Émile Benveniste and the Linguistics of Dialogue

I

The studies by Émile Benveniste collected in the two volumes of *Problems in General Linguistics* (published originally in French in 1966 and 1974) are characterized by an approach to the questions addressed that is at once purely linguistic – in the most technical sense of that word – as well as distinctly philosophical. By *philosophical* we do not mean the elaboration of a coherent speculative system but rather the spotlighting, in the analysis of linguistic facts, of their most general implications involving the nature of language, its place in the set of human activities, and – first and foremost – the role of human subjectivity in the exercise of discourse (*parole*). There is, in Benveniste’s work, an extreme sensitivity to the philosophical dimension of problems of language, even if this is never broached in his work in explicit reference to the tradition of the metaphysics of language, such as it has developed in Western thought since Plato and up to Heidegger, by way of Medieval scholasticism, then by Hamann, Herder, and German romanticism. A notable exception is presented by analytic philosophy and in particular by J. L. Austin and the Oxford School, to which Benveniste devoted a remarkable study, centered on the question of “performative” utterances.¹ But this interest in analytic philosophy is due, according to Benveniste himself, to the fact that it is out of reach of “metaphysics,” for which linguists supposedly feel an “aversion” that “proceeds above all from a more and more vivid awareness of the formal specificity of linguistic facts, to which philosophers are not sensitive enough.”²

If Benveniste’s linguistic analyses nevertheless lead him so close to philosophy, it is due to the central place that signification occupies for him.³ From the

starting point of Saussure’s definition of the linguistic sign as the articulation of
a signifier and a signified, Benveniste had noted quite early, in his 1939 study
on “The Nature of the Linguistic Sign,”⁴ that this conception of the sign as asso-
ciation of an acoustic image and a concept does not account for the relation of
language to external reality, that is, to what he will later call its “referent.”⁵ In his
1939 article, Benveniste still defends the idea that Saussure’s celebrated formula-
tion about the “arbitrariness of the sign” only truly concerns the relation between
the sign and the external object that it designates, but not the relation between the
signifier (the acoustic image) and the signified (the concept), which is entirely
necessary inside the system of language, where “all values are values of opposition
and are defined only by their difference.”⁶ Twenty-seven years later, in his
study on “Form and Meaning in Language,”⁷ Benveniste will return to the prob-
lem of signification, by pushing it this time beyond the Saussurean opposition of
signifier and signified to an attempt at general comprehension of the “very being
of language.”⁸ Speaking here of his object in terms of ontology, Benveniste is
without any doubt much closer to a metaphysics of language than he would like
to accept. And the essence of language, he tells us, is precisely to signify: “Such
is its primordial character, its original vocation, that transcends and explains all
the functions that it fulfills in the human environment.”⁹ Its function is not lim-
ited to communication, since, “well before it communicates, language is used for
living.”¹⁰ By its very essence, language is a bearer of signification, and this is
why it represents the medium through which man gives a meaning to the world.
But, for Benveniste, language for man is not one means among others to endow
the reality surrounding it with signification; it is signification itself, and there
is no other possibility of signifying except through language. “Language is the
signifying activity par excellence,” he writes, “the very image of what significa-
tion can be.”¹¹ This is why the question of the origin of language, which had so
preoccupied the philosophers of the eighteenth century, had no meaning for him.
Language is as old, or as primordial, as signification itself, and it would not be
possible to imagine a meaning not possessing the fundamental aptitude to give
things a meaning, that is, to speak: “We can never get back to man separated from
language and we shall never see him inventing it. . . . It is a speaking man whom

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   trans. Meek, 48].
we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man.”\(^{12}\)

To designate this property of signifying inherent in human language, Benveniste forged the concept of significance (significance). In his study on the “Semiology of Language” (1969), he specifies, however, that significance defines not only human language but also every system of signs (writing, road signage, monetary signs, aesthetic signs, social codes, etc.). It is then a question of knowing why human language would occupy such a place among the set of systems of signs. The reason is found in the distinction that Benveniste establishes between “interpreting system” and “interpreted systems.” Language is the interpreting system of all other semiotic systems, and this is because it alone is capable not only of articulating all the other systems of signs, but also of categorizing itself and interpreting itself on its own. And this self-reflexive capacity of language which makes it the “great semiotic matrix,”\(^{13}\) stems from the fact that it alone, among all the systems of signs, is endowed with a double significance: one part, which is proper to the linguistic sign and to the system to which it belongs, and which Benveniste calls the semiotic mode of significance; the other, which belongs to the mode of discourse, that is the subjective appropriation of language by the speaker, and which institutes the semantic mode of significance. This second level of enunciation represents the self-reflexive dimension of language. It permits, says Benveniste, “making significant statements about significance.”\(^{14}\) It is this metalinguistic dimension that grants language its privileged status among the set of sign systems.

