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Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest

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Abstract This essay highlights certain limitations in the way the so-called 'linguistic turn' became prominent in philosophy throughout the twentieth century. In particular, in line with the pragmatist approach – especially that of John Dewey – it emphasises the importance of the relationship between language and experience. The main aim is to show that those philosophical traditions which focus either on experience (such as phenomenology) or on language (such as analytic philosophy) overlook the most crucial point: namely, what language and experience owe each other, as well as their rootedness in a shared natural and social foundation.

Keywords Pragmatism. Linguistic Turn. Language. Experience. Communication.

Summary 1 Language and Experience. – 2 Two Typical (and Major) Misunderstandings. – 3 Language and Communication. – 4 Language and Social Action.

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> If we had not talked with others and they with us, we should never talk to and with ourselves. Because of converse, social give and take, various organic attitudes become an assemblage of persons engaged in converse, conferring with one another, exchanging distinctive experiences, listening to one another, over-hearing unwelcome remarks, accusing and excusing. Through speech a person dramatically identifies himself with potential acts and deeds; he plays many rôles, not in successive stages of life but in a contemporaneously enacted drama.
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> John Dewey, *Nature and Experience*, Chapter V

The 'linguistic turn' has enabled philosophy to better understand what it owes to language, and what language implies for individual and common experience, while also suggesting a better approach to the issues later taken up by the philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences.[1] These advances, generally taken for granted, have come at a price. Questions specific to the social field, whether they actually concern life in common or what takes shape within it, have largely faded into the background. No doubt, the renewed interest in language had the – very indirect – consequence of steering political philosophy in new directions, but the presumed effects remained quite marginal.[2] Pragmatism – whose origins lie in Peirce, for whom language plays a leading role – has undergone, so to speak, a renewal, as evidenced by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, among others.[3] But once again, one thing does not come without the other: the counterpart to this has been the discredit into which the notion of experience has fallen, along with what it enabled us to articulate precisely on a social level and in terms of relationships with the environment.

I do not intend to continue this dual assessment of gains and losses. Instead, I would like to take a slight step aside in order to see how the question of language has been posed in pragmatist philosophy, rather than closely following the evidence that the adherents of the 'linguistic turn' have helped to disseminate. My guiding principle will be the following: a reflection on the role of language in pragmatist naturalism not only makes it possible to show that it has never

1 Cf. Rorty 1992. Let us recall what Rorty means by 'linguistic turn': "the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (1992, 3).

2 One example is the benefit that authors like Habermas and Apel have drawn from Peirce, Wittgenstein, and philosophers like Austin. This influence is less evident in the case of authors like J. Rawls, although we certainly owe to him one of the books that most shaped philosophical and political debates in the final years of the twentieth century.

3 This is one of the things that distinguishes classical pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. Rorty and Putnam may have undergone a pragmatist conversion, but they nonetheless incorporated part of the legacy of analytic philosophy and the linguistic turn. Their conceptions of language, particularly in Rorty's case, bear clear witness to this.

been underestimated, but also leads to a better assessment of its role and the resulting consequences for a social and political philosophy, and even for a philosophy of language. It is likely that I will not be able to carry out this task in its entirety. At the very least, however, I would like to establish a few milestones along the way. For reasons of obvious convenience, but also because his work most clearly illustrates the perspectives I have in view, I will focus on what a reading of John Dewey suggests.

