

Language in Archaic, Pre-referential Cultures. The Emergence of Dualism

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When one analyses cultures, the paths of conflicts or possible dialogue between them, then it is also worth mentioning a very exotic kind of cultures: cultures of the past. They are the main subject of concern in my paper. The so-called archaic, magical or preliterate cultures (comprehended here as models or methodological idealizations) are connected with hunters-gatherers and their relatively simple societies. They were societies without the division of labour and without any complex forms of social hierarchy. Anthropologists localize them before the invention of literacy and also before the neolithic revolution when humanity invented agriculture and breeding.

The exoticism of the archaic world can be reconstructed to some extent by anthropology and I would like to present such a reconstruction, mainly on the basis of some Polish anthropological conceptions of Anna Pałubicka, Jerzy Kmita, Wojciech Burszta, Michał Buchowski and Andrzej P. Kowalski. I hope such a reconstruction can turn out to be fruitful, for the very existence of the pre-referential world makes many traditional philosophical assumptions to some degree controversial (as being historically contingent).

But before let me mention the main inspiration of my paper. According to Josef Mitterer – the author of a very fascinating book titled *Das Jenseits der Philosophie*, Western philosophy and also Western common thinking originates from the crucial assumptions of dualism (Mitterer 1996). The so-called *dualizing mode of speaking*, comprehended simply as a set of argumentative techniques and practical rules of conversation, assumes and creates the ontological difference between the object and its description, between the world and language. Philosophical problems of truth, reality or reference (as the problem of some mysterious gap between language and reality) arise as simple side-effects produced by the dualizing practices of

communication. In the process of socialization, individuals internalize rules and norms of dualism as obvious and overwhelming. They are forced to construct descriptions according to them and, being often corrected by others, they start to discuss in a proper, dualizing way. An important methodological advantage of Mitterer's hypothesis for me is that the dualizing practices of communication, and also its drawbacks, can be empirically noticeable and describable by history, anthropology, philosophy of language, theory of speech acts or sociology of communication.

In a very simple way, described by Mitterer, the dualizing mode of speaking creates *the other side of discourse*, which plays an important role of the independent instance that can settle any debate or argument. The other side of discourse can possess many faces, like the single God in monotheistic religion, like objective reality in scientific argumentations, like the essence or nature of things within every type of essentialism.¹ Frequently the other side of discourse is given a priori, *essentialized* and in effect it cannot be subjected to any external discussion. But of course, being mute it needs professional spokespersons who can speak in the name of it. When the other side of discourse becomes the only God we hear theologians speaking, when it becomes an objective nature, we see scientific experts who speak in the name of facts.

It is also interesting that many contemporary conceptions create the other side of discourse as epistemically elusive. In that role we can find, for example, causal pressures in Richard Rorty's neopragmatism or the negative instance of resistance in the strong programme of the sociology of knowledge. But even if they make no discernable difference to our descriptions or conventionally shaped beliefs, they still play their role of some very important ontological assumptions constituting dualism.

As Mitterer writes, the dualizing mode of speaking has its historical roots. Probably, we can historically observe processes in which dualizing techniques emerged, stabilized and institutionalized, becoming more and more obvious, rooted and unproblematic. This is exactly the point of the main interest in my paper. First of all, I would like to describe the archaic,

¹ Essentialism for me is a standpoint in which we assume the existence and the cognizability of the essences of the objects. Essences are ahistorical and invariable, they determine the identity of objects. We can express them in definitions. Things possess their essences objectively, independently of the way in which we relate to them.

pre-referential and pre-dualizing use of language, and then to ask about possible reasons and necessary conditions of the emergence and institutionalization of the dualizing mode of speaking.²

In the world of magic, before Max Weber's first disenchantment of the world, while spheres of *sacrum* and *profanum* differentiated and religion emerged, every dimension of human experience was magical. Archaic cultures were *syncretic*, without any clear difference between the practical-technical sphere, the communicative-symbolic dimension or the sphere of outlook and transcendent values (Pałubicka 1984, 44-48). We should remember that by distinguishing those spheres we impose or impute our modern European way of understanding anthropological data (cf. Kmita 1984). In tribal societies, where practical and symbolic elements were intertwined, those dimensions constituted integrated aspects of social practice.

But magical cultures, which is be even more interesting in the context of this paper, are also defined by the very specific way of understanding language within them. Magical spells, curses, solemn promises, the special function of proper names and also linguistic taboos, suggest that language is here seen as dynamic, deeply performative and even "glued together" with reality (Zybertowicz 1995, 218-224). That merging leads to the situation in which the assumption that language and reality constitute two different ontological spheres is absent. As a result, it is not possible to use language in a clear, referential way. In other words, it is not possible to relate words to things comprehended as having a different ontological status. Let me describe the details of this archaic feature or tendency using selected anthropological conceptions.

