

## **From Linguistic Production to Global Communication: Directions in philosophy of language.**

### *Practising philosophy of language*

The expression "philosophy of language" conveys the scope and orientation of Augusto Ponzio's research for two main reasons. Firstly, as a research method it promotes philosophical investigation into the sciences of verbal and nonverbal languages in terms of heteroglossia, polylogism, reciprocal otherness and dialogism, by contrast with the tendency toward prevarication, unquestioning authority, and monologism. "Philosophy of (verbal ) language" because, as a meta-science, the interpretant of philosophical investigation is ultimately verbal: investigation takes place within verbal reality, its materials and instruments are verbal, its specific object is necessarily mediated by verbal signs, and it is pronounced verbally in a specific field of discourse. The pervasiveness of sign reality for man is evidenced by Ponzio with his theory of meaning as a network, a system of "interpretive routes", outside of which meanings cannot subsist: signs correspond to the nodes and intersections in this network and like the nodes in a network, once the pieces or the interpretive routes joining these signs disappear, signs themselves also disappear (cf. Ponzio 1985a, 1990b, 1995b).

The second reason why the expression "philosophy of language" is a good qualification of Ponzio's work is that philosophy as a science presupposes philosophy immanent in language. In other words, philosophy of language presupposes the orientation inherent in language toward "dialogic plurilingualism", "multi-voicedness", "heteroglossia" and otherness interrelating different languages, cultures and ideologies: the expression "philosophy of language" implies philosophizing by language and not just about language (cf. Ponzio 1985c). Even when research conducted in the sciences of language, linguistics, and institutionalized philosophy of language (commonly understood as philosophical studies on language) is oriented monologically and regulated by the centripetal and unifying forces of linguistic life, the original philosophizing immanent in language, its constitutional dialogic heteroglossia, is often betrayed. Were this not so, the very objectification of language and consequent flourishing of numerous philosophical and linguistic disciplines would have never been possible.

Therefore, from the viewpoint of philosophy, dialogic heteroglossia has a methodological function in the study of language as well as in delimiting philosophy of language as a discipline. Philosophy in general (and not just that immediately concerned with language) works within the framework of the dialogic heteroglossia inherent in language, which acts as a sort of a priori and transcendental condition in philosophical reflexion as in all forms of critical consciousness.

### *Ideology and linguistic production*

In his 1973 book *Produzione linguistica e ideologia sociale* (amplified in a French edition of 1992), Ponzio promptly takes a clear stance against Noam Chomsky's approach to language analysis. Some aspects of this study are subsequently developed in a volume of 1991, *Filosofia del linguaggio 2*. In 1973 Ponzio's attitude meant criticizing dominant trends in the linguistic sciences given Chomsky's widespread influence over the intellectual globe. Ponzio's main contention is that Chomsky mistakes linguistic use in a specific language—English (his sentence examples are often untranslatable)—for the essential or universal in language-in general. Furthermore, according to Ponzio, Chomsky confuses levels of analysis, mistaking the description of the objects of analysis for the construction of the models of analysis. Ponzio's critique is in line with Sebastian K. Shaumjan, who proposes a bigradual theory of generative grammar articulated at two levels (the

genotypical and the phenotypical ), as against what he describes as Chomsky's ungradual linguistic theory.

In Ponzio's opinion, what Chomsky calls "linguistic creativity" refers, in reality, to a situation characterized by the use of rules, codes, and programs which the speaker does not control. Moreover, this is true not only at the phonologic, syntactic and semantic levels of language, as believes Chomsky, but also at the ideological level. Chomsky dedicates a great part of his attention to questions of ideology both on a theoretical level , as well as on a pragmatic level without hesitating to commit himself publicly (think of his critique of the Bush administration in relation to the Gulf war, or of official U.S.A. politics concerning Cuba). Nonetheless, his theoretical work on linguistics is kept completely separate from his critique of ideology and political commitment. In Ponzio's view, what Chomsky describes in his linguistic theory is not a speaker exercising "linguistic creativity", but an alienated subject, that is, a subject who passively accepts rules, codes, and programs as given and natural while, in fact, they are determined socially and historically, though described by the linguist as "extra-historical" and universal. The Chomskyian speaking subject is an uncritical, passive, alienated subject unable to intervene actively on the codes it is subjected to, and transform them.