1 Language and Experience

Richard Rorty, who is largely responsible for the renewal of pragmatism and the renewed interest in Dewey's work, considered the notion of *experience* to be one of the remnants rendered obsolete by the 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1982).[4] He believed that was that Dewey's emphasis on experience had distracted him from what a more thorough reflection on language would have allowed him to understand (Rorty 1982).[5] This (critical) position raises several issues that I alluded to at the beginning, particularly with regard to the Darwinian-type *continuity* that the notion of experience, in Dewey's sense, was tasked with legitimising, as well as the conditions it provides for a conception of culture and political institutions that privileges *social action*.[6] More simply, however, anyone who pays slightly more attention than usual to what Dewey wrote on this subject will see that this position is exaggerated, if not unjustified. We might thus be motivated to set the record straight and show that Dewey did not at all ignore the importance of language for all the problems that this importance generally leads us to consider. It seems to me, however, that there are better ways to spend one's time than donning the costume of Zorro in this way, because the polarity of *language* and *experience*, so often invoked, appears to mask – here to the benefit of language – an aspect of the philosophy of language that is the source of many misunderstandings; and precisely the kind of interest that Dewey actually had in language is of a nature to rid us of it.

4 "Throughout his life," writes Rorty, "[Dewey] wavered between a therapeutic stance toward philosophy and another, quite different, stance – one in which philosophy was to become 'scientific'" (Rorty 1982, 73). Dewey was mistaken in choosing the latter direction.

5 Rorty observes that Dewey himself seems to have become aware of this while writing the preface to the second edition of *Experience and Nature*. At that point, Dewey was led to believe that the word 'culture' would be a useful replacement for 'experience' and would avoid the many drawbacks associated with the latter.

6 Cf. Dewey 1981 and 2007.

The writings and reflections that are likely to convince us of this are scattered throughout Dewey's entire body of work; they weave a tight web of concepts that ensure its coherence, and which I cannot hope to encompass.[7] The simplest approach, then, is to quickly examine one of the texts in which the specificity of Dewey's reflection on language emerges most clearly. This is Chapter V of his 1925 book *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1981).

In this chapter, as can be seen from the lines I have included as an epigraph, Dewey attempts to highlight the role of language in communication between humans – which is, admittedly, not a very original idea. However, he tries above all to show how language (the human faculty of using 'sounds' that carry meanings, as well as those meanings themselves) is structured around modes of interaction that find in it a complementary and effective means, and without which there would be neither 'meanings' nor 'language'.[8] This aspect of Dewey's reflection is important for several reasons that I would like to point out right away. Firstly, this approach is what allows us to conceive what links the *processes* of adaptation inherent in life (nature) to the more specifically social *processes* of interaction (culture), and to think about their *continuity* (the naturalistic hypothesis). Secondly, this approach, because it does not dissociate language from these interactions, dissociates communication from language, in the sense that the former does not have its exclusive condition in language. As we shall see, this leads to a philosophy of language that is entirely different from those that have prevailed in linguistics and philosophy, across all currents.[9] (But let us begin by) Let's briefly focus on these two points.

The analyses of language proposed in *Experience and Nature* constitute a complement to and deepening of earlier work in psychology. In this latter field, Dewey is an *experimentalist*; his psychology and his reflection on psychology were oppose to 'mentalism', but also differ just as markedly from what would later develop from a study of

7 The reason for this lies notably in the fact that language processing is not separate from the processing of experience, nor from the notion of belief (and habit) which is also involved in it, etc.

8 "The heart of language is not 'expression' of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes. […] Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects" (Dewey 1981, 141).

9 This remark concerns linguistic structuralism in particular, what structuralist or neo-structuralist philosophers have drawn from it, and – in the Anglosphere more specifically – the philosophies stemming from the 'linguistic turn' or related philosophies, from Carnap to Dummett. [To be specified]

'behaviour'.[10] As is clearly shown in one of his most important writings on the subject, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) (Dewey 1972), the relation that behaviourists such as Watson would conceive according to the model of the simple S-R (stimulus-response) relation, driven by the ambition to guarantee scientificity, is only intelligible within the framework of relations with the environment that encompass the relation in question, the agents involved ('human' or 'non-human'), and the interactions that occur between them always under particular conditions. In "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" Dewey proposes an analysis of these interactions that makes behaviour dependent both on the *effects* induced by the factors or behaviours with which they come into relation, and on the reactions that these effects produce in return, due to what can be anticipated from them (see more precisely).[11] This interactionist model illustrates what the proposed understanding owes to Darwinism, as opposed to the empiricist (and mechanistic) schemes that have also shaped psychology.[12] The model notably provides an idea of the changes brought about by Darwinism, from the perspective of the modes of intelligibility it has imposed on attention. What is remarkable about this is particularly reflected in what Dewey draws from it regarding the status of 'meanings'. Unlike the empiricists, such as Locke, who viewed words as labels ('marks'), for Dewey, meanings are constructed within the exchanges that prefigure social interactions, so that they are inseparable from them, and find in language a condition without which they would not go beyond the 'primitive' stage at which we can imagine them to have emerged.

