

BACKGROUND OF THE LINGUISTIC THEORIES (ESPECIALLY OF THE SIGN) IN FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE: FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO THE XIX CENTURY

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Abstract: In this study, it is our objective to carry out a historical tour of the main antecedents that we can find on the linguistic theories in Ferdinand de Saussure, with special emphasis on the influences he took for the elaboration of his theory of the sign. To do this, given the philosophical-rationalist nature that supports his theoretical conceptions, we are going to study the hypotheses preceding his, which had a logical-speculative nature. In this sense, we will start with Classical Antiquity focusing on the contributions made by the main Greek philosophers (Socrates, Platon and Aristotle) on the language / thought duality and the origin motivated or not of linguistic signs. Next, we will address the medieval theories of scholasticism and its conception of language as a syntactic and paradigmatic system in which agreement and rection were of fundamental importance, as Saussure would explain centuries later, categorizing language as a formal and functional system.

Next, we will carry out an overview of the rationalist linguistic thought conceived by El Brocense in the 16th century and made explicit in his *Minerva*. From him, Saussure would take the conception that reason was above any use or linguistic norm that tried to limit language. Later, already located in the seventeenth century, we will study the general and reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal and its influence on Ferdinand de Saussure, especially with regard to the conception of the two faces of the linguistic sign (meaning and signifier). Finally, we will review some of the late nineteenth century theories that influenced Saussure and that were basically those conceived by the Kazan and Moscow schools and by the thought of the American linguist W. D. Whitney. Finally, we will expose some of the fundamental concepts contained in Ferdinand de Saussure's General Linguistics Course in which he presented his linguistic theories.

Keywords: History of linguistics; Ferdinand de Saussure; Sign theory; Structuralism; Generativism.

Introduction

1. Linguistics in Ancient Greece

The first and the only written testimonies that are conserved on linguistics in Classical Antiquity, from a philosophical-rational perspective, come from Ancient Greece and, more specifically, from the period that has been called classic in the history of this civilization. It corresponds to the 5th and 4th

centuries BC. and, in its course, the main Greek philosophers left us in their works some reflections, albeit scattered, about language and its components.

The first speculations were made by the pre-Socratic sophists (Heraclitus, Democritus and Protagoras), their task being to instruct the orators on how to use language with ingenuity in their rational arguments. Although their theories have come down to us in a biased way, we know that they considered the Greek language as the main and the most dominant, relegating the other languages to the condition of barbarians.

Contemporary to them, Socrates made the first contributions regarding the controversial issue of the motivation or not of linguistic signs in empirical reality. His thesis was interpreted by Platon who, in his dialogue known as *Cratilo*, addressed various issues derived from the question, such as the etymology of some words and their origins. It seems that the positions of Socrates and of Plato himself advocated because there was a natural relationship between words and designated things, based on the phonic symbolism and onomatopoeic character of the first names. However, it cannot be excluded that this position was maintained in an ironic key.

Against this relationship of natural dependence between words and designated things, Aristotle reacted in his logical works. For him, the relationship between both concepts was conventional since each culture used its particular way of naming the same thing. For his part, Epicurus maintained an intermediate position, since he pointed out that the words in their origin arose from nature itself, but, as it changed over time, this evolution was based on a tacit agreement established between men.

Closely related to this problem of the natural or conventional origin of words, arose that of their creation by analogy with others or their individual and anomalous existence, that is, they were all totally differentiated from each other. While Aristotle defended the theory of analogy, the Stoics, by contrast, supported the theory of anomaly.

The analogists relied on the equivalences of formal paradigms in which words had a number of similarities, both morphological and prosodic. They started from the conviction that equivalent words from the morphological point of view had to have similar meanings; with this, they established the basis of the grammatical divisions from a semantic point of view. This process made it possible to fix similarities and differences, grouping the words into categories and giving rise to the methodological process necessary to elaborate the grammars.

The anomalists, for their part, wielded the lack of correspondence that existed between the forms of the words and what was designated by them. Thus, for example, they pointed out that words with singular forms had plural meanings or vice versa and positive forms had negative meanings or vice versa. Finally, the conclusion was reached of the evident presence of regularities and irregularities in the language and, with this, they laid the foundations of an incipient grammar.