According to Ernst Gellner we observe the lack of a clear referential use of language in primitive cultures (Gellner 1988, 44-55, 78, 72). The use of language, like any other action, is here a kind of *multi-strand activity* that realizes many aims at the same time and that can be subordinated to many different criteria. The use of words is a kind of social ritual in the

² It is fascinating that we can find some analogies between anthropological reconstructions mentioned in the paper and the so-called evolution of language and theories of grammaticalization. For example, both areas stress that not referential, but phatic, coordinative function was basic in the first stage of the evolution of language (Aitchison 2002).

community, playing many important functions, for example: affirming and performing loyalty to the social order. In such a context linguistic denoting or clear informing, separated from normative functions is not possible.

As Michał Buchowski and Wojciech Burszta write, in the context of the magical world we should better speak only about speech (*parole*), not about language (*langue*). Language, comprehended as an abstract, stable system of meanings and rules that are located on a superindividual level, is not present. When analysing archaic cultures, we are reconstructing the stage before the emergence of symbols. Semantics or conceptual knowledge is not yet crystallized. Separating language or any conceptual, mental domain from the practical activity of archaic men in their community is unjustified. Language is not an equivalent of thought. Rather than any abstract symbols, we observe noises correlated with the specific, current situation. It follows that a conventional, arbitrary character of symbols is not yet recognized (Buchowski, Burszta 1986, Burszta 1986).

According to Andrzej P. Kowalski's conception, the archaic thinking proceeds in terms of continuous metamorphosis (Kowalski 2001). It is connected with an image of the dynamic of things and also with the deep presupposition of the permanent changeability of being. In a such context every object can undergo any changes in another object. In fact, the very notion of stable object or stable being is not present. Metamorphosis is not regulated by any convention. It is context-dependent and can even be accidental. Such image appears with the assumption of some peculiar homogeneity of being: axiological, practical, mental and physical aspects of being are mixed together. We can reconstruct to some degree and describe those features analysing the structure of archaic languages.

The exotic situation sketched above leads to many interesting consequences described by Kowalski. First of all, in the archaic mind there is no separate mental sphere: perceptual, emotional, conceptual and imaginative layers are not separated. The archaic experience is deeply holistic or syncretic. Secondly, the archaic thinking is not individual, but rather social or common, and always rooted in context and practice. The subject of knowledge, as a kind of independent, reflexive instance, is not present. Moreover, things, mental representations and words can fluently undergo metamorphoses in each other. Consequently, language penetrates reality and

minds. This is the reason why magic is possible and also effective. The use of words, spells or curses allows making real changes in reality. Names are seen as parts of their carriers. The act of calling can change the essence or nature of a person or thing that is called. Language is superperformative. The distance between words and things is not present, words exert a direct and immediate influence on reality. What is more, the magical speech cannot “break free” from the context of the current action. Those languages have no stable semantic rules, no third person pronouns, no possibility of commenting or citing, no abstract ideas or meanings. Archaic languages rather use constructions with dynamic verbs than with nouns. Consequently, magical cultures include only practices of manifesting or demonstrating in the context, without abstract denoting. They are pre-referential.³

Probably, the process of some peculiar “unsticking” language from reality was long-lasting and, of course, very complex. We can only speculate about possible cultural causes and necessary conditions of the emergence of the dualizing mode of speaking. Let me start with asking how did magical, syncretic cultures disintegrate? How did the symbolic sphere emerge from the holistic background of magic? According to Kowalski, axiological symbols were probably recognized and generated in the first stage. In axiological symbolizing some gestures, actions or noises started to substitute or replace values. Originally it was connected with some selected professional magical groups, for example specialists in the treatment of metals and their magical procedures. Some of those procedures started to play a role of axiological symbols (cf. Kowalski 1999).

Probably, Plato is not responsible for everything, but when we search for the possible origins of dualism, we should remember the influence of Greek philosophy with its essentialism. What is very important, ancient Greek philosophy was built in a very specific environment. In Greece of those times the real confrontation between oral and literate culture took place. When looking for possible roots of dualism, we should not forget about the role of technological innovations, first of all, about literacy and its mental and cognitive consequences. According to Jack Goody the invention of literacy and an alphabet facilitated the decontextualization of

³ We can find a lot of motives suggesting the existence of the magical view of language in the Bible (see Bińczyk 2003).

speech (Goody 1978). Literacy objectified speech, it stabilized the content of communication or oral transmission. Critical analysis of arguments became possible. The rational style of discussion was invented together with new techniques of argumentation. Greeks discussed the problem of falsity and fiction, and have tried to understand the linguistic conditions of lying. They gave us first systematic reflection on semantics, on the nature of signs, on grammatical and logical rules, which were here understood as arbitrary conventions. When the changeability of being was replaced by its stability, essentialism and objectivism became possible. Metamorphosis had to disappear. Gradually, the symbolic use of language emerged. It was described and understood better, when literacy became popular. Literacy proves to be an important condition for the emergence of the clear referential use of language. Probably, at the same time the epistemological relation appeared as the relation that presupposes the subject of knowledge, its object and problematic questions of truth, and knowledge or reference as ontologically distinct (Zybertowicz 1995, 73).