I am aware of what objections this kind of perspective can give raise to. It is not necessary, however, to conceive of all this in terms of anteriority or origin. It is sufficient – from a purely conceptual standpoint – to consider that the 'interactions' linking the biological and the cultural, 'meanings' and 'language' constitute three interconnected yet autonomous components – we shall see why – of what

10 Within the framework of the Watsonian behaviourist current, according to the "stimulus-response" theory (John B. Watson, 1878-1958).

11 See Dewey 1972, 99: "[T]he reflex arc idea, as commonly employed, is defective in that it assumes sensory stimulus and motor response as distinct psychical existences, while in reality they are always inside a co-ordination and have their significance purely from the part played in maintaining or reconstituting the co-ordination; and (secondly) in assuming that the quale of experience which precedes the 'motor' phase and that which succeeds it are two different states […]. The result is that the reflex arc idea leaves us with a disjointed psychology, whether viewed from the standpoint of development in the individual or in the race, or from that of the analysis of the mature consciousness".

12 Dewey's often-claimed empiricism is here illuminated in a way that nonetheless distinguishes it from the empiricist current in the proper sense. I refer to my study on this subject (Cometti 2010) as well as to my introduction to the French translation of *Experience and Nature* (Cometti 2012).

to our eyes is usually encompassed by the sole notion of 'language'. The benefit of this view is immediately apparent: communication is not just a matter of language; language itself cannot be dissociated from the actions and interactions within which it operates, certainly as an 'instrument' of communication, but also of cooperative or concerted action – although at times of conflict, too.

Apart from a few differences, this point of view is that of Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*: the bricklayers whom he uses to illustrate the notion of 'language game' utter *words* clearly *coordinated* with what they are *doing* (in relation to tacit rules) and inseparable from it; words to which this 'game' is not reducible, and which enable them to carry out a common task together.

2 Two Typical (and Major) Misunderstandings

This brief evocation of the connections that bind language to experience – referring here to the relations constituted on the basis of the interactions involved in situations of which language is most of the time an element – leads to an understanding that clearly departs from the conceptions that the 'philosophy of language' – but also linguistics – has most often favoured (I may provide some examples and clarify this point in the conclusion). It provides specific insight into two forms of the misunderstanding to which our reflections on language are very often linked. A first misunderstanding – these two misunderstandings are symmetrical, for reasons that stem from their dualistic rooting – is thinking that there exits a regime or modality of 'meaning' that is independent of and prior to language. A second misunderstanding is the one that leads to including the whole range of constitutive conditions of communication, our 'worldviews', and the potentialities of the imagination within language – thereby endowing it with all the virtues or all the faults, depending on one's perspective. Phenomenology, to take just one example, has fallen prey to the first misunderstanding and has even extensively cultivated it; in contrast, analytical philosophy of language has favoured the second one, and I need hardly say that the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy has contributed greatly to this. In reality, by attributing too much weight to either language or (sensory) experience, we ignore what they owe each other, as well as their rootedness in a shared natural and social foundation.