To complete this vision of the consideration of linguistics in Ancient Greece, we must make it clear that neither the pre-Socratic sophists, nor Socrates, nor Platon were at any time interested in grammatical studies in themselves; however, they were introducing certain notions that would later serve this purpose. In this regard, Platon's division of the Greek sentence into *onoma* (noun-subject) and *rhema* (verb-predicate) is important. Aristotle included in this dichotomy the linking words, that is, everything

that was not nouns or verbs. Aristotle himself, in his *De interpretatione*, was the first to offer a formal definition of a word as a linguistic unit, defining it as "the component of the sentence that had meaning per se and that could not be divided into more significant units." Furthermore, in the linguistic sign he distinguished between "what was in the voice" and "what was in the soul", that is, what Saussure later called signifier and signified.

Later, the Stoics started from the tripartite classification of the parts of speech established by Aristotle and increased their number. Thus, they divided the linking words into inflected (pronoun and article) and non-inflected (preposition and conjunction), separated the nouns into common and proper, and incorporated the adverb as an independent part of the sentence.

In the same way, regarding the Aristotelian concept of nominal inflection, the Stoics specified it in five cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and vocative. For the verbs, they elaborated a classification that divided them into active, passive, reflexive and neutral and, likewise, they analyzed them according to the categories of time and aspect.

2. The contributions of scholasticism in the Middle Ages

After a long period in which the linguistic study was approached from a didactic-philological perspective, we are going to reach the thirteenth century in which Saint Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic current elaborated their own rational-speculative theories, adapting them to the socio-cultural needs of his time. The scientific interest of scholasticism reflected an adaptation of the Aristotelian-logical philosophy to the Christian faith.

The main issue that the logical-medieval philosophy dealt with was to study the problem of linguistic universals, that is, the relationship between language and thought. There were two different lines of thought around this question: the realist and the nominalist. In addition, within the first one, it was possible to distinguish between moderate realists and extreme realists.

The realists defended the opinion that general concepts, or ideas, really existed, already before the particular objects (extreme realists), already, at least, independently of them (the moderate ones). The nominalists, on the contrary, claimed that only particular objects with their individual features really existed, and considered general concepts (ideas) as a simple common denomination that served to designate the set of particularities.

Once the bases of the dispute have been established, we must point out that, during this period of the Late Middle Ages, the predominant thought was the moderate realist who was reflected in the scholastic grammarians, who were known as dressmakers. These, according to Aristotle, defended the theory that there was only one universal science. The world that surrounds us is the same for everyone and, therefore, the words that allude to that reality and that were the object of study of their speculative grammars had to be universal. Accordingly, his grammatical theories were based on three main concepts: *modi significandi* (modes of signification), *modi intelligendi* (modes of intelligence) and *modi essendi* (modes of existence).

The *Modi essendi* were things and their properties, seen as abstract immutable entities by intelligence and mutable ones observed from a temporal perspective. The study of them did not

correspond to linguists but to philosophers. The *modi intelligendi* were the ways of understanding things and could be active or passive. The active way of understanding had to do with the capacity of the understanding to conceive or apprehend the properties of things. The passive way of understanding was one in which the properties of things came to understanding through their most marked features.

The *modi significandi*, for their part, were made up of the words that made up the parts of the sentence. It was the words that expressed the properties or characteristics of things. Thus, there were words with a higher way of meaning and others that had a lower way of meaning: nouns and adjectives belonged to the first class and the rest to the second. The parts of the sentence that they distinguished were the *nomen*, the *verbum*, the *participium*, the *pronomen*, the *adverbium*, the *coniunctio*, the *praepositio* and the *interiectio*.

In addition to these philosophical questions, the scholastic dressmakers were well known for their syntactic theories (an advance on those of Noam Chomsky), highlighting the contributions made by Thomas of Erfurt in his work entitled *Speculative Grammar*. Its syntax divided it into three well-differentiated blocks: the construction, the congruity as and the perfection and, in its conception of the same, the study of the sentence was gaining ground compared to that of the word.

The construct dealt with how words were related in the realm of the sentence. For these theorists, there was always a main or determining word and a dependent word (always in binary relations). This construct could be divided into transitive and intransitive depending on whether the dependent term preceded or postponed the determinant. The only thing that mattered was that the sentence was correctly constructed from a grammatical point of view. As we can see, this conception supposed, to a certain extent, an antecedent of what later was the analysis of the sentence in mediate and immediate constituents.

In the *congruitas*, what the grammarian had to worry about was that the meaning of the sentence was congruent, that is, that it was easily intelligible. To do this, they abided by the two fundamental laws of the field of syntax: agreement and rule. It was necessary to review, on the one hand, the semantic acceptability of the union of the parts of the sentence and, on the other, the grammatical acceptability that was given by the fulfillment of the agreement and the direction.