What is essential here is that this faculty that language has to express – so to speak, the significance of significance – is fundamentally linked to the exercise of discourse, that is to say to the presence of subjectivity at the heart of speech. It is therefore human subjectivity that grants language its preeminence in relation to all the other semiotic systems. Hence the central importance, in Benveniste’s linguistic theory, of the distinction between semiotics and semantics. There it is a matter of a generalization, at the scale of an overall theory of language, about the distinction made, in 1959 in the study on “Relations of Tense in the French Verb” between the two planes of enunciation: story and discourse.\(^{15}\) But in two slightly earlier articles, “The Nature of Pronouns” (1956) and “On Subjectivity in Language” (1958), Benveniste had already posited the opposition, so central in his thought, between the system of language and its subjective appropriation


\(^{13}\) Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2, 63. [Translator’s version]

\(^{14}\) Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2, 65. [Translator’s version]

\(^{15}\) Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2, 238 ff.
by the speaker. Language qua language, that is, as a system of signs, forms a closed world, where signs are defined in relation to one another, without the positing of the question of the relation of the sign with denoted things, nor the even more general question of relations between language and the world. Benveniste’s critique of Saussure bears directly on the fact that the latter does not distinguish sharply between the signified (which is one of the faces of the sign) and the referent, which is independent of meaning and “the particular object to which a word corresponds in the concreteness of circumstance or usage.”

This is the reason why the language system, whose essence is signifying, does not allow, as such, for communication. Since communication not only implies the presence of a speaker and hearing but also that of a “state of things” (or of a “context,” according to Roman Jakobson’s terminology) to which the discourse refers. In opposition to the sign, a semiotic unit (which always refers back to other signs), the word (a semantic unit), and then the phrase (a more complex semantic organization), always refer to a certain state of reality. Thus, because this reality, by its very definition, is ever changing, each phrase brings something new: “Each time, the phrase is a different event; it only exists in the instant where it is uttered and is just as quickly erased; it is an evanescent event.”

It is clear, from this point of view, that the distinction between semiotics and semantics is not only, for Benveniste, of a linguistic order; in truth, it refers to “two distinct faculties of the mind.” Apprehending signs requires the recognition of units that are always identical to themselves, that is, the identification of what is already known, whereas the understanding of the meaning of an enunciation implies the aptitude to comprehend the emergence of the new – since each enunciation refers to an unprecedented situation, “that we can never foresee or guess.” This distinction brings out the properly philosophical implications of the opposition between the semiotic and the semantic. On this topic, Benveniste himself declares that for him it consists “of setting out from language and trying to go all the way to the foundations that it allows to be glimpsed.”

Paul Ricoeur, for his part, affirms that “the distinction between the semiotic and the semantic is, in the realm of philosophy, of considerable fruitfulness,” to the extent that the concept of semantics “allows for the reestablishment of a series of mediations between the closed world of signs, in a semiotics, and the hold that our language has on the real in its capacity as a semantics.”

It goes back to the difference between two fundamental cognitive attitudes, one turned toward the past, the other toward the future: the intellectual identification of elements already known, on the one hand – and, on the other, the discovery of new realities.