In what way, then, are we really dealing with misunderstandings, and in what way do the reflections found in Dewey's work help to dispel them? The core of the misunderstanding, in both cases, essentially lies in a mistaken appreciation of language, over-detached from the social interactions of which it is but one element or component. Philosophy, drawing on a Humboldtian and Romantic inspiration and

furthered by post-Saussurean linguistics, has elevated 'the' language to a quasi-Platonic position, at least insofar as language has been credited with the power to determine thought and the forms of organisation of the world, which has practically assured it the function of a 'foundation'. This view of language owes much to a set of hypostases, foremost of which is the fate reserved for 'meaning', regarded as a system effect, along with a propositionalism that was rightly challenged by authors such as Wittgenstein, and later by Austin and the ordinary language philosophers (I will return to this).[13] A characteristic effect of this was the sequestration of the dimension to which aesthetics, since Baumgarten, owed its philosophical dignity. The sensible, the body, in many respects appear to be epiphenomena whose significance in our lives derives solely from the power of language. The efforts to rehabilitate the sensible, which have been developed – if not nearly unleashed – in response to this linguistic imperialism, would not have been possible without language's increased power.[14]

One might be tempted to think of Dewey as one of the valiant combatants who have distinguished themselves in this endeavour. One of the particularities – and by no means a minor one – of the notion of experience, in Dewey's sense, is precisely that it integrates the whole part of the sensible into the variety of relations that we have with each other and with our environment (cognitive, aesthetic, sentimental and emotional, of course, practical and linguistic).[15] Yet, if the stage is neither the brain nor thought nor language, then this apparently cursed part cannot be dissociated from it. This means that there is no basis on which to guarantee one actor a position of principle or original ground over another. Darwinian continuism stands in opposition to such a hypothesis, just as in reality it stands in opposition to all the dualisms that this debate ultimately only serves to illustrate. In reality, the question of knowing whether there exists an *original* instance of meaning and, if so, which one, is just one expression of the misunderstandings that creep into our reasoning when we attribute the status of causes to effects and detach the benefits of our analyses, including the distinctions they mobilise or presuppose,

13 The 'propositionalism' I have in mind is the view that language's functions are exhausted in the communication of propositional content. To some extent, this view – whether implicit or explicit – is bound up with a conception of meaning that Quine has characterised as a myth (cf. Quine 1962). The main source of this is the fact that the study of language, within the current that gave rise to analytic philosophy, focused on its logic or its role in logic and science.

14 This is one of the points of divergence between phenomenology and analytic philosophy.

15 Cf. Dewey 1981, as well as Dewey 1987.

from the conditions that enabled us to achieve them.[16] This type of displacement lies at the root of the dualisms that have contaminated our modes of thought, and of which 'language', as it has most often been conceived, is an expression.

In fact, contrary to what we might think, experience does not argue against 'the' language; rather, it invites us to understand that, in a certain sense – as Davidson provocatively put it, in a remark that was, to say the least, impactful – "there is no such thing as language" (2005b, 107), as philosophy or linguistic theories have elaborated the notion.[17] Assertions of this kind are not to be found in Dewey's work, but the reflections he devoted to this question seem to me to point entirely in the same direction.

As a result, one can understand why it is difficult to speak of a 'philosophy of language' in Dewey's case. Just as a Wittgensteinian would more readily speak of 'language games' to clearly emphasise that 'the' language is a fiction, albeit a convenient one,[18] so too would a consistent pragmatist philosopher more readily speak of language as an 'instrument' (*horribile dictu* for a very great number of linguists, first and foremost the 'structuralists'), which is always associated with other instruments in contexts of interaction, whose modalities of interlocution obviously form a part of them.[19]

Let us suppose, then, that these two misunderstandings have been dispelled, and see what the benefits are.

16 Cf. Dewey 1981, Chapter I "Experience and philosophic method": "Philosophy, thinking at large, allows itself to be diverted into absurd search for an intellectual philosopher's stone of absolutely wholesale generalizations, thus isolating that which is permanent in a function and for a purpose, and converting it into the intrinsically eternal, conceived either (as Aristotle conceived it) as that which is the same at all times, or as that which is indifferent to time, out of time" (33). And again: "Three sources of large fallacies have been mentioned, each containing within itself many more sub-varieties than have been hinted at. The three are the complete separation of subject and object, (of *what* is experienced from *how* it is experienced); the exaggeration of the features of known objects at the expense of the qualities of objects of enjoyment and trouble, friendship and human association, art and industry; and the exclusive isolation of the results of various types of selective simplification which are undertaken for diverse unavowed purposes" (36).