A central category used by Ponzio in his critique of Chomsky is "linguistic work" which he adapts from Rossi-Landi's important book entitled *Linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato* (1992 [1968]; English trans. 1983). The latter ideates the concept of "linguistic work" by relating different human sciences (political economy and linguistics), in other words, by identifying a homological relationship between sign production and the production of artifacts. As against the Chomskyian categories of competence and performance which repropose traditional problems, terminologies and mechanistic oppositions (e.g., consciousness vs. experience, behaviorism vs. mentalism, physical vs. psychic, internal vs. external, empiricism vs. rationalism), Ponzio, following Rossi-Landi and the lesson of dialectic materialism, calls attention to the dialectic relation between the subject and the social and natural environment, to language conceived as work and to the different languages viewed as the product of work, as the result of linguistic production processes, to the principle of the "methodics of common speech" or of "common semiosis" (cf. Rossi-Landi 1980 [ 1961]).

Chomsky explains linguistic competence, intended as the speaker's ability to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences on the basis of a finite number of elements, in terms of innate, universal generative grammar whose structures are biologically inscribed in the human mind and activated by experience understood as a totally passive condition.

However, as remembered by Ponzio, experience in modern conceptions after Kant is described as a series of interpretive operations, including inferential processes of the abductive type (Charles S. Peirce) through which the subject completes, organizes, and associates data which is always more or less fragmentary, partial, and discrete. Experience is these operations and as such is innovative and qualitatively superior by comparison with the limited nature of eventual input. In Ponzio's view, experience coincides with competence which conceived in such terms does not need to be integrated with an innate supplement, a piece of natural equipment supposedly inherent in the human infant.

In a more recent essay on Chomsky, now included in *Filosofia del linguaggio 2* , Ponzio returns to the question of the development of linguistic competence and knowledge generally, to what Chomsky in 1985 baptized "Plato's problem", that is, how a finite number of entities generates knowledge extending beyond such entities both qualitatively and quantitatively. According to Ponzio, that we recognize, know how to use, and understand a previously unexperienced linguistic expression (constructed, however, according to the rules of the language the speaker is familiar

with) is no more surprising than the fact that we recognize and consequently use something as a hammer, though never having seen this object before (but which is constructed according to the rules and functions that model a hammer).

In the same essay, the connection between language acquisition and performance of inferential-abductive operations is also analyzed by Ponzio in the following terms:

The relation between abduction and language learning (which is never finished and complete) is a relation of reciprocal support: language learning makes use of abductive processes, while abductive processes in their turn benefit from language learning because they are necessarily grounded in linguistic interpretive work as accomplished by the generations that have preceded us historically leaving us the linguistic materials and instruments which go to form the language we experience. (Ponzio 1991a: 97)

For a linguistic theory that goes beyond the dualism of competence and experience and of deep structures and surface structures, Ponzio draws on suggestions from Peirce and his particular sign theory. In this framework, and taking his distances from the Chomskyan concept of deep structures, Ponzio proposes what he calls an "interpretive linguistic theory" in the light of which the theory of different levels, of antecedents and derivations, no longer holds. The "interpretive linguistic theory" (ideated for application to both verbal and nonverbal signs) explains one's ability to comprehend the utterance or verbal sign in general in terms of its relation to another utterance that interprets it, an utterance acting as interpretant. All utterances are produced, characterized, identified, and developed by their interpretants. According to this approach, the interpretant of a sentence (or, rather, utterance) is not a deep structure grounded in underlying elementary sequences, but another verbal sign. In Ponzio's words, "an interpretant identifying an utterance or any verbal sign whatever is simply 'unexpressed', until the conditions are realized for its expression, explicitation" (1991a: 102).

In Ponzio's terminology, an interpretant is either an "identifying interpretant" with the function of recognizing the sign at the level of its phonemic or graphic configuration, semantic content, morphological syntactic structure, or an "answering comprehension interpretant" focusing on the pragmatic dimension of signs. Viewed in such terms, and this is a particularly significant aspect of Ponzio's approach, the relationship between "interpretant signs" and "interpreted signs" is marked by dialogism, active participation, and otherness (Ponzio 1985a: 65-76). This level of sign interpretation is closely related to the ideological level of discourse, and while it is ignored by Chomsky, Ponzio argues that it should in fact be the starting point for any approach whatsoever to the problem of ideology (cf. Ponzio 1977, 1990c, 1993).

For a linguistic theory to be functional, it must be explicative and critical, it must go beyond the limits of a simply descriptive and taxonomic approach to language analysis, and to achieve this it must reckon with the social processes of linguistic production in relation to a critical theory of ideology. As stated above, a weak point in Chomsky's research is represented by his failure to theorize the relation between language and ideology, which leads him to ignore the problem of the ideological structures that determine linguistic production processes. In Ponzio's words: "This separation stops his theory from becoming a critique of language and his critique of ideology from being grounded, on a theoretical level, in the study of language" (Ponzio 1991a: 7). Using categories adapted from Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Marx, Schaff, Rossi-Landi and Prieto—such categories as language as work, language as historico-socio-ideological reality—Ponzio criticizes the reduction of linguistic use to mere behavior or activity, and works on the human's potential for truly creative (abductive) and critical intervention on language and on one's surroundings at large (cf. Ponzio 1991a: 92).