II

From semiotics to semantics, there is therefore a radical change in perspective: “Semiotics is characterized as a property of language; semantics results from an action by the speaker who puts language into action.”21 Found at the center of Benveniste’s theory of language is this individual act through which the speaking subject mobilizes language on his own behalf and performs its categories in an “instance of discourse.” Indeed, language is presented, as such, as a system of linguistic elements – distinctive traits, phonemes, signs – and of rules (phonetic, morphological, syntactic) that order their arrangement. But, in a way, this purely formal system remains virtual, as long as a speaker has not actualized it in an individual act of appropriation, which Benveniste designates with the term enunciation (énonciation). Enunciation, which is the act of producing an utterance (énoncé), accomplishes what Benveniste describes as the “conversion of language into discourse.”22 What orders this conversion is the situation, new and unique each time, in which the speaker is located, his specific hic et nunc a point of reference from which his discourse draws its meaning, and which renders it intelligible to other people. This individual act of appropriating language constitutes the first formal aspect of all enunciations. The second aspect consists of the fact that enunciations are necessarily produced in a situation of intersubjectivity. Speaking always means, explicitly or implicitly, addressing someone: “Immediately, once he declares himself a speaker and performs language, [the subject] establishes the other facing him.”23 It is to this fundamentally dialogical structure of discourse and to the analysis of its linguistic implications that Benveniste devoted the crux of his reflection on the nature of enunciation, that is to say on the subjective dimension of human language. It is here as well that he is closest to the dialogical conception of language developed in the twentieth century by philosophers such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, or Emmanuel Lévinas, or by literary theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin. By setting off, as we

have seen, from purely linguistic considerations, Benveniste thus stands, probably unknowingly, in a current of twentieth-century philosophy that, counter to analytic philosophy and logical positivism, emphasizes the predominant role of subjectivity in language.

It is appropriate to note on this topic that the third formal characteristic of every enunciation (defined by Benveniste as the reference to (external or internal) reality) must also be understood along the plane of intersubjectivity, to the extent that the identification of the portion of reality to which the enunciation refers must be subject to an agreement between two speakers, and this “in the pragmatic consensus that makes each speaker an interlocutor.” This necessarily dialogical character of enunciation is perfectly highlighted in the following passage, drawn from the study on “The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation” (1970):

What in general characterizes enunciation is the accentuation of the discursive relation to the partner, whether the latter is real or imagined, individual or collective. This characteristic posits by necessity what can be called the figurative framework of enunciation. As discourse’s form, enunciation posits two “figures” that are equally necessary: one the source, the other the goal of the enunciation. This is the structure of dialogue. Two figures positioned as partners alternate as protagonists of enunciation. This framework is necessarily given with the definition of enunciation.

To the analysis of linguistic structures of enunciation, Benveniste devoted three fundamental studies: “The Structure of Relations of Person in the Verb” (1946), “The Nature of Pronouns” (1956), and “Subjectivity in Language” (1958). Beginning with his 1946 study, Benveniste posits the foundations of his theory of personal pronouns, which forms the heart of his linguistics of enunciation. Contrary to the classic paradigm where the three persons, I-You-He/Her, are naturally situated on the same plane, as if this classification were “set down in the order of things,” Benveniste, who denounces “the summary and non-linguistic nature” of this “pseudo-theory,” sets out to study “how each person is opposed to all the others.” It is starting from this rigorously structuralist point of view that Benveniste will come, paradoxically, to break the closure of the system of signs and to open it towards the reality of the world and of others. Drawing from the nomenclature of Arab grammarians who define the first person as “he who speaks,” the second as “he who is spoken to,” as opposed to the third person,
which refers to “he who is absent” (analogously, Hebrew distinguishes between discourse addressed to a second person, described as “language of presence,” and discourse referring to a third person, called “language of absence”), Benveniste brings into radical opposition the two first persons, necessarily posited on the basis of the I, “which designates the one who speaks and implies at the same time an utterance about I” to the third who, being excluded from the personal relationship I-You, has as its true function expressing non-person. The I-You relation, which founds the very exercise of speech, not only expresses the presence of subjectivity in language, as if the latter possessed on its own a psychological reality that would manifest itself, among other ways, via discourse (la parole). In truth, for Benveniste, it is the linguistic relation I-You that institutes the very possibility of all subjectivity. The latter, Benveniste will write in 1958,

is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject.” It is defined not by the feeling that everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness.

“And,” he adds, “that ‘subjectivity,’ whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, . . . is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. ‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego.’”