17 Davidson 2005a, 107: "[T]here is no such thing as language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure that language-users acquire and then apply to cases".

18 Cf. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) in which Wittgenstein compares language to a city.

19 This is Davidson's thesis in "The Social Aspect of Language". Davidson writes: "I have argued that sharing such a previously mastered ability was neither necessary nor sufficient for successful linguistic communication. I held (and hold) that the linguistic skills people typically bring to conversational occasions can and do differ considerably, but mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and an awareness of human interests and attitudes" (2005b, 110).

3 Language and Communication

The first noticeable consequence concerns communication. Language plays a role, probably a major role; it certainly contributes to shaping our thinking, our beliefs and our behaviour, since it is an integral part of them; but it is not a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition for communication (Davidson 2005b, 110). The conditions of communication are *social* – they are formed through interaction – and language itself is subordinate to them.[20] This distinction is important for understanding the nature of the learning processes that the use of language entails, and the very fact that our language is *learned*; it is also important in view of the variety of cases in which communication occurs without the aid of language, or at least of what has been learned as such; it is equally valuable for those who really want to understand the role of language in the history of changes, and even upheavals, that take place in common (or individual) forms of life, not to mention the evolution of linguistic practices themselves.

How could we learn to speak if we had to rely on the resources of language alone? We would come up against much the same kind of difficulty as we did with the 'origins' of language.[21] Undoubtedly, one must master the rudiments of a language to learn the meaning of a word on the basis of ostension, but learning these rudiments occurs in conditions of communication that involve 'situations' of interaction. As Quine suggested in *Word and Object*, with regard to our own language we are in a situation of radical translation[22] (or

20 This is one of the benefits of Chapter V of *Experience and Nature*. It argues in favour of a thesis that goes hand in hand with Davidson's. Dewey writes: "Language is specifically a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a speaker and a hearer; it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech. It is therefore a relationship, not a particularity. This consideration alone condemns traditional nominalism. The meaning of signs moreover always includes something common as between persons and an object. When we attribute meaning to the speaker as *his* intent, we take for granted another person who is to share in the execution of the intent, and also something, independent of the persons concerned, through which the intent is to be realized. Persons and thing must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence. This community of partaking is meaning" (1981, 145-6). Rorty is right to write in reference to Davidson and mentioning Dewey's name: "This Davidsonian way of looking at language lets us avoid hypostatizing Language […]. For it lets us see language not as a *tertium quid* between Subject and Object […], but as part of the behavior of human beings. On this view, the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment" (Rorty 1982, xviii).

21 In other words, against a similar circle, since one would already need a language to learn language.

22 Cf. Quine 2013. The 'radical translation' hypothesis assumes the lack of any data other than behavioural data. In a situation of 'radical translation', the only available concept of meaning is that of 'stimulus meaning'; this forms the basis on which the linguist can compile a dictionary. However, guarantees related to such a concept only

radical 'interpretation'), which implies that the mastery of a language is learned from communication situations that cannot be exclusively linguistic, for otherwise one would have to imagine the possibility of one-to-one correspondence systems between languages – something that both common sense and the indeterminacy of translation rule out.

What we learn are rules, but these rules are learned through use, and the correctness of their application is essentially verified through our understanding of them based on (public) criteria that cannot be linguistic either (Wittgenstein 2009);[23] otherwise, we would have to accept a sort of autistic conception of language, whereby we would learn to master a language by a sort of ingestion, apply its rules by uttering sentences that would strictly conform to them, and could only be sure of the correctness of these applications through what the rules of language allow us to establish – to say! I don't even know what that would lead to, but it is absurd. Language is intertwined with the situations in which individuals interact with one another in a multitude of ways – in relation to objects, events and a shared world – and that is why they can learn something from it, and above all, understand one another.

