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Linguistic division of labour: Putnam and Rossi-Landi*

An interesting hypothesis by Putnam concerns linguistic division of labor. In this paper I would like to compare Putnam's hypotheses with an Italian philosopher's, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's similar theory. In his works in the sixties and seventies Rossi-Landi used the categories of work and economy to shed light on the social nature of language¹. It seems to me that the two philosophers developed their theories without knowing about each other. At any rate, I myself could find no evidence that they could have influenced each other.

In the history of philosophy there is, of course, a long and ancient tradition of explaining linguistic phenomena in terms of money, commerce and economy. It is sufficient to refer to philosophers like Augustine, Boethius, Hegel, Humboldt, Saussure, Ryle and others.

It was, for example, by applying the categories of labor and, in general, of human activity, to language that Hegel and Humboldt were able to grasp the twofold nature of language: its 'objective' nature, binding the individual by rules on the one hand, and its free, 'subjective' aspect expressing the individual's intention on the other. Since Saussure this twofold character is expressed by the concepts of *langue* and *parole*.

The well-known distinction between *langue* and *parole* of course is not exempt from criticism. Rossi-Landi pointed out that even *parole* can not be considered as a totality of

* This is the English version of a larger text published originally in Italian: „La divisione del lavoro linguistico: Putnam and Rossi-Landi”. In: Susan Petrilli (a cura di), *Lavoro immateriale*. Meltemi Editore, Roma 2003-2004. 55-63. *ATHANOR*: (anno XIV, nuova serie, 7)

¹ Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*. Bompiani, Milano 1968.; Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Linguistics and Economics*. Mouton, The Hague – 1975

purely individual phenomena. He introduced the notion of “parlare comune” (“common speech”) which enabled him to go beyond Saussure’s dichotomy.²

Tough it is legitimate to criticize the rigid dichotomy of the linguistic system and individual speech, the Saussureian distinction is an important milestone in the history of linguistics. It is an essential part of the efforts made to relate language to work. While the dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* leads to oversimplifications and conceals the social aspects of the individual linguistic work, its rejection is pregnant with an even more serious consequence – the reduction of language to the aggregate of *parole* phenomena. This is typical of the biased neoidealist interpretations of Humboldt. Benedetto Croce for example suggested that: „Languages have no existence apart from the propositions and concatenations of propositions actually spoken or written between different people, at particular times.”³ Linguistic work here is replaced by linguistic creation which leads to a kind of creationist view of language. Rossi-Landi criticized the neoidealists unrelently,⁴ as he would surely crab Davidson’s similar suggestions made in the ’90s.

In spite of the existence of so many distinguished predecessors it was Rossi-Landi who worked out a systematic semiotic theory that interprets linguistic reality in terms of production and consumption; social and individual work, capital and exchange, commodities and money, or reification and alienation.

² Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*. Marsilio Editori, Venezia 1980. 169.

³ Benedetto Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*. Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 160.

⁴ Davidson followed Croce when attacked the concept of linguistic competence and language when writing „In linguistic communication nothing corresponds to a linguistic competence...”, or „I conclude that there is no such thing as language [...]; [t]here is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with...” In Donald

The philosophers who could be mentioned as predecessors of Rossi-Landi use the concept of work only in a very abstract way to characterize the nature of language in general. But they give no hint how such an approach could be applied in solving specific linguistic problems. Even Rossi-Landi's chiseled theory remains from this point of view too general and vague.

The best example of the application of notions related to the concept of work in the field of specific linguistic problems, including the problem of semantic interpretation, is given us by Hilary Putnam's theory of meaning. The comparative analysis of Rossi-Landi's and Putnam's theories suggests that the Italian philosopher deals with linguistic work in general, while Putnam takes for granted the general concept of linguistic work and concentrates primarily on the linguistic division of labor⁵. This is not surprising at all as the problems he is most concerned about are connected to the various aspects of the relation between reference, meaning and knowledge.

The problem of what is the exact nature of the relation of meaning to knowledge does not raise specific difficulties in the framework of a materialist theory like Rossi-Landi's but, as we know, it has been a recurrent topic of the mentalist conceptions since the 17th century. Can we assume, as Locke did, that the meaning of a word is the speaker's knowledge of the thing signified by the word? If we suppose, like him, that the word 'gold' has different meanings for those for whom it is a bright and heavy substance and for those who regard it as a yellow moldable material, etc., it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that we do not understand each other. So should not we think instead that the meaning of a word includes what we do not know about the signified thing? This is, as we know, Leibniz's theory,

Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs". In: Ernest LePore (Ed), *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Basil Blackwell, New York 1986. 446.

⁵ It is important to note that before Putnam and Rossi-Landi it was the Marxist Lukacs who tried to connect the categories of language and work. Both Putnam and the Marxist Rossi-Landi ignores Lukacs' relating theory.

according to which the meaning of the word ‘gold’ includes what the speaker does not know about gold, but someone else, experts for example, might know about it.⁶ Though this suggests even more overtly that we do not understand what we say, Leibniz’s intention is different and farther reaching than that of Locke’s. And when Putnam examines the concept of the linguistic division of labor he follows this Leibnizian intuition⁷.

(For one who considers historically the problems we are treating here it is hard to resist the temptation of mentioning Dante’s comment on the Babel myth. As far as I know this is the first interpretation raising the question of linguistic division of labor: “they were struck with such confusion from heaven that those who had all been using one and the same language in their work, were made strangers by this difference of tongues and abandoned their work, and never again worked together”.⁸ This reference is important and relevant but misleading. The division of labor for Dante is not the explanation of the possibility of mutual understanding – on the contrary, it is attached to the confusion of languages and not to explanation of the possibility of mutual understanding.)