One will note at what point this quasi-programmatic declaration, which attests to a sort of absolute “panlinguisticism,” borrows at the same time its vocabulary and its logic from the domain of philosophy and even from classical ontology. There is, in Benveniste, beyond his wariness of metaphysical speculations, a profound tendency to seek, beyond the structures of language, the ultimate foundations of the real. But it must be very much understood that, for Benveniste, the latter group is not found behind language, but at the heart of language, such that the latter appears, all told, as constituting the very being of subjectivity. Let us note, however, a very important nuance: what language constitutes is indeed human subjectivity, and, from the standpoint of this subjectivity, the world that opens to it. This does not signify, however, that, for Benveniste, the external world would only be a projection of human language; there is, in his work, no form of philosophical idealism whatsoever. In truth, the organization, starting from a specific “instance of discourse,” the space and the time that surround the

speaker (an organization that the interlocutor accepts in turn and shares with his partner) only appears at the moment when the latter begins to speak, that is, with the manifestation of the semantic dimension of language. Before this inaugural act, where the subject takes the initiative to declare himself speaking, the language as a system of signs already exists, and facing it is the intangible reality of the outside world. The fact that Benveniste limits the validity of the Saussurean theory of “the arbitrariness of the sign” precisely to the relationship of the sign to external reality, a relationship that he indeed holds to be totally contingent (but not to the relation of the signifier to the signified, which he judges essential and necessary), does prove that, for him, the external world exists on its own. However, in the relatively old study in which he broaches this question (“The Nature of the Linguistic Sign,” 1939), Benveniste implies that, beyond the natural tendency of the linguist to admit – if only implicitly – the objective existence of the outside world, “the metaphysical problem of the agreement between the mind and the world” is unceasingly raised. For him, this problem, moreover, concerns the reality of the outside world less than it does its signification, or rather its capacity to signify. What is troubling here for the linguist is the profound disagreement that exists between the linguistic theory of the arbitrary character of the relation between word and thing, and the spontaneous belief of the speaking subject in a complete adequation between language and reality. This conviction, which Benveniste, in his 1939 study, registers as a fact of experience, without making a statement for or against its validity, is at the foundation of both mystical theories of language, of archaic belief in a magical power of the word, and, in the philosophical domain, of the vision of language that Plato attributes to Cratylus in the dialogue of the same name. Benveniste does not explicitly reject this theory, being content to note that “the points of view of the speaker and of the linguist are so different in this regard that the assertion of the linguist as to the arbitrariness of designations does not refute the contrary feeling of the speaker.” It is only much later, first with the distinction of semiotics and semantics (“Form and Meaning in Language,” 1966), then with his theory of double signification (“Semiology of Language,” 1969), that Benveniste will resolve this contradiction. He does so by assigning the vision of a cut between the universe of language, perceived, from

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this point of view, as a pure system of signs, and the world of external reality, to the semiotic dimension of language, and the conception of an adequation between a person’s discourse (parole) and the world of things in its semantic dimension, that is, from the point of view of the speaking subject who, from the standpoint of his “here and now,” projects his spatial and temporal coordinates onto the reality that surrounds him.

III

The I-You relationship, through which the subjectivity of the exercise of speech is attested, is founded first and foremost on the exceptional nature of the personal pronoun I. Unlike a common noun, which always refers back to a definable object, the pronoun I refers to no object outside language, an object that would be, moreover, always identical to itself. “Each I,” writes Benveniste, “has its own reference, and corresponds each time to a unique being, posited as such.”34 This unique being is the speaker himself, such as he designates himself precisely in the instance of discourses where the pronoun I appears. This means, Benveniste adds, that “I cannot be defined except in terms of ‘locution,’ not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. I signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I.’ This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness.”35 In other terms, in each instance of discourse, I refers to another reality, precisely the one that utters the present instance of discourse. But inversely, I is not a linguistic sign like the rest, composed of a signifier and a signified; I does not possess a signified, which means that the general concept “I” does not exist independently, in its conceptual reality, from the particular objects to which it happens to refer. To the contrary, “the form I only has linguistic existence in the speech act that utters it.” In other words, I signifies nothing outside of the specific instance where this pronoun is pronounced. I is therefore a unique grammatical case, where one linguistic form used as a referent is related to itself as a referee (référent).