It is because things happen in this way that language is neither a closed universe nor a necessary and sufficient condition for communication; quite the contrary, since in a sense it is communication that is the condition of language. One might well ask what communication without language would be like. It is clear that most communication situations are situations of verbal exchange. In standard cases, it is knowledge of the *same* words and the *same* rules that provides speakers with the possibility of understanding each other.[24] That is what language is for. But this simple possibility presupposes a number of

concern observational sentences. Therefore, the situation of 'radical translation' brings to light the 'indeterminacy of translation' and the 'inscrutability of reference'. "Understanding a sentence means understanding a language". In a situation of radical translation, indeed, no one can assign a unique reference to a word. Besides, no translation manual can claim exclusivity. Several translation manuals are possible for the same language, all of which are equally satisfactory with respect to the needs they are intended to meet. Furthermore, contrary to what one might be tempted to believe, such findings do not concern only the relations between distinct languages. As Quine says, "radical translation begins at home" (1969, 46).

23 One overlooked point is that the question of knowing whether a rule is being followed correctly is not merely resolved in a 'public' (as opposed to private) manner, but within a context that allows one to 'make the difference', in the pragmatist sense of the term. And this excludes that the assessment could take place solely in thought, or even solely in language, if that idea has any meaning at all.

24 Cf. Davidson 2005b. Dewey also writes: "The meaning of signs moreover always includes something common as between persons and an object. When we attribute meaning to the speaker as his intent, we take for granted another person who is to share in the execution of the intent, and also something, independent of the persons concerned,

other conditions, which are equally common, starting with a shared background; moreover, the fact that language plays the role of an instrument – no doubt essential in most cases – does not mean that it alone fulfils all functions. It may well be a necessary condition, but it is certainly not *sufficient*.[25]

It is not even certain that it fulfils the role of a necessary condition. One aspect of Dewey's aforementioned analysis of the relationship between language and experience – that is, the interactions associated with meanings – is that, no matter what scope we give it, language serves to reinforce something that is outlined as a process of communication without properly constituting it. Certain situations that we do not usually pay enough attention to are likely to shed light on this point. These are situations where understanding is not compromised, despite the application of the rule being faulty. Literature and poetry offer countless examples of this, as do humour, slips of the tongue, and witticisms more generally.[26] How is it that I understand or can understand sentences that clearly and sometimes radically transgress the rules of the languages we master and which we assume to be a condition for communication? It's simple. These transgressions simply show us that the condition does not lie in these rules, even though learning them most often fulfils these conditions. In reality, in such cases, the learning in question serves somewhat as a backdrop to the whole set of 'extra-linguistic' conditions involved in language and its rules, and these conditions make up for the gaps or transgressions to which language falls victim.

Despite what appears to stand in its way, what the effectiveness of communication suggests in these cases is that communication does

through which the intent is to be realized. Persons and thing must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence" (1981, 145-6).

25 As Dewey rightly suggests in the above-quoted passage, the factors involved in a communication situation go beyond the strictly linguistic components.

26 These are all deviations from the rules of language, especially when they are not the result of chance, error, or ignorance of the rules. See Davidson 2005b, 115: "Even during a conversation, each is apt to use words the other did not know before the conversation began, and so cannot belong to a practice he speakers share in detail; here I think particularly of names and of words new to the vocabulary of one or the other speaker. Then there are malapropisms which are nevertheless understood, slips of the tongue, and all the 'errors', as we think of them, that we would not normally commit ourselves […]. These are often part of the practice of one speaker but not of another, but communication does not suffer […]. We have no trouble following the conversation of a child who says 'He wented to the shop' and who generally forms the past tense according to a rule which is not part of the 'language'. Actual cases grow rarer as they grow more extreme, but more extreme cases certainly exist. People who speak dialects of what we call the same language may not at first be able to make anything of what the other says; after they learn to understand each other, each may continue to speak in his own way, just as I have learned to answer letters in German, Spanish, and French in English".

