic principle of all these developments: "*We have to recognize to what extent the individual, by virtue of its belonging to a linguistic community, assumes the characteristic mentality of the community which shapes it in such a way that its mental activity is more strongly determined by the conception about the world of its mother tongue than by its own individual personality*" (Weisgerber 75).

In the same period with Weisgerber, but having no connection with him, Sapir wrote in one of his studies about the conceptual categories in the primitive language: "*We seldom misunderstand the relation between language and experience. Language is not just an inventory, more or less systemized in various items of experience that seem relevant to the individual ... (language) is a symbolic autonomous creative structure that does not refer only to an experience mostly acquired without its aid but which, in fact, defines the experience for us ...* " (Sapier 573).

Thus, language appears among the factors the modern psychology acknowledges as co-determinants in the development and quality of the perception, learning and thinking processes. The new outlook over the social perception especially underlined the importance of motivation and experience in the way the perception and learning are organized. Among such factors, language has a special position: it is less powerful than the biological and physiological factors operating over the entire species, but its influence is stronger than all the other social, situational and individual factors. It is not the direct experience of the individual and its personal motivation what contributes to its conception about the world, as it is language (comparable to the sensorial organs we are physically endowed with) the one placing to its disposal the necessary tools to acquire such experience. And these tools are among those that cannot be refused by the individual, who is compelled to use them.

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)

It is sometimes very difficult to find the proper words for what we see, but once found, these words «work» the reality like as many little hammers that the craftsman uses to work copper" (Benjamin 44).

4. Language Structure Formalisation – Formalisation of Thought

One of the ultimate consequences of the above-stated concerns the mental structures/verbal structures relation, a biunivocal one, which therefore reciprocally condition one another. From here one can easily deduce that a certain type of formalized verbal behaviour induces a certain type of mental behaviour.

This idea has historical roots: the first signs of speech formalizing coincide with the first writings, where the expressive function of the language is cancelled by a neutral reference field – official deeds, documents – or, later, by the development of the scientific and technical subjects. Thus a common language imposes itself, formalized at the specialist's and speciality level, as a requirement of extra-linguistic nature determined by a certain reference field, which could be expressed and transmitted only within the limits of some adequate patterns. By the generalization of schooling and readjusting the training by subjects of a scientific or technical prevailing nature, the impact of the formalized verbal structures over the intellectual behaviour becomes a mass phenomenon.

The formalization of the scientific and technical language structures is a natural and determined phenomenon that can be theoretically motivated by the way it is achieved at the level of the language functions.

In order to be effective as a language, it is necessary that the „classical" functions of the language should be effective in communication.[1] In order that the message should be formalized, the code of the message created and transmitted through an usual channel by the transmitter, should be completely known by the receiver, in a certain given context and a register pre-established by both of them: the technical one, of course. In a formalized language, the expressive or emotive function and the poetic one are reduced to zero. The register functions (*referential* and *metalinguistical*) determine constraints from the direction of the reference field the language expresses, becoming objectified, communicating exclusively objective relations, by adequate means to the objective reference field. Thus language becomes more selective in terms of achieving some syntactical constructions specific to the conditions imposed by the given reference field direction, by technical terms but not limited to them, having only one destination: the specialist. By cancelling the expressive function, the technical language becomes depersonalized and will never make use of the lexical or grammatical means that would emphasize a subjective point of view. In other words, at the level of code function and referential context, of register in the technical reference field, an objective approach of the technical processes and lack of interest in the subject describing that process is supposed. By the cancellation of the expressive function, all the language means contravening to the technical register function are automatically excluded. The result is a standard structure, whose basic features are, apart from the specific vocabulary, the rigidity of the syntactic construction and its repetitive character, and the occurrence of the same structures in the same contexts respectively. Thus, the formalization of the technical language has an objective explanation and an inevitability character – it is not possible otherwise – and the same for the consequences resulting from this fact.

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)

One of the consequences is that unspecific means, with a continuously increasing frequency, are introduced into the everyday language, such as compressed syntactical structures and placing the logical subject at the beginning of the sentence.