The *perfectio* referred to the sentence offering a finished content, that is, the subject and the predicate were present. For this, in addition, it was required that no internal dependency ceased to be completely finished, without which it could depart from the purpose for which the sentence was conceived, which was none other than the expression of a compound concept in the mind, expressed in such a way. a way that generates a perfect sense in the mind of the listener.

From all the above about scholasticism it is concluded that for them the study of scientific fields such as prosody was of little interest, developing, instead, morphology, syntax and semantics.

3. The Renaissance and the Minerva of El Brocense

Continuing with the theories that influenced Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of linguistics, we arrive at a time like the Renaissance in which the scholastic current from the Middle Ages survived, which was surpassed and improved by the contributions of Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas, *Brocense*, contained in his work *Minerva* (1587). It was dedicated to Fray Luis de León and was the model that later rationalist grammars continued.

For the *Brocense*, the reason was above any linguistic use or norm that could be attested in linguistic practice. In his conception of the linguistic sign and its relationships, he used the demonstrative method to indicate the truth or falsity of the theories about the linguistic sign that had appeared within the didactic-philological current. For him, the relationship between reality and language was arbitrary, except for interjections that had a demonstrable origin and were based on the noises of nature. His work was structured in four books.

In the first book, *Brocense* presented his theory on the origin of language, which turned out to be a symbiosis of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. For the Spanish, Plato's naturalism could only be applied to the original language of the Adamic paradise, while in the other languages the words originated in each one for different reasons. This book goes on first by addressing different questions about words.

The second and third books were dedicated to the study of syntax, that is, to the construction of perfect sentences through the combination of the three main types of words: nouns, verbs and linking words. Finally, the fourth book was dedicated to the study of construction figures from a grammatical point of view. These figures were for him “anomalies or inequality of the parts of the sentence that were made by default (ellipsis and zeugma), by hyperbole (pleonasm), by discord (silepsis) or by inversion of order (hyperbaton)

4. The 17th century and the general and reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal

Coming to the seventeenth century, we will find that the essential work that influenced the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure was the *General and Reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal* (1660-1662) written by Claude Lancelot, Pierre Nicole and Antoine Arnauld. This grammar was markedly rationalistic and had in René Descartes and his theories the most influential philosopher. Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), tried to apply the inductive rational procedures of science to philosophy. Descartes started from the principle that reason was unique and, therefore, wisdom also had to be. To access knowledge, one had to know the easiest and simplest objects to go up little by little, by steps, until the knowledge of the most complex matters.

In short, grammar was reduced to logic. The language was only conceived as a logical structure since it derived from human reason. Language had to be logical as logic was the reason. However, several times it was found that there were illogical phenomena in language, which did not prevent us from trying, again and again, the logic of language and trying to elaborate a universal grammar. This hypothesis was applied by the Port-Royal grammarians to language studies, resulting in the development of a general and reasoned theory of grammar.

Thus, the main objective of the *Port-Royal General and Reasoned Grammar* was to explain in a reasonable and generalizable way the causes of grammatical phenomena, while ensuring that the explanation had general validity. In this way, the most important part of the work, due to its later influence, is that which was applied to logical the language. It was shown in it that the noun denoted the substance and the adjective could only denote the accident. They were also innovative in some contributions such as, for example, when they contradicted what the entire Middle Ages had taken for granted, following Aristotle, that the verb was the word that “designated time”. For the *General and Reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal*, he assured that the main task of the verb consisted in a “pure and simple logical assertion”, that is, in “designating in the speech in which said the word was used that this was a speech of man, who not only understood things but also judged them, assuring something about them”.

The *General and Reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal* appeared structured in two parts: a first in which the letters and characters of writing were discussed and a second in which they spoke of the principles and reasons on which the various forms of the meaning of words. From the content of the first part, it is worth highlighting the two ways they set to study the word. The first was based on his study from the material point of view, that is, in terms of sound and spelling and, the second, from the spiritual point of view, that is, how man used his thought to understand the sounds of words.

Of the elements that made up the second part, the studies carried out on the syntax of the sentence stood out. They defined the sentence as "the expression of a logical judgment" and classified it as simple, complex and compound. The simple one expressed a single judgment, the complex one was one that expressed more than one judgment under the guise of expressing only one, and the compound one expressed two or more judgments.