not depend on it, or at least not exclusively. This becomes even more convincing when we also recall that in language, there is not *just* language, but also a whole set of aspects or functions that play a role in communication without being exclusively cognitive or propositional in nature. Since Austin, ordinary language philosophies and pragmatic theories have provided decisive insights into this point. A sentence does not enter the process of communication bearing only its semantic (propositional) content; it also carries an illocutionary force, which notably contributes to the conditions under which it will be understood by a listener; context and situation also contribute, which ultimately means: 1) that the criterion of communication lies in *understanding*; 2) that understanding is not only a function (of the rules) of language – sometimes it may not even depend on them at all; 3) that language is therefore not the only factor in communication. As a result, it is perhaps easier to grasp why and how changes in language can occur, and how they can contribute to changes in ways or forms of life. This is an important point that enables us to revisit one of the points addressed at the beginning, namely the contrast between the philosophies stemming from the 'linguistic turn' and John Dewey's philosophy of experience, with greater clarity.

4 Language and Social Action

Richard Rorty is the main protagonist of this story. Rorty's view of language led him to make it a decisive element of his philosophy, in line with the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, from whom he also borrowed an essentially critical (therapeutic) view of philosophy. This inspiration distinguishes him from Dewey's thought and ambitions of construction and reconstruction. In this respect, Rorty criticises Dewey for pursuing quasi-metaphysical goals and losing his way in some of the impasses he was trying to neutralise (cf. Rorty 1982). It would take a long time to analyse the ins and outs of what distinguishes Rorty and Dewey (although the former claims to follow the latter); it is clear, however, that their belonging to distinct and distant philosophical horizons constitutes one of the elements. This is why I considered it appropriate to insist from the outset on the importance of the 'linguistic turn', of which Rorty is obviously an heir.

For Rorty, as for Wittgenstein (at least on the surface), philosophical questions originate in language and, therefore, in our 'grammatical confusions'. Like Dewey, Rorty believes that the dualisms running through the history of philosophy, much like our language (its grammar), need to be defused; but while Dewey believed that this depended on a multitude of factors that were not exclusively linguistic – far from it – Rorty often gives the impression that he believes it is a matter of 'vocabulary', i.e. of language (see, for example, Rorty

1989). This is true not only of philosophical questions, but also of the ills affecting the state of the world, which can hopefully be changed only by 'changing the vocabulary'.

Of course, Rorty was aware that this could not be attributed solely to the power of a magic wand, but his attitude nonetheless consisted in attributing to words (to language) a power that Dewey never granted them because he was much more attentive to the conditions, both natural and social, in which language exerts its effects. On the contrary, Dewey would probably not have disputed the powers of words over our ways of thinking and, consequently, our beliefs, habits, representations, and behaviour. The grammar of our language, in the Wittgensteinian sense, plays an undeniable role in this respect. The language we use to express ourselves is never innocent and always has an effect. Without looking far for examples, the popularity – in French – of verbs such as 'réguler', 'gérer', and 'négocier' or nouns such as 'opportunité', in a wide variety of contexts, including intimate matters, helps to shape our desires, our thinking, and our behaviour in a way that accords with the inherent aims of commerce, competition, and the individual adapted to them. *Homo liberalis* has his own language, and this language contributes to the ends and interests it serves. Would a change in 'vocabulary' be enough to change this state of affairs? Of course not. If this state of affairs evolves, if our ways of life move away from those favoured by the powers of money today, or if they abandon them, we will change our language. We may return to vocabularies that we have abandoned and allow more freedom to the imagination, but these changes will follow or accompany processes that will be played out simultaneously on a different social, economic, and political stages.

To me, these simple considerations seem to draw a distinction between some of the major shortcomings of the philosophy of language and a conception, like Dewey's, that gives way neither to the reification of language nor to its magic. Language is far too important for that (and perhaps too important to be left solely in the hands of specialists, since it is our common good).