Another consequence is the specialization by technical, univocal operations, to the detriment of the originality of expression, and of the word plasticity. The force of the word and of the metaphorical syntagm is replaced by the technicized syntax and by the agglomerations of logical-operational syntagms. The technical register of language is the one processing the information, in agreement with the requirements of the reference field.

The structures produced in such a way offer only the possibility to be copied, the originality in a creative sense being excluded. The increase in the direction of formalization therefore entails the decrease of the originality potential at the level of language creation.

Repeating in the course of time the formalized language structures, standardized syntactical structures and agglomerations of verbal syntagms, corroborated with the decreasing of the language creative potential facilitates on one hand the transfer of formalized structures from speciality specific fields to unspecific, everyday fields. On the other hand, as transformed into language automatisms by long-time use, the formalized language cancels in part the original intellectual behaviour and creates a type of false intellectual behaviour. We refer to the fact that we are often in the position to see that the formalized verbal structures and syntagms take the place of thinking, as we automatically build sentences, especially when the reference field is an abstract one. This is because we become, with or without our will, dependent on a professional style, and this style, formalized, is a formative one. The verbal behaviour/intellectual behaviour or verbal structures/mental structures relation becomes in this way a fact.

5. Conclusions

The resulting conclusions which, unfortunately, allow us only to wait for a predictable end with our eyes open, are valid on two directions.

If we accept the assertions of the above-mentioned coryphaei of the "history of civilization" and of other historians as well, it will be English the language that will increasingly impose itself. So much the more it is necessary to find a solution for the homogenization of the technical languages.

On the other hand and in another view, if we give trust to the Humboldt's vision on the language that proved its validity both by itself and by the researches it has inspired, we will accept the following sentence, which is as sibylline as it proves to be possible, containing *in ovo* a possible solution to the language problems concerning us: "*Language combines the universal convergence and the individual specialization in such an amazing way that it is as much justified to talk about a single language peculiar to the human species as we can talk about a specific language peculiar to each individual*" (Humboldt 103).

References

1. Benjamin, William. "San Gimignano" *Thèmes de culture en France.* Le Havre: Garnier, 1958.
2. Buhler, Karl. *Sprachtheorie*. Translated from French by F. Dubois-Charlier, *Théorie du langage*. Paris: Larousse, 1978.

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)

3. Cassirer, Ernst. *Philosofie der symbolischen Formen. I: Die Sprache*, translated from English by R. Manheim, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, I: Language*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
4. Djuvara, Neagu. *Civilisations et Lois historiques*. Paris: Mouton & Cie, 1975.
5. Humboldt, Wilelm von. *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*. Translated from French by H. Back şi D. Ermot. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
6. Jakobson, Roman. *Linguistique et poétique*, *Essai de linguistique générale*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1964.
7. Morris, Charles William. "Signs, Language and Behavior". *Collected Papers.* New York: Braziller Publishing House, 1955, 2nd volume (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960).
8. Sapir, Edward. "Conceptual Categories in Primitive Language". *Selected writings in language, culture and personality*. University of California Press, 1949.
9. Spengler, Oswald., *Der Undergang des Abendlandes*. Translated from French by M. Tazerout. 2 vol.. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.
10. Toynbee, Arnold Joseph. *A Study of History*. Translated from French by E. Julia, *L'Histoire, un essai d'interprétation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.
11. Weisgerber, Leo. *Vom Weltbild der deutschen Sprache.* Translated from French by J.-F. Longacre. Paris: Albin Michel, 1953.

[1] The six functions of the language are the following: *transmitter*, *receiver*, *code, channel, message and content.* The operational mechanism is the following: the *transmitter* transmits a message to the *receiver.* In order to be operational, the message needs first a referential *context* and then a *code*, both of them being common, and fully or partly known by the *transmitter* and the *receiver*. Finally, the message benefits from a contact, a physical *channel* and a connection between the *transmitter* and the *receiver*. Each of these six elements give birth to various functions: the *expressive* or *emotive* function, focused on the transmitter; the *conative* function, focused on the *receiver*; the *referential* function, *denotative*, focused on the context; the *metalinguistic* function, oriented on the code; the *fatic* function, oriented on the contact established through the *channel*; and the *poetic* function, focused right on the message (Jakobson, 135).

BDD-A20270 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:31 UTC)