Ponzio's evaluation of Chomsky's approach to language analysis, which is still representative today of main trends in linguistics, underlines the influence of the Marxian critique of political economy on his particular approach to philosophy of language. Ponzio never abandons his readings of Marx which, in fact, induce him to work on the problem of the critical grounding of scientific knowledge. His focus is on the production processes of knowledge, which, following Marx, coincide with the problem of the reproduction process of the social system that produces knowledge (cf., for example, Ponzio 1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1977).

### *Meaning as interpretive route*

Working in such a theoretical perspective, Ponzio was only too glad to welcome the transition from decodification to interpretation semiotics as it began taking place in Italy in the early 1970s (cf. Ponzio 1988a).

The Peircean-Morrisian sign model at the basis of interpretation semiotics is a dynamic sign model, rooted in the concept of infinite semiosis in an open chain of deferrals from one interpretant sign to another. The supporting logic is not the logic of equal exchange, but rather of non correspondence, excess and otherness in the relation among interpretants forming the sign network. The interpretant sign says something more with respect to the interpreted sign, which in turn has its own semiotic consistency by virtue of which the latter resists any single interpretation, or "interpretive route", to use Ponzio's terminology (cf. 1985a and 1995b). In the framework of interpretation semiotics the sign is always part of a sign situation in which all the components of semiosis—the sign vehicle (*signifiant*), meaning (*signifié*), referent, interpreter, interpretant and codes regulating sign systems—are considered as different aspects of complex and articulate semiotic processes, and not separately from one another (cf. Ponzio 1988a: 24).

The sign model proposed by interpretation semiotics is the heterogeneous product of dialogically related results achieved in different contexts. These include: theory of knowledge (Peirce), of literature (Bakhtin), of *significance* (Barthes) and of axiology (Morris). Furthermore, research on the relation between semiotics and ideology (Rossi-Landi, Schaff) also led to greater attention during the 1980s on the relation between signs and (socio-ethical) values. In this connection, an important contribution is represented by Charles Morris who explicitly theorized the necessary relation between signs and values in his book of 1964, *Signification and Significance*. By contrast with a view of semiotics as a solely cognitive, descriptive and ideologically neutral science, a major trend in semiotics today is intent on recovering the orientation toward problems of an axiological order and on achieving, therefore, a global reconnaissance of man and his signs. Ponzio proposes we call such an approach to the study of signifying practices "ethosemiotics", given its focus on the interrelation between signs and values beyond that between meaning, sense and significance (cf. Ponzio 1985c). An important contribution in this sense comes to us today from the English scholar Victoria Welby and her original approach to language analysis and meaning theory tagged "significs" (cf. Welby 1983, 1985; Petrilli 1988, 1998).

Through this critical groundwork of the 1970s covered in such books as *Produzione linguistica e ideologia sociale* (1973), *Filosofia del linguaggio e prassi sociale* (1974), *Dialettica e verità. Scienza e materialismo storico dialettico* (1975), and *Marxismo, scienza e problema dell'uomo* (1977), Ponzio demonstrates the inadequacy of trends which reduce the (verbal and nonverbal) sign and the human subject to exchange value, viewed separately from the historico-social relations of production processes. With reference to the various human sciences—philosophy, semiotics, linguistics, philosophy of language, political economy, anthropology, esthetic creation, and especially literature —, Ponzio conducts a series of studies which might be defined as explorations

and exercises along the boundaries of such sciences where they interact and contaminate each other and, therefore, along the boundaries of discourse.

### *Displacements*

Another complex of interests in Ponzio's research finds expression in such books as *Michail Bachtin* (1980), *Segni e contraddizioni Fra Marx e Bachtin*, 1981, *Spostamenti. Percorsi e discorsi sul segno*, 1982, *Lo spreco dei significanti L'eros, la morte, la scrittura*, 1983, *Tra linguaggio e letteratura*, 1983, *Per parlare dei segni*, 1985, *Filosofia del linguaggio*, 1985, *Interpretazione e scrittura*, 1986, *Dialogo sui dialoghi* (in collab. with Massimo A. Bonfantini), 1986, *Il filosofo e la tartaruga*, 1990, *Man as a Sign*, 1990, *Filosofia del linguaggio 2*, 1991, and *Tra semiotica e letteratura*, 1992. At the philosophical level Ponzio's interlocutors include: Lévinas, Blanchot, Bakhtin, Kierkegaard, Peirce, Marx, Schaff, Rossi-Landi, Vailati, Peter of Spain, and Plato; at the literary level, Leopardi, Manzoni, Foscolo, Sterne, Orwell, Poe, and Proust. Ponzio's discourses on the sign and shifts in viewpoint as he confronts various approaches and research itineraries, suggest the image of the researcher working in the laboratory intent on sounding out the potential of the word and of human signifying practices generally.

