TOWARDS A LINGUISTIC ECOLOGY OF THE RENAISSANCE

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I do not know whether the term "ecolinguistics" already exists. If it does not, I would like to invent it and make it designate the study of linguistic environments. The assumption is that it should be possible to infer the characteristics of a cultural group from a study of its linguistic habitat. To this assumption there is, of course, a caveat: the procedure becomes more and more unreliable the more we narrow the scope of our inquiry since (to use the language of biology) what is valid of populations may not apply to single organisms. If one conceives of language as a cultural *ecosystem*, one may find much use in the concept for the study of cultural populations, little for an exploration of individual conducts. Conversely, methods devised to study individual behaviour (e. g. psychoanalysis) need not be applicable to social groups.[1]

Since the work of Jost Trier we are all familiar with the concept of *semantic field*. The semantic field seeks to account for the way a given meaning is conveyed by a system of lexical *as well as structural* elements in a language: a field in which syntax may play as important a role as the lexicon.[2] Furthermore, it is a diachronic, dynamic field, its importance deriving not so much from the existence of such and such semantic strategies in the language as from the fact that these differ from those used earlier by speakers of that language.[3]

Every language has a number of (varying) strategies to express its concept of reality. These, whether lexical or structural, may be said to shape an (always shifting) semantic field which we may refer to as the Reality Field of the language in question. As I envisage it now, the Reality Field of Early Modern English may be identified by at least six lexical and two grammatical changes with respect to that of Middle English; no doubt, more will be unearthed by further research.

To begin with, let me take a case of neologism. According to the ***Oxford English Dictionary***, the verb "to exist" did not exist in the 16th century in English; neither did it in Spanish, French, Dutch, German or other Western languages; and its introduction consecrates a careful distinction in the vernacular languages between the domain of existents and that of non-existents. Obvious and trivial as this contrast may seem to us now, it was not self-evident in the Middle Ages; then the great distinction was a *moral* one: good and evil were the fundamental categories of reality, and it was in terms of good and evil that the world was structured: good things *were*, had being, while Evil had no *ens*, it being pure appearance, a deception with no being; likewise, evil actions were merely actions which lacked goodness and, therefore, value and significance - ultimately, they lacked reality. It is for this reason that Satan was said not to have the power truly to *create* anything but merely to imitate, ape, copy- or else pretend (see Aguirre 1990, especially chapter 2). In other words, the question of reality or its lack was inseparable from, and ancillary to, a *moral* definition of things.

The new doctrine, upheld by Descartes, is not moral but purely *epistemological*: it claims that the first task for both philosophy and science is to tell truth from falsehood in the world, not because of a moral quandary but merely as a precondition for acting. This distinction heralds our rational investigation of reality in search of truth and control; it also reveals our uncertainty about reality, a deep mistrust at the core of our *Weltanschauung*: exactly Hamlet's problem as he tries to figure out what is real, authentic, genuine in the deceptive world of Elsinore.

I have used two key notions, *control*, and *doubt*. Let me, for my next examples, turn to two grammatical developments which, proceeding apace over a period of centuries, reach completion towards the fifteen hundreds.

The first is the massive process of transitivization undergone by the English verbal system: by Shakespeare's time, most verbs are or can be used transitively. One need no longer 'cause the spear to stand against the wall', one may simply 'stand the spear against the wall'.[4] The human agents may, if they so wish, take the event upon themselves *because the new structure of their language so allows it*. The event (standing) is no longer ascribed to the thing (the spear) as subject, but can be made directly dependent, as *action*, on animate (mostly human) subjects. By this operation, our environment seems to become somewhat more 'inert', all its energy being now assigned to the

manipulating subjects, who are characterised by the immediacy with which they impinge upon, and the directness with which they take control of, their world.

The second development is the slow rise of epistemic modalities out of deontic ones -from "You must go" to "It must be raining"-. The epistemic modal-verb system is a means of expressing a state of uncertainty towards our environment. Both the success of epistemological thought and the emergence of an epistemic modal verbal system are due to the same cultural reasons. Underlying the rise of a philosophy built to explore the world of mystery around us, and the rise of a modality designed to convey degrees of probability and possibility based on inference -hence degrees of uncertainty-, one same principle can be discerned: a culture very much unsure of its environment will seek to develop tools, not least linguistic tools, to *reflect* upon this mysterious world and, thereby, to obtain a better understanding of it. Thus the Renaissance produces a new type of literature and philosophy which mistrusts the will and emphasises consciousness, alertness, careful examination and criticism of what *seems* to be the case -of the world at large, which, in the work of Descartes and Locke, has turned into a grand appearance.[5]