Everything that has just been said on the linguistic status of I applies to the pronoun You as well. Like I, You is a “discursive reality,” but with the difference that instead of being defined like the I in terms of “locution,” it must be defined in terms of “allocution:” “You,” writes Benveniste, is the “individual spoken to

in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance you.” And this difference implies others, the first being that of interiority and exteriority in relation to the act of enunciation in which these two pronouns figure. From a formal point of view – that is to say to the extent where they are used as pure referents – they are both inside of enunciation. But in their capacity as referees, the I is internal to enunciation, whereas the You is external to it. In other words, the person designated by I is the one who utters the enunciation whereas the person designated by You is the addressee of the utterance. This is why Benveniste has defined the first person as “person-I” and the second person as “person not-I,” or even as the “subjective person” facing the “non-subjective person.” But these two ‘persons’ are together opposed to the ‘non-person’ form (= he). This linguistic solidarity between the I and the You is not contingent; to the contrary, it is an integral and necessary part of all enunciation. The I is not a form that can or cannot address itself to a You; the relation to the You is inscribed in the definition of the I, to the extent where even monologue is, according to Benveniste, “an internalized dialogue, formulated in ‘internal language,’ between a speaking self and a hearing self.”

Two other characteristics of the I-You relationship, highlighted by Benveniste, refer back, beyond their linguistic signification, to a properly philosophical problematic. The first concerns what Benveniste calls the “transcendence of the I in relation to the You.” Here the term “transcendence” must be understood in the sense of “logical anteriority,” and surely in the sense of “preeminence” as well, and perhaps even in the phenomenological sense of “constitutive power.” All these significations seem to be implied in the following remark: “When I get out of ‘myself’ in order to establish a living relationship with a being, of necessity I encounter or I posit a ‘you,’ who is the only imaginable ‘person’ outside of me.”

It is appropriate nevertheless to note, in this definition of the “transcendence of the I in relation to the You,” the ambiguity of the formulation: “I encounter or I posit.” Indeed, in the experience of the “living relationship with a being” that Benveniste evokes here, “encounter” and “posit” designate two radically different attitudes. To say that I posit the You, indeed means implying that it constitutes it from the starting point of its own “instance of discourse;” in this case, the I

would indeed be “transcendent” in relation to the You. To say on the contrary that
the I “discovers” the You signifies that the exteriority of the You is primary and
that it is imposed on the I, in a way despite itself, as a new and unforeseen reality;
in this case, it is the You that would be transcendent in relation to the I.

One will not fail to be struck by the resemblance between the linguistic theory
of dialogue in Benveniste’s work and Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophy of the
dialogue – as well as everything that separates them. In Totality and Infinity, the
relation to the other is accomplished through the discourse that I address to him,
discourse that, while establishing a face-to-face relationship, maintains him at
the same time in his alterity in relation to me: “The claim to know and to reach
the other is realized in the relationship with the Other that is cast in the rela-
tion of language, where the essential is interpellation, the vocative. The other is
maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him.”

Meanwhile, whereas Benveniste is only preoccupied with the formal structure
of dialogue, and not with its content, Lévinas, for his part, does not conceive of
studying dialogical language without posing himself the question of the truth
of the words exchanged. In this perspective, dialogue is no longer defined only
by the linguistic structure that underpins it, but also – and surely first and fore-
most – by the truth of the relation that it institutes between the two partners. And
in the phenomenological analysis of this relation, Lévinas starts off, not from
the discourse that I address to the other, but from the discourse that the other
addresses to me. Indeed, by leading to its conclusion the search for the logical
implications of the idea of the You’s exteriority in relation to the I, he establishes
that the latter signifies the absolutely autonomous presence of the You, its radical
anterity in relation to the I on whom it imposes itself, and consequently, its
preeminence: “This presence dominates him who welcomes it, comes from the
heights, unforeseen, and consequently teaches its very novelty.”

In the dialogue as Lévinas conceives it, it is the You that is transcendent in relation to the I: the
I does not “posit” the You; he “discovers” it. It is therefore the appearance of the other
and of the speech that he addresses to me that puts the truth of the dialogue
to the test. The discovery of the other self in the situation of the dialogue is first
and foremost that of the “candid presence of a being who can lie.” The possibility
of lying is given in every word, but this possibility is always contradicted by the
reality of the face that faces me, where, “the eyes break through the mask, the
language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble.” This is why the other self appears
to me, beyond the “alternative of truth and lying, of sincerity and dissimulation,”

41. Emmanuel Lévinas, Totalité et Infini, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 41. [Totality and
42. Lévinas, Totalité et Infini, 38. [Totality and Infinity, trans. Lingis, 66.]
with “the prerogative of him who abides in the relation of absolute frankness.”