In 1990 Ponzio founded the journal *Athanor*—this Arabic word evokes the alchemist in the laboratory mixing and transforming the elements. To the elements, in the double sense of the natural elements and the elements of the alphabet (two meanings which had already been connected by the ancient Greek philosophers), is also dedicated a collective volume of 1988 edited by Ponzio entitled *La scrittura degli elementi*. This includes essays by Omar Calabrese and Claude Gandelman with paintings by Angela Biancofiore.

Ponzio's books of the 1980s, especially the sections dedicated to literary writing, are written essentially from the viewpoint of literature. Here the expression "of literature" is not only intended in the restricted sense of applying given models and categories to the study of literary texts, but more broadly in the sense that literature, the "excess" and "otherness" of literary writing, the dialogic, digressive, and indirect word of literature provide the perspective according to which the sign is described. As averred by Lévinas and Bakhtin, literary writing is the place par excellence for the full realization of "extralocality", whose guiding value is not "egocentric identity", but "absolute otherness", where time and space do not belong to the order of productive accumulation, but of dispersion, digression, expenditure, and dialogic heteroglossia.

A book of 1990, *Il filosofo e la tartaruga* (collecting essays written between 1983 and 1988) assembles the general results of the "experiments" conducted by Ponzio during the 1980s. The main values theorized are represented by such terms as "ephemeral", "otherness", "discontinuity", "discretion", "passion", "expenditure", "waste", "transience", "drift", "shift":

As the expression of the logic of expenditure, dispersion and waste, the word "passion" serves to indicate that which escapes the logic of equal exchange and constitutes a critique of bourgeois economy, of the logic of accumulation, functionality, efficiency and productivity. The subject affected by passion is a "passive subject"; as such, it is considered negatively in relation to those conceptions of man that exalt such values as the Subject's authority, initiative, activity and consciousness. But the properly human subject, "subjectum", is constitutively passive, subject to..., dependent on..., interested in..., oriented toward.... Such a subject is characterized by its being open to the other, by the capacity of listening to the other, of tuning in with the other. In this perspective, alongside the "passive subject" understood as the subject which fails in its intention of being a controlling subject, in a position to answer for itself and reach its own personal aims, another modality of being "subject to..." is delineated. The latter is measured in terms of volition and

capacity for planning, but, on the contrary, concerns the subject's availability with respect to dialogism, otherness, listening. Thus intended, passivity is not alienation, the condition of the unquestioning subject passively experiencing external constriction. On the contrary, in Ponzio's description passivity denotes the possibility of surpassing the limits of identity, private individual interest, and is connected with a concept of the subject as a totality open to unlimited interrogation and criticism.

The frenetic production-exchange-consumption cycle is dominant today in our consumer society. Paradoxically, a condition for continuity of such production cycles is production of the ephemeral, that is, the discontinuous, the superfluous, the private—the "addomesticated" ephemeral, says Ponzio (1990e: 21). On his part, Ponzio proposes a different kind of "ephemeral" from that programmed by the logic of accumulation and equal exchange, intending it as a value that disrupts the latter, is refractory to it, and is therefore the place of the nonalienated self, the properly human, creativity, difference, freedom. Thus conceived, the ephemeral denotes the body's resistance—with its pulsional economy, exigencies, experiences, maladies, and even death—to programming, productivity, efficiency and functionality as established by a plan regulated by a specific aim. Viewed in relation to the human person, the ephemeral represents otherness, the right to be other with respect to identity as it is fixed by roles, contracts and commitments connected with officialdom. With respect to the bourgeois system of values in current capitalistic society, the ephemeral represents excess and loss; with respect to the time of (Hi)story, accumulation, edification, it is the place of irreducible discontinuity, disgregation, digression, discretion (cf. *ibidem*:)

In this perspective, Ponzio also re-evaluates the concept of automatism in relation to man, commonly considered in the negative sense of mechanicalness. The metaphor of automatism embraces what would seem to be contradictory concepts such as necessity, on one hand, and spontaneity, chance, and automony with respect to external constriction, on the other. On developing such contradictions in dialectical terms, Ponzio proposes what would seem to be another paradox: automatism as the process by which human action is rendered autonomous.