Nevertheless many authors provide examples of the magical and performative use of language in many subsequent contexts. Tzvetan Todorov describes the magical understanding of language among Europeans discovering America (Todorov 1996). Michel Foucault reconstructs magical elements in the *episteme* of similarity in the 16th century in Europe (Foucault 1966). It is visible that the style of communication and thinking reveals many differences between elites and masses. It proves that the institutionalization of the dualizing mode of speaking was context-dependent and also gradual.

Another interesting issue concerns the origins of the other side of discourse as an important instance settling arguments. It is possible to reconstruct historically, how the dualizing techniques did produce such instances and how they did undergo institutionalization. One of those instances was the single God. Gellner stresses here the role of clergy as professional interpreters of the Holy Scriptures. Clergy invented new techniques of argumentations, speaking as spokespersons, in the name of God. Another important instance settling arguments in Western culture was Nature. We should take here into account new scientific experimental practices invented in 17th Europe and the specific style of representing facts popularized by Robert Boyle. Since the 17th century, a scientific expert can speak

in the name of any mute fact. Thanks to his artificial experiments, an expert can settle every human question concerning Nature. Of course, new techniques of speaking in the name of facts had to be justified. Those processes are described by Bruno Latour, who used the historical reconstruction of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (Latour 1993; Shapin, Schaffer 1985).

What I wanted to indicate in my paper until now is that: 1) essentialism is inscribed in dualism due to the notion of the other side of the discourse; 2) dualism and essentialism have their historical roots and can be seen as contingent; 3) dualism can be empirically reconstructed when it is defined as a set of argumentative techniques. At this moment, in conclusion, let me suggest that the dualizing mode of speaking can also be impractical in dialogue and even dangerous in some context.⁴ The rejection of dualizing assumptions can prove to be useful for ethical reasons. As Mitterer's book indicates, if we reject the blockades of essentialism we can conduct our negotiation freely in many directions. We avoid deadlocks and idle debates. We are rather looking forward for the future consensus, than back to appeal to the other side of discourse to prove that *we are right*. What is more, the specific usurpation of speaking "in the name of...anything" can have its political negative consequences. So, in some conditions it would be probably better to stay distrustful of usurpators who play the role of spokespersons. Of course, a very strong Western, political elitism of experts makes it very difficult.

Essentialism has its political consequences in the contemporary context of the global risk society as well. What we observe in present condition is the growing significance of scientific experts. But at the same time we see scientific controversies and debates that turn out to be so difficult to close. Very often there are experts on both sides speaking in the name of objective facts. Contemporary controversies are so difficult to close not because science is weak or because scientific experts have bad intentions. The reason is rather that the world of global heterogeneous associations is too complex, unpredictable and risky. Let us think here, for example, about ecological crisis, the ozone hole, financial risks, virtual markets, technological

⁴ Of course, dualism constitutes the common sense of the Western world. It is deeply internalized and recognized as "natural" and useful. But it does not mean that the dualizing techniques of argumentation have no drawbacks.

unemployment or political terrorism. As a result the Greek ideal of *episteme* as knowledge, which can be absolutely certain and true, cannot be achieved today. We rather observe unpredictable side effects of our technological interventions. But still we need political decisions to be made (very often almost on the spot). So this is not a good time for people who want to be sure before they start to act. Today we have to make political decisions in the conditions of uncertainty (Latour 2004, 263), putting aside our essentialistic habits and hopes.

We live in such a dynamic collective that maybe it is better to think beyond the assumptions of essentialism. I think here mainly about an essentialistic view of Nature as stable and safe. But Nature is now rather an unstable, human artifact in a dynamic, technological process of continuous transforming (cf. Beck 2002). Technological innovations and scientific discoveries permanently reshape the global world. Those two spheres introduce new possibilities, new limits and also new entities, like prions, viruses or the ozone hole. Essentialism is not a good tool for describing this dynamic, and even less so to predict anything. Scientific work is done without any previous, sufficient ethical or political reflection and dialogue. The parameters of the human future are shaped without the discussion about the consequences of human innovations. They are shaped almost freely, governed mainly by the rules of the market.

All dangerous consequences of essentialism mentioned above remain invisible due to some strong philosophical assumptions of the Western world. Let us mention here the modern vision and hope of progress, which is almost never undermined; strong faith in the liberty of scientific research which is good in itself and the value of freedom to invest in the market. Progress, science, and the free market are still comprehended as the only tools to save humanity in the future. I hope it would be true. But I am afraid it is not.

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