However, undoubtedly the most relevant of this general and reasoned *Grammar of Port-Royal* was his explanation of the theory of the linguistic sign. This had a very great influence on the culmination of Ferdinand de Saussure's later theory. For the authors of this theory, the sign was conceived as the association of the idea of sound and the idea of the thing; considered arbitrary in terms of the nature of the relationship that constitutes it, but imposed by society; opposed, by its conventional origin, to the natural sign; combined in the act of communication already to accessory ideas that common use added to its meaning, and to aspects external to the language.

5. Immediate antecedents of Ferdinand de Saussure (19th century)

Focusing on the linguists who more immediately preceded Ferdinand de Saussure and who conceived linguistics from a rational-philosophical perspective, we will highlight the contributions made by the Kazan School of Linguistics, the Moscow School, and the American linguist WD Whitney.

Regarding the first, in the 70s of the 19th century, Professor Jan Baudouin de Courtenay founded the Kazan School who, together with his student Mikolaj Kruszewski, created an original linguistic theory, whose ideas belonged rather to the 20th century. Thus, for example, they emphasized the need to distinguish the language of a linguistic community and that of an individual, or also to differentiate the linguistic evolution and description of a given living language. In this way, both linguists prepared the

ground for two Saussurian theories: the dichotomy of *langue* and *parole* and the diachronic and synchronic study of languages.

Badouin de Courtenay was also the first to adequately interpret the notions of experimental phonetics on the large number of variants of each of the sounds. He showed that all these variants could form a single linguistic sign. Based on this finding, he proposed that phonetics be divided into physiophonics (that is, phonetics proper) and psychophonics (that is, phonology) and also opposed the term phoneme to that of sound. Thus, he became the forerunner of the phonology later formed by Ferdinand de Saussure and the Prague School.

On the other hand, at the same time that the Kazan School developed its thought, another linguistic school emerged in Moscow, whose founder and main representative was Filip Fedorovich Fortunatov. He dealt primarily with phonetic changes, drawing attention to the influence that the structure of the respective language had on them and, above all, to the influence of the historical conditions in which the language developed.

This author is known primarily for being one of the first to emphasize the social character of the language. In this way, he conceived the theory of linguistic form, which was reworked in the 20th century by structural linguistics. Based on this theory, Fortunatov elaborated his conception of grammatical categories and syntax. Like the representatives of the Kazan School, he realized the double possibility of studying the language, also becoming one of the precursors of the Saussurean thesis on the synchronic and diachronic study of the language.

Along with these two linguistic schools, the contribution of the American linguistics W. D. Whitney stood out. His theories greatly influenced Ferdinand de Saussure since from him he collected the primacy in the theory of the linguistic sign and its function, as well as in ideas about the arbitrary character of the sign, about the difference between articulated language and other types of language, etc. Whitney was the precursor of Saussure par excellence, what happened is that he never achieved an adequate systematization of his ideas. Likewise, an advanced theory of the linguistic sign - the so-called semiotics - was elaborated by the American philosopher Ch. S. Peirce, who, however, was hardly known by his contemporaries.

6. Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories

Ferdinand de Saussure's main linguistic ideas were published in his *Course in General Linguistics* published posthumously in 1916 by his disciples Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye. In preparing it for publication, they made use of their own notes and the annotations of other students who had had the opportunity to follow one of the three cycles of lectures that Saussure offered between 1907-11 at the University of Geneva.

In this *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure presented five linguistic theories of great importance that are the ones that we will deal with here and that correspond to the diachronic and synchronic conception of language, the opposition of *langue* and *parole*, the systematic nature of language, the social character of the language and the particular conception of the linguistic sign.

As regards the study of language, for Saussure there were two different possibilities of interpreting language: the diachronic and the synchronic. The diachronic method consisted of verifying the relationship of a certain linguistic phenomenon with what preceded and followed it in time. In this way, with the diachronic method, linguistic evolution could be clarified. On the other hand, it was also possible to study the state of the language at a certain moment in history; this was the synchronic method, whose objective was to explain the relationships between phenomena that appeared at the same time, one next to the other. Each of these methods was scientific and could bring positive results, since each of the linguistic phenomena was characterized, on the one hand, by its evolution and, on the other hand, by the relationship it had with the other phenomena that surrounded it in the given moment.