This particular case clearly shows the difference between Benveniste’s purely linguistic approach – even when his analyses identify the philosophical implications of certain linguistic structures – and the phenomenological approach of Lévinas, who makes the contents of language situations appear and clarifies their significations.

Another difference, resulting from the preceding one, and just as essential, concerns the idea of symmetry between the I and the You in Benveniste’s work, and Lévinas’s thesis about their radical asymmetry. For Benveniste, “the one whom ‘I’ defines by ‘you’ thinks of himself as ‘I’ and can be inverted into ‘I,’ and ‘I’ becomes a ‘you.’” And this reversibility of the I and of the You de facto appears as an indubitable given of experience, since the two partners in dialogue alternate playing the role of speaker and listener. One could even go further and maintain that the very possibility of intersubjectivity is based on this reversibility. If Lévinas, for his part, defines the relation of the Self to the Other as essentially asymmetrical, it is not to deny the dual structure of intersubjectivity, but to the contrary to foreground the conditions of the possibility of this duality itself. Indeed, the perception of the I and of the You as symmetrical implies the existence of an outside observer who would encompass the two terms of the relation in a panoramic perspective. And the central thesis of Totality and Infinity consists precisely in denouncing this panoramic gaze as precisely the way to subsume under a single concept the irreducible difference of the Self and Other, that is to say to deny the very essence of the Other’s alterity. “The Same and the Other,” Lévinas writes, “cannot enter into a cognition that would encompass them; the relations that the separated being maintains with what transcends it are not produced on the ground of totality, do not crystallize into a system.”

The truth of the relation of the Self with the Other could not be grasped by an outside observer; it can only be perceived from within, by the Self itself who discovers the alterity of the Other. This alterity, which is absolute exteriority, discovered in a being who is radically foreign to me, is given to me as a revelation. It is this revelation of the other as the stranger par excellence that Lévinas calls its transcendence. To say that the other is transcendent to the Self signifies that its appearance suddenly breaks the autarky of the Self, and that it surprises the Self as the unforeseen encounter with an unknown. From this point of view, even if the encounter of the I and the You is accomplished through language, it is not

43. Lévinas, Totalité et Infini, 38. [Totality and Infinity, trans. Lingis, 66].
45. Lévinas, Totalité et Infini, 53. [Totality and Infinity, trans. Lingis, 80].
language that constitutes it. Since language itself (and, in particular, dialogical
discourse), can only be produced on the plane of two people facing one another,
a face to face than cannot be described from the outside without annulling its
very signification, but which must be described as an experience internal to sub-
jectivity, and in which the latter is effaced before the transcendence of the other.

IV

It is in his study “Relations of Tense in the French Verb” (1959) that
Benveniste establishes one of the most fundamental distinctions of his linguistic
theory, between narrative (récit) (with its paradigmatic modality, the modality
of the historical narrative) and of discourse (discours). This distinction comes
to specify the more general opposition of language (as system of signs) and of
enunciation, defined as the appropriation of language by a speaker. The more par-
ticular distinction between narrative and discourse is situated within the world of
enunciation. Narrative and discourse are two specific modalities of enunciation,
and they are opposed to one another as much by their finality as by the linguistic
structures that characterize them. On the one hand, a historical plane of enuncia-
tion exists, whose foremost illustration is the historical narrative, but to which all
the other forms of the narrative belong, to the extent that they are deployed in a
quasi-impersonal fashion, without any intervention of the speaker in the narrative
(which does not at all preclude, in a certain type of literary narrative, the inter-
vention of the narrator in the story that he is telling). In contrast to this type of
“historical” enunciation is discursive enunciation, which assumes “a speaker and
a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way.”
It therefore seems that the contrast between story and discourse reflects, within
the world of enunciation, the very principle that orders, on the more general scale
of the theory of language, the contrast between language as system of signs and
the multiplicity of concrete instances of enunciation, that is, the conceptual oppo-
sition between the impersonal and the personal. Indeed, the impersonal system
of language, the semiotic, stands opposed to the appropriation of signs by each
speaker, the semantic, in the same fashion that the narrative, marked by the gram-
matical forms of the impersonal, is in contrast to the discourse that brings two
people face to face, and which is organized around personal grammatical forms.