The Leibnizian conception is to be understood as follows.

It is the linguistic division of labor that makes mutual understanding possible despite the differences in our knowledge of things. For the knowledge presupposed by language is possessed *collectively* by the members of a society. Even if we know the objects from diverse aspects and in different depths, it is sufficient to identify our culture’s important objects by the help of words and to know the rules of using them. As Leibniz pointed out, only experts need to understand the complete meaning of words. And the ideal experts, whose competence

⁶ Leibniz,

⁷ Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”. In: H. Geirsson – Michael Losonsky, *Readings in Language and Mind*. Blackwell, Oxford 1996. 167. o.

⁸ *De vulgari eloquentia*

represents the sum of the individual competencies, are entrusted with the knowledge of the totality of the linguistic system.

Putnam introduced the concept of linguistic division of labor into recent philosophy of language as a sociolinguistic hypothesis. The novelty of the hypothesis was not the discovery that the knowledge and the use of language have a structure similar to the division of labor. Its originality consists much more in recognizing that the division of labor permeates the very structure of our languages and, by consequence, the formal description of these structures requires a correct understanding of the social character of linguistic agency and activity. As Putnam puts it: “The features that are generally thought to be present in connection with a general name – necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the extension, ways of recognizing if something is in the extension (‘criteria’), etc. – are all present in the linguistic community *considered as a collective body*; but that collective body divides the ‘labor’ of knowing and employing these various parts of the ‘meaning’ of ‘gold’.”⁹

Putnam’s hypotheses can be generalized in the following way:

(T1) Linguistic division of labor prevails in every linguistic community and there are terms the application rules of which are known only by few experts, and thus these terms can be used by others only due to the cooperation with these experts.

⁹ Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” in: *Mind, Language and Reality*. Cambridge University Press. 1975. p. 228

The proposition states that the social aspect is not just a secondary or derivative but an essential feature of language. Language can only be possessed collectively by agents engaged in collective work with shared tasks, tools and knowledge. Meanings are not identical with the individuals' ideas about things, that is to say, the utterer's psychological condition does not determine what she 'means'.

(T1)'s weight is shown not only by its constant recurrence in Putnam's thought and the philosopher's continuous efforts aimed at rephrasing and polishing it.¹⁰ Putnam suggests that the proposition marks the division between the traditional philosophies of language and the more appropriate conceptions recognizing that language is determined by world and society. "Ignoring the division of linguistic labor is ignoring the social dimension of cognition; ignoring what we have called the *indexicality* of most words is ignoring the contribution of environment. Traditional philosophy of language, like much traditional philosophy, leaves out other people and the world; a better philosophy and a better science of language must encompass both"¹¹

To sum it up, we can say that Putnam calls for a social and materialist theory of language. As I have sketched above, Rossi-Landi developed such a theory. But does that involve that he would accept proposition (T1)?

¹⁰ It seems to me that proposition T1 has indeed great importance in Putnam's theory. For him linguistic division of labor is not only a picturesque term, as it was suggested by Michael Dummett. Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. Duckworth. 1991.

¹¹ "Ignoring the division of linguistic labor is ignoring the social dimension of cognition; ignoring what we have called the *indexicality* of most words is ignoring the contribution of environment. Traditional philosophy of language, like much traditional philosophy, leaves out other people and the world; a better philosophy and a better science of language must encompass both." I. m. Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'". 197.

Without reviewing the details of his theory I think he would accept (T1) with the following modifications:

(T1') *Technical* division of labor is the feature of every single linguistic community, for the linguistic agents' knowledge of producing and using the linguistic tools (terms) are possessed only by few agents. Other members of the community acquire this knowledge only in cooperation with such agents.

(T1') integrates the notion of 'production' into (T1), and shows that Putnam applies *one* kind of division of labor (though historically a universal kind) to language. Putnam's theory about the linguistic division of labor can be squared with Rossi-Landi's semiotic system and philosophy of language if we make explicit the following assumptions:

(T2) Technical division of labor, which is the feature of every linguistic community, usually has the form of social division of labor. This is to say that speakers' (the linguistic agents') place in the division of (linguistic) work is determined by the structure of class stratification of the society.

(T3) Due to the social division of labor prevalent in numerous linguistic communities, only few speakers can define and control the knowledge necessary for the production and application of linguistic tools (terms).

Without further analysis I just want to note that the three theorems presuppose a certain homology of linguistic and economic-material division of labor. Without accepting that

linguistic activity is articulated by material production, the discourse about linguistic work and linguistic division of labor will be purely metaphorical.

A theory which takes into account the social aspect of the linguistic division of labor, besides the technical aspect, has a twofold significance.

1. It is, as Putnam has shown, a precondition of construing a correct theory of meaning.
2. It is a precondition of construing a philosophy of language which could give us the theoretical foundations of the critic of linguistic alienation.

I'd like to conclude my paper by making a comment to this second point.

Debunking linguistic alienation, i.e. the critique of language, has at the same time always been the critique of society and ideology, or critical thinking, at least. Nowadays, as critical social science has been reduced almost to silence and information society is rapidly developing, it would be time to revive this tradition. It is easy to see that information society entails not only the promise of more democracy but also the threat of linguistic alienation. It is a real and constant danger that the purely technical division of linguistic labor turns into a social division of linguistic labor, making it possible that certain social groups expropriate not only the control over the tools and content of communication, but also the right and possibility of defining linguistic meanings.