

Benveniste

CRITICAL

THEORY

SINCE

1965

EDITED BY

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& LEROY SEARLE

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ORDERS for books published by all member presses should be addressed to University Presses of Florida, 15 NW 15th Street, Gainesville, FL 32603.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Critical theory since 1985.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Criticism. 2. Aesthetics. 3. Semiotics.

4. Discourse analysis. I. Adams, Hazard, 1926--

II. Searle, Leroy.

PN94.C75 1986 801'.95 86-13216

ISBN 0-8130-0844-1

Printed in the U.S.A. on acid-free paper ∞  
Typography by G&S Typesetters, Austin, Texas

# Emile Benveniste

1902–1976

THE COLLECTION of Emile Benveniste's essays in linguistics written from the thirties to the late fifties covers a variety of subjects, from consideration of Aristotle to the relation of the behavior of bees to language. The two essays printed here, one published in 1939 and one in 1958, have in common a concern for the question of the referent. In "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," Benveniste points out that there is a fruitful contradiction in *de Saussure's* idea of the sign. On the one hand, de Saussure regards the sign as containing an arbitrary relation of signifier to signified. Yet at the same time he tacitly admits that the French and German words for ox apply to the same "reality" or referent. Benveniste's point about de Saussure is that there is a tacit notion of a referent present after all. The very arbitrariness on which de Saussure insists is dependent on the presence of the real object to which two entirely different signs refer. Furthermore, the sound image, or signifier, and the signified are inextricably one and can hardly be regarded as in an arbitrary relation if it is not possible to think the concept apart from the word, as de Saussure avers.

Clearly Benveniste thinks of language as fundamental to thought. In "Subjectivity in Language" he pursues this notion further by making a distinction between language and speech; by the latter term he means communication. His point is that communication is a property of language but not its fundamental nature or essence. Language is "constituent" and constitutes man as subject. The "I" of discourse is a linguistic creation, the polarity of "I-you" a product of language, prior to communication, which must be, one supposes, a consequence of it. It is Benveniste's view that the "I" and the other are dependent on each other and are nothing apart from this opposition, that reality is linguistically constituted as dialectical.

One sees in Benveniste an approach to linguistics more philosophically oriented than that of his predecessor de Saussure. There are obviously links between him and the earlier neo-Kantians back to Wilhelm von Humboldt. In his discussion of verbs in the later part of "Subjectivity in Language" one detects an affinity with the speech-act theorizing of J. L. Austin and John Searle.

Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics*, a translation of his major essays, appeared in English in 1971. Untranslated works include *Origine de la formation des noms en indo-européen* (1935); *Nom d'agent et noms d'actions en indo-européen* (1948); *Hittite et indo-européen* (1962); and *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européen* (1969–70). Despite considerable reference to him by recent literary theorists, little has been written about Benveniste's work, though remarks by him are quoted as authoritative in such works as Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature* (1974) and Edward W. Said's *Beginnings* (1975).

## THE NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

The idea of the linguistic sign, which is today asserted or implied in most works of general linguistics, came from Ferdinand de Saussure. And it was as an obvious truth, not yet explicit but nevertheless undeniable in fact, that Saussure taught that the nature of the sign is *arbitrary*. The formula immediately commanded attention. Every utterance concerning the essence of language or the modalities of discourse begins with a statement of the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign. The principle is of such significance that any thinking bearing upon any part of linguistics whatsoever necessarily encounters it. That it is cited everywhere and always granted as obvious are two good reasons for seeking at least to understand the sense in which Saussure took it and the nature of the proofs which show it.

In the *Cours de linguistique générale*,<sup>1</sup> this definition is explained in very simple statements. One calls *sign* "the total resultant of the association of a signifier [=sound image] and what is signified [=concept] . . ." "The idea of 'sister' is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds *s-ö-r* which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified 'ox' has as its signifier *b-ö-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* (Ochs) on the other." This ought to establish that "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," or, more simply, that "the linguistic sign is arbitrary." By "arbitrary," the author means that "it is *unmotivated*, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified." This characteristic ought then to explain the very fact by which it is verified: namely, that expressions of a given notion vary in time and space and in consequence have no necessary relationship with it.

THE NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN originally appeared in *Acta Linguistica* (Copenhagen, 1939). Reprinted from *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, by permission of the University of Miami Press, © 1971.

<sup>1</sup>See *de Saussure*. [Eds.]

We do not contemplate discussing this conclusion in the name of other principles or by starting with different definitions. The question is whether it is consistent and whether, having accepted the bipartite nature of the sign (and we do accept it), it follows that the sign should be characterized as arbitrary. It has just been that Saussure took the linguistic sign to be made up of a signifier and signified. Now—and this is essential—he meant by "signifier," the *concept*. He declared in so many words that the "linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image." But immediately afterward he stated that the nature of the sign is arbitrary because it "actually has no natural connection with the signified." It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term which was not included in the initial definition. This third term is the *thing itself*, the reality. Even though Saussure said that the idea of "sister" is not connected to the signifier *s-ö-r*, he was not thinking any the less of the *reality* of the notion. When he spoke of the difference between *b-ö-f* and *o-k-s*, he was referring in spite of himself to the fact that these two terms applied to the same *reality*. Here, then, is the *thing*, expressly excluded at first from the definition of the sign, now creeping into it by a detour, and permanently installing a contradiction there. For if one states in principle—and with reason—that language is *form*, not *substance*, it is necessary to admit—and Saussure asserted it plainly—that linguistics is exclusively a science of forms. Even more imperative is the necessity for leaving the "substance," *sister* or *ox*, outside the realm of the sign. Now it is only if one thinks of the animal *ox* in its concrete and "substantial" particularity, that one is justified in considering "arbitrary" the relationship between *böf* on the one hand and *oks* on the other to the same reality. There is thus a contradiction between the way in which Saussure defined the linguistic sign and the fundamental nature which he attributed to it.

Such an anomaly in Saussure's close reasoning