Insofar as the position I have tried to make explicit is intended to characterise a pragmatist conception of language (which is substantially deflationary), one might be tempted to see it as comparable to the conceptions mentioned from time to time under the heading of 'pragmatics'.[27] A pragmatics of language in fact differs from the conceptions that I have undertaken to criticise in light of Dewey's suggestions by emphasising what makes language depend, in a

27 Centred on the notion of the *speech act*. Today, pragmatics encompasses a wide variety of works that are only distantly related to pragmatism. In any case, the philosophical sources are different. The starting point is the work of John Austin and Paul Grice.

communicative context, on a set of factors relating to utterance and the contexts of utterance. Insofar as pragmatism places language in light of conditions of that kind, we might be tempted to think that pragmatism is part of such an attempt. There are, however, important differences between 'pragmatics' and 'pragmatism'. Pragmatist philosophers are not specifically interested in the conditions that informs the uses of language, even though for them the consideration of *uses* takes precedence over that of language as a *system*.[28] But above all, as in Dewey's case, they are primarily concerned with highlighting the conditions and social components, in continuity with the processes rooted in the phenomena of life. This is a very different perspective.

The main target, in any case, is a view that comes up against the question of the role of language in communication, as if it were a persistent difficulty (how to explain that very substantial deviations from ordinary use can nevertheless not completely compromise communication?), and that of *change* (how to explain that what seems to be subordinate to rules can, once again, deviate from them and lead to new rules?).

Strangely enough, these two questions – to which, I believe, Dewey's philosophy provides an answer for reasons I have partly outlined – receive a very similar response from Donald Davidson, at least on what seems to me to be the essential point. For Davidson (as for Dewey), communication is one thing, language is another.[29] To master a language is to master a set of learned rules – to know how to apply them. The criteria for this are public (but they are not linguistic in nature; rather, the fact of following a rule is assessed in a context of action or related conditions). But the rules do not operate mechanically and communication (understanding) is not entirely subordinate to them. The conditions of communication are social, and while this simple consideration may not be enough to explain changes in language or society, it at least makes the possibility conceivable. If language and its rules were not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for communication, we would find it impossible to think about it. If we add to this the fact that one of the major concerns of Dewey and his philosophy was to think about change and, above all, to preserve and think about the possibility of it, we can admit that the principles on which the philosophy and theories of language are based were unlikely to be found in his writings, so much do they go

28 Language, says Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, is "the tool of tools" (Dewey 1981, 134, 146).

29 It is not that they have nothing to do with each other; rather, the former is not reducible to the latter: "[There are] clear reasons to doubt that language, if language is taken to imply shared ways of speaking, is essential [to human communication]" (Davidson 2005b, 15).

against the grain of what he never ceased to denounce in philosophy.[30] The study of language is the study of our verbal, linguistic practices; the rules that make it possible to describe regularities are not 'laws' in relation to which utterances (*la parole*) are instances or occurrences – so much so that it has been said that language speaks through us.[31] As Davidson wrote:

> Those who insist that shared practices are essential to meaning are half right: there must be an interacting group for meaning—even propositional thought, I would say—to emerge. Interaction of the needed sort demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment much as he does; only then can teaching take place and appropriate expectations be aroused. It follows that meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared. (2005b, 125)

30 The Parmenidean tendency within the metaphysical tradition is one of the main objects of Dewey's analysis in *Experience and Nature*. On this subject, Dewey writes, for example: "[T]he thoroughgoing way in which Aristotle defined, distinguished and classified rest and movement, the finished and the incomplete, the actual and potential, did more to fix tradition, *the* genteel tradition one is tempted to add, which identifies the fixed and regular with reality of Being and the changing and hazardous with deficiency of Being than ever was accomplished by those who took the shorter path of asserting that change is illusory" (1981, 48).

31 This idea has accompanied the adherence to structuralism in linguistics as much as in philosophy, in conjunction with challenges to the notion of the subject.

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