My next example involves morphosemantic differentiation, such as took place between the word "history" and its aphetic form "story".[6] The Latin word *historia*, etymologically related to "wisdom" and "wit", originally denoted a *significant* narrative, a story conveying knowledge or learning; under this heading one might have chronicles as well as folk-tales. In the late 14th century, the English word "history" still denoted a *narrative* of events, whether true or imaginary. But by the 16th century, "history" had narrowed down to mean 'a series of *true* events, whether narrated or not', while "story" came to mean 'fictional narrative'. Francis Bacon made exactly this distinction when he defined 'poesy' as a part of learning which,

> being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure [...] make unlawful matches and divorces of things [...] and is nothing else but *feigned history*; [...] because the acts or events of *true history* have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, *poesy* feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical.
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> (***The Advancement of Learning***, 1605, Book II. iv: 1. 2).

From the Renaissance onwards we have enshrined in language a careful distinction between *fact* and *narrative* (a distinction which comes to supplement that between existents and non-existents), with a cultural bias in favour of the former. In an age such as ours, where text seems to be all, it is most relevant to look at that moment in time when the separation between text and fact was consummated in language. If we judge by the way the late 20th century more and more defines the world in terms of Wittgensteinian *language-games*, or by the glee with which Postmodernists, Poststructuralists and Deconstructivists are nowadays claiming that everything is *text* and *discourse*, we might well infer that our culture was returning to a very traditional concept: to the *textual* nature of reality, and, on the other hand, to the significant, *exemplary* character of text.

My next example is a semantic inversion. The adjective "apparent" used to mean "open to sight", "visible", "manifest", "evident", "plain", and these meanings, going back at least to John Gower's time, have all to do with the *obviousness* of reality: what you see is what there is. This is the commonsense view of reality, still appealed to by Gertrude when Hamlet asks whether she does not see the ghost: "Nothing at all: yet all that is I see" (***Hamlet*** III, iv: 133); the position is still recoverable in Berkeley's *esse* = *percipi* doctrine and in William Blake's "The Eye Altering Alters All", both statements relying on one same principle: that reality is inextricably related to perception. But already in the 17th century the word "apparent" developed an additional meaning, as contrasted with "real", and came to designate precisely that which seems but is not (at least, not necessarily) the case.[7] The *evident* ceases to be synonymous with the real, and reality from now on will have to be sought *behind* appearances. This is exactly what happens in the philosophy of Locke, where all the evidence at our disposal is claimed to be mere appearance, while the true substance of things endlessly eludes us. The Modernist concern with depth, with the hidden meaning, with the heart of darkness, with an unfathomable objective truth -this concern is already in the rise with Rationalism, in Descartes' careful distinction between appearances and realities, in Hamlet's realization that one may seem one thing and be another- that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain". And something of that evil quality the medievals ascribed to appearances-without-substance adheres to Hamlet's, to Macbeth's, to Faustus' deceptive, insubstantial worlds[8]. By contrast, around the same time the word "apparition" developed its modern

sense of "immaterial appearance as of a real being; a spectre, phantom, or ghost" (first instance given in the *OED*: 1601) -as if *significant* manifestations were something to be feared.

Our next example is a very modern word: the word "modern". It appears in English in the 15th century,[9] meaning 'being at this time', 'now existing'; by the end of the 16th century it has developed a new sense: not just the 'now' but the 'new', that which is 'up to date'. And the contrast between these two senses once again signals a different manner of thinking: the age that defines itself as modern evinces a growing awareness of a difference between itelf and all that has gone before, takes a stand *against* tradition, and claims not only to be breaking with the past but also to be 'up to date', to be in harmony with its time, to be riding the train of history rather than living in the shadow of a prestigious past (Arcadia, Golden Age) or in expectation of a promised future (Utopia). The Modernity borrows little from past times, defines its own questions and answers, lives by its own principles and needs, and engages in a constant effort to keep abreast, to ride the wave of history.[10]

Allied to this emphasis on 'modernity', we find the word "progress". This word is recorded in the first half of the 15th century with the meaning of 'onward march', 'journey', 'travel'; 'state journey or procession'; 'course, way, process'; 'forward movement in space'. 1603 is the date for the first recorded use of the word in a new sense, as "Going on to a further or higher stage, [...] advance, advancement; growth, development, continuous increase; usually in good sense, advance to better and better conditions, continuous improvement". This new sense signals, on the one hand, the rise of a conception of time which views temporal development as an indefinite, non-recursive advance -hence, as *linear* time-, and human history as a 'continuous improvement' whereby we constantly shed the errors of the past; on the other hand, it heralds the rise of a culture which refuses to accept the eternal return of things (a concept central to all traditional mythologies and, in very many respects, still important in medieval thought) and, *a fortiori*, seeks to deny death; for such a culture, death is the Other, the great opponent of Rationalism and Progress and, therefore, no longer a part of the cosmic cycle of things, but an enemy of the new conception of time. "Progress", in this reading, means as much an advance towards a luminous future as a frantic attempt to outrun death.