The narrative/discourse opposition must not be confused with the opposition
between written and oral. Indeed, discourse not only includes oral enunciations,

trans. Meek, 209].
but also writings that reproduce oral enunciations. “Discourse is written as well as spoken,” Benveniste specifies, “in practice one passes from one to the other instantaneously.”47 With this being posited, Benveniste undertakes establishing a systematic inventory of the forms of discourse, as opposed to forms of narrative. It is essentially a matter of two verbal categories: tense and person. From this point of view, the historical narrative will be defined as the “the mode of utterance that excludes every ‘autobiographical’ linguistic form.”48 These forms that are precluded by the historical narrative are precisely the ones that characterize discourse: the use of personal pronouns I and you, deictics such as here and now, and the verb tenses of present, perfect (= passé composé), and future. Narrative, for its part, privileges third-person personal pronouns and the aorist mode (= passé simple), whereas the imperfect is common to both modes of enunciation.49 What is essential in this distinction is the definition of narrative as an impersonal linguistic mode, and the definition of discourse as personal mode. In the historical narrative, Benveniste writes, “there is then no longer even a narrator. The events are set forth chronologically, as they occurred. No one speaks here; the events seem to narrate themselves.”50 Of course, what applies to the historical narrative appears in a much more complex form in the fictional narrative (especially in genres where the narrator intervenes in his story and speaks to the reader), and in borderline cases like the autobiographical or pseudoautobiographical narrative. But if the opposition between narrative, as a mode of impersonal enunciation, and of discourse, as a personal mode of enunciation, is never presented as an absolute in the structure of texts (whether fictional or not), it remains no less fundamental in the perspective that belongs to Benveniste, which is that of the structure of language. And from this perspective, it is from the starting point of discourse, and not narrative, that the set of human experience is organized. It is through the exercise of discourse that subjectivity projects an order into the world and renders it intelligible. This applies first of all to the human experience of time. Indeed, for Benveniste (and in this case in opposition to the entire philosophical tradition emerging from Kant), temporality is not an innate framework of thought, but

it is in reality produced in and by enunciation. From enunciation the implementation proceeds of the category of the present, and from the category of the present the

category of time is born. The present is literally the source of time. It is this presence in the world that the act of enunciation alone makes possible, since . . . man does not have at his disposal any means of living the “now” and to actualize it other than by realizing it through the insertion of discourse into the world.”

For Benveniste, the general category of time therefore proceeds from the experience of linguistic time. The latter, in turn, is engendered in the present from the instance of speech. The latter is truly at the origin of our experience of time, and in two ways: in the first place, each time that a speaker utters an enunciation in the present, he summons, for himself and for his interlocutor, the very dimension of time. The latter is not a permanent given of consciousness; it is in truth reinvented each new time that a subject initiates a new “instance of discourse.” “Each time that a speaker employs the grammatical form of the present (or its equivalent), he situates the event as contemporaneous with the instance of discourse that mentions it. . . . This present is reinvented each time a man speaks, because it is, strictly speaking, a brand new, as-yet-unlived moment.” On the other hand, the present also represents the “axial center” of linguistic time, and therefore of the experience of time in general. Indeed, “language must by necessity order time from the starting point of an axis, and the latter is always and only the instance of discourse.” “The only time inherent to language,” Benveniste adds, “is the axial present of discourse, and . . . this present is implicit.” By this, it must be understood that any act of enunciation is firstly – and this independently of the content of the utterance that it conveys – a self-referential linguistic event. What underpins and simultaneously conditions any specific act of enunciation is this other underlying enunciation: “I who am uttering in the very moment the present act of enunciation.” It is from the starting point of this “axial center” of temporality that the two other dimensions of time will be defined: the past as that which is no longer present, and the future as that which is not yet.

This centrality of the present in discourse is evidently interdependent with the centrality of the first-person singular pronoun and, correlatively, the second person. Each “instance of discourse” is organized around a “speech act” by an always-singular subject, and is addressed to another subject who is unique as well. In this sense, discourse appears as the purest form of enunciation and in opposition to narrative, which, due to its impersonal character, is in a way situated at the limit of the domain of enunciation. And indeed, in his 1956 studies on “The Nature of Pronouns” and 1958’s “Subjectivity in Language” which predate

the narrative/discourse (récit/discours) opposition, Benveniste had centered his reflection on the more general opposition of language as system of forms and enunciation as subjective actualization of these forms. Later, it is in the distinction of the semiotic and the semantic that the fundamental distinction will crystallize between the impersonal and personal dimensions of language.