Another linguistic theory that Saussure put forward was that of the dichotomy that existed between *langue* and *parole*. For him, the language constituted the system of all the rules that had to be respected by all the speakers of the linguistic community; it was an abstract system of accepted conventional rules. The language, therefore, was the property of the entire speaking community and had a social character. The *parole*, for its part, was an individual phenomenon, an authentic and concrete communication emitted by an individual at a given moment. Of course, the speaker was only able to formulate it knowing and respecting the rules of the system, that is, of the language.

In the same way as the synchrony/diachrony opposition, the language/speech opposition constituted a dialectical unit of two contradictory members. A concrete communication (*parole*) could not be imagined without the existence of the language system (*langue*), since only if the system of conventional rules was respected could communication take place between individual speakers. But neither could the language system be imagined otherwise than from abstractions of individual acts of communication. It followed that language and speech were interdependent and that it was not possible to separate them mechanically.

Regarding Saussure's conception of the systematic or structural character of language, he argued that language constituted a system of signs whose value did not depend on their forms, but on the reciprocal relationship between them. Therefore, each linguistic phenomenon could be defined not with the help of its physical properties or on the basis of other non-linguistic factors, but through its function, that is, of the relationship that united it with the other linguistic phenomena. From this Saussure drew the conclusion that language was no substance, but form.

Saussure also distinguished two fundamental classes of relationships that existed between linguistic signs: syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. The value of each of the signs was derived, on the one hand, from the relationship that existed with the other parts of the enunciation and, on the other hand, from the relationship it had with other linguistic signs, which could substitute it since they had something in common or contrary to him.

If we now focus on the social character that language had for Saussure, we must point out that for him language was conceived as a practical instrument at the service of communication between people and, for the study of its functioning in this context, he created a science he called semiology. In this way, linguistics was classified among the social sciences, separating itself from the theories that wanted to see a living organism in language, whose study had to be carried out by the natural sciences.

Referring now to Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign, the first thing he pointed out is that it was an arbitrary union of two components, which he called the concept and the acoustic image. For Saussure it was not a question of uniting an object with a word, as it was for Plato, but of differentiating two components of a psychic character that we're united in our mind with the help of associations. In this way, the acoustic image was not conceived as a purely physical sound, but as a reflection or imprint in our brain. The second component of the sign, the concept, was even more abstract since it did not exist a priori, but was formed at the same time as the acoustic image. Thus, the first characteristic of the linguistic sign is that the components that formed it were indivisible and inseparable. Saussure compared the two components of the linguistic sign with the two sides of a sheet of paper; when cutting the paper with scissors, the two components were modified at the same time and in the same way.

The second fundamental property of the linguistic sign for Saussure was that of its linear character. The enunciation was carried out in time and from this, it followed that two linguistic signs could not appear at the same time, but that it was essential to order the signs of the enunciation successively one after the other. The third property of the linguistic sign was its discontinuity or discrete character. According to this theory, the phonic material of the language itself was amorphous. Only through the union of a specific number of ordered sounds of a specific language with a specific segment was the linguistic sign formed. This was made up of discrete units that functioned by presence or absence. Unlike extralinguistic reality, which was registered in our brain as a continuum, the linguistic sign always designated a precise part of that reality.

Finally, the fourth characteristic feature was that of its immutability and mutability. The signifier being freely chosen in relation to the idea it represented, in relation to the linguistic community that used it, it was imposed, not free. Not only was an individual incapable of modifying the choice of that signifier, but also the mass was tied to the language; thus the linguistic sign was beyond our control. At the same time, it was mutable since time, which ensured the continuity of the language, had another effect, apparently contradictory to the first, that of altering linguistic signs more or less rapidly.

Conclusions

After having carried out this research work, it has become clear that the linguistic theories coined by Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the 20th century, especially that of the linguistic sign, had their origin in the historical trend that has been dedicated to studying linguistics from its philosophical perspective -logic. It had its first representatives in the Greek philosophers and reached the Genevan author after a long speculative process in which the contributions of scholasticism, El Brocense, the General and Reasoned Grammar of Port-Royal, of the Kazan and Russian language schools and the American linguist WD Whitney.

And, with all this substrate, it was Ferdinand de Saussure who conceived the linguistic theories that became the basis of all modern language studies, whether they were continuous (structuralists) or deviationists (generativists). Among all of them, he highlighted his theory of the linguistic sign and his creation of science such as semiology. In addition, the extraordinary thing about Saussurean theories is

that they not only stuck to the linguistic field but were also applied to other social sciences, especially anthropology, literary science, and philosophy.

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