This point brings me to my final example, a case of semantic shift: the verb "to haunt". Its traditional meaning was "to visit or frequent"; but towards

the end of the 16th century a new sense arises: "visitation by unseen or immaterial visitants", such as cares, thoughts, diseases, "especially as causes of distraction or trouble"; [...] "especially, of imaginary or spiritual beings, ghosts, etc.: To visit frequently or habitually with manifestations of their influence and presence, usually of a molesting kind. To be haunted". The earliest recorded appearances of this sense are 1590 (in ***Midsummer Nifght's Dream***), 1593 (in ***Richard II***), and 1602 (in Marston's ***Antonio's Revenge***). This development says much about the changed quality of our experience of the Numinous in the Modernity. Our culture has tried to exclude the Other, the non-existing, from its rational description of the world; whatever comes from that shunned domain is both Numinous and Non-Real, both impossible and significant, both unintelligible and fearful; and therefore it will no longer be the subject of a tale of wonder so much as of a horror story. The 'apparition' is the significant manifestation of the Other from behind the deceptive world of 'appearances', and he who, like Hamlet, peers behind and perceives the Other will be credited with an unnatural perception; he will be called a 'visionary' or judged a madman; and that 'seeing' which used to validate the reality of the thing observed will become the attribute of the 'seer' alone.

To sum up: the Renaissance is not just a matter of social, political, religious, cultural changes heralding a brave new world -the invention of the printing press, the fall of Byzantium, the discovery of America, the new philosophy of Francis Bacon, or the rise of Elizabethan drama-: it is, also, a matter of linguistic developments signalling the coming of the new age -an age characterised by its linear conception of time, its concern with control over the natural world, its deep uncertainty about the world it seeks to control, its dread of the Other, its intense rejection of death. All of these characteristics of the Renaissance could be inferred from the language it uses to define reality.

NOTES

1.- This paper recaps and expands a number of researches first presented in my unpublished M. A. thesis ***Fidem Quaerens Intellectus?*** (1980); some case examples have been taken from Aguirre (1990).

2.- Possibly even phonological phenomena like the Great Vowel Shift, or aspects of *written* language such as matters of spelling or punctuation conventions might be relevant to the study of historical semantic fields.

3.- Some sixteen years ago I proposed the then most unfashionable concept of Historical Semantics in Aguirre 1976, and there developed aspects of a historical-semantic linguistic model.

4.- The example comes from Traugott 1972; it must be observed that she gives a very different interpretation of it. She considers it in the framework of a generative historical syntax, and in such a perspective the phenomenon of transitivisation appears merely as the result of a *surface* transformation which does not affect the deep structure of the language nor, therefore, its meaning. For the contrary position, see Aguirre 1976.

5.- The Western critical tradition has its roots in the Renaissance; it is in the 16th century that the first 'academies' are established to maintain purity of linguistic and literary standards; likewise, the problem whether to accept *uncritically* the existing social order pervades the picaresque novel tradition, as it does ***Hamlet*** or ***Don Quixote***. See my forthcoming "A Literature of Reflection".

6.- This distinction is not found in Spanish, French or Italian, where the Latin usage has been preserved; in these languages the word "historia", "histoire", "storia" is applicable both to the course of human events and to a fictional narrative. Though these languages have developed other indirect means to mark the distinction, it is plain that the term does offer an ambiguity in them.

7.- It of course retains its traditional semantic potential, which surfaces in expressions such as "the heir apparent", "it became apparent that [...]", and so on.

8.- For the claim that the whole of the Renaissance and Baroque drama is tinged by a pervading sense of paranoia, suspicion and dissembling in the face of a deceptive reality, see Aguirre 1990, chapter 3.

9.- Likewise, Corominas (1980) gives Spanish "moderno" as dating back only to the 15th century.

10.- For a detailed analysis of the historical semantics of this word and the relevance of this approach to studies of Modernism, see my "The Meanings of Modern", in preparation.