V

It is striking to note the resemblance between Benveniste’s linguistic theories and the philosophy of language developed by Franz Rosenzweig in his work *The Star of Redemption*, which came out in Germany in 1921. Granted, Benveniste’s and Rosenzweig’s points of view are radically different: for one, it is a matter of purely linguistic reflection, in the most technical sense of the term, to the exclusion of any philosophical reference; for the other, to the contrary, it is a matter of an entirely philosophical approach to language as an integral part of a vast speculative system. It is extremely improbable that this might be a case of Rosenzweig influencing Benveniste, since *The Star of Redemption* was a work that remained completely unknown in France until the beginning of the 1980s. It is much more plausible that the resemblance between certain central themes in Benveniste’s work and Rosenzweig’s philosophy of language are the effect of an encounter between two theoretical approaches that are very different from the outset: in Benveniste’s work, it is a matter of an internal critique of Saussure’s linguistics, whose premises he certainly admits, and in particular the theory of language as system of signs, but in whose work he foregrounds the closure of this system, its inaptitude to being open to external reality, the reality of the world and of human subjectivity. Rosenzweig, for his part, setting out from the Feuerbachian and Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, ultimately reaches the idea of the preeminence of language over conceptual speculation, and more particularly, ultimately reaches the idea of subjectivity’s central function in the practice of discourse (parole), and this on the one hand in opposition with the purely formal character of language as system of signs, and, on the other hand, within the world of discourse, with the impersonal nature of narrative. Corresponding

55. With the exception of two articles by Lévinas “Between Two Worlds” [“Entre deux mondes”] (1963) and “Jewish Thought Today” [“Une pensée juive moderne”] (1965), released in hard to access locations, the French translation of *The Star of Redemption* appeared in 1982, as did Stéphane Mosès’s book, *Système et Révélation. La philosophie de Franz Rosenzweig* (both published by Éditions du Seuil). One of the foundational works of the philosophy of dialogue, *Ich und Du*, by Martin Buber, was first translated into French in 1938 (by Geneviève Bianquis) but Benveniste never cites her, nor does he cite Martin Buber’s name.
to the distinction, in Benveniste’s work, between language and enunciation, is
the opposition, in Rosenzweig, between the language of the elementary (die
Sprache), which appears as a pure system of signs, and living speech (das
Sprechen). For Rosenzweig, the latter is comprehended, as will be the case for
Benveniste, as an actualization by the speaking subject of the formal virtualities
of language, and as a conversion (Umkehrung) of language into discourse. And
not only that – far from it: the distinction that Rosenzweig establishes, within
the world of language, between récit (Erzählung) and dialogue (Zwiesprache)
is exactly parallel with the récit/discours opposition in Benveniste’s work. For
Rosenzweig, the story is also characterized by the use of the personal third-per-
son pronoun and the preterit verbal form, whereas the personal mode, which is
the mode of dialogue, is marked by the central role of pronouns I/You and by
the predominance of the present tense. This opposition is inscribed in the heart
of Rosenzweig’s philosophy and orders the entirety of his system of thought.
This is extended, in his work, by way of a linguistic vision of texts, illustrated
by two contrasting analyses of the first chapter of Genesis as the paradigmatic
story, and of The Song of Songs as the paradigm of the dialogical mode. Let us
add that, unlike Benveniste, Rosenzweig moreover distinguishes a third mode of
discourse, the mode of choral language, characterized by the preeminence of the
first-person plural pronoun (“we”) and by the use of the future tense. This mode
is illustrated, in The Star by the linguistic analysis of Psalm 115, as paradigm of
a form of discourse aiming to collectively evoke a utopian future. It would be
interesting to compare, on this topic, the semantic analysis of the pronoun we
and of its dual – inclusive and exclusive – aspect in Benveniste’s work (in the
study “The Structure of Relationships of Person in the Verb”) and in Rosenzweig
(L’Étoile, II, 185-194). They both agree regarding the statement that “we’ is not
a quantified or multiplied ‘I’ (Problèmes de linguistique générale, vol. 1, 235
[Problems in General Linguistics, 203]) or even, as Rosenzweig says, “‘we’ is
not plural” (L’Étoile, II, 192), because I designates a singular and irreducible
reality, which resists dissolution in an impersonal collective.

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