The automaton as a combination of the programmed and the spontaneous, of necessity and chance, of the natural and the artifact tells about man more than about the machine. [...] As autonomous determinism automatism implies and claims freedom from external agents or conditions. Automatism opens to the unconscious: automatism of thoughtlessness, forgetfulness, lapsus, automatism of dreams, desires, passions. (1990e: 124)

What would seem separate and independent programs and automatisms are, in fact, related dialectically. This emerges even more clearly when we break down or "detotalize" the larger categories commonly used in analyzing man and his behavior: individual subject, society, culture, class, *parole*, and *langue*. On closer examination, we soon realize that each of these categories is built on a series of automatons in a system of ever-changing relations, so that what may seem programmed from a given viewpoint will result self-propelled and spontaneous, from another (cf. Barthes 1978; Rossi-Landi 1994). The problem to be dealt with is that of sounding out the possibility of constructing open automatons capable of responding to the other, to outside solicitation, and capable of modification as a result of such response, an automaton that is heterogenous and multiple with respect to the pseudo totality-automaton. Such a positive conception of human automatism is connected by Ponzio to another positive conception of automatism theorized by Antonio Gramsci:

Do freedom and what is commonly known as "automatism" clash with each other? Automatism clashes with the arbitrary, not with freedom. Automatism is freedom of the group, which contrasts with individualistic arbitrary will [...] For if the arbitrary is generalized, it is no longer the arbitrary but a shift in the basis of "automatism", new rationality. Automatism is no less than rationality, but the word automatism is an attempt at proposing a concept stripped of any kind of speculative aura. (Gramsci 1975 [1932-1935]: *Quaderno* 10)

### *For a critique of globalized communication*

In his book of 1991 *Filosofia del linguaggio 2*, Ponzio continues his research on various problems mentioned in the present paper with a special focus on the interrelation between signs, values and ideologies. The mediating role carried out by signs in the current system of social reproduction is undeniable, as amply demonstrated by the extensive influence of mass media. Consequently, in an era in which the "crisis" or "end of ideology" has been proclaimed—in truth, a strongly ideological position and product of a combination of false consciousness, false thought and false praxis which as such is difficult to demystify—, Ponzio belongs to a community of researchers who insist on the interconnection between critique of ideology, critique of economy and science of signs. A critical dialectic approach to the human person and its signs leads to awareness of the continual "sacrifice" of otherness on the "altar of identity" (cf. Ponzio 1995d), and aims therefore to recover sense in the direction of otherness and extralocality. In a dialectical framework Ponzio proposes a "detotalizing method", freedom from the limits of identity, fragmentation of false but concrete totalities (Ontology, Politics, Equal Exchange, Individual, Society, State, Nation, Language, Truth, Knowledge, Equality, Justice, Freedom, limited Responsibility, Need), and awareness of the reality of extended totalities, of the general network of signs to which the smaller totalities belong as dialogically interacting and interconnecting parts:

[...] the present social reproduction system based on the logic of identity, which asserts itself by segregating or eliminating otherness, makes possible concrete abstractions on which such a system is constructed. Such concrete abstractions include the Individual forced to sacrifice its otherness to itself. A critique of such a system presupposes *the viewpoint of another*, which in turn presupposes recognition of the other, or better still: recognition of the inevitable imposition and compulsoriness of recognition of the other. (Ponzio 1991a: 17)

In the present phase of his research, Ponzio is mainly concerned with developing a critique of the logic of identity and of communication-reproduction through categories connected with the logic of otherness. Leaving a presentation of his ongoing publications to a future article, I shall now simply limit myself to naming the following: the volumes *Dialogo e narrazione*, 1991, *Signs, Dialogue and Ideology*, 1993, *Responsabilita e alterità in Emmanuel Lévinas*, 1995, *I segni dell'altro*, 1995, and (in collaboration with other authors) *Fondamenti di filosofia del linguaggio*, 1994. A critique of productivity ideology and global communication is the main concern of a work in various volumes, *I segni del capitale*, of which the first and second volumes have so far appeared entitled respectively, *La differenza non indifferente. Comunicazione, migrazione, guerra*, 1995, and *Elogio dell'infunzionale. Critica dell'ideologia della produttività*, 1997. In this same perspective another book by Ponzio is his *Metodologia della formazione linguistica*, 1997, which through the sciences of language proposes a critique of social programs aiming at subjecting science, education and socio-cultural experience generally to market logic and consequently to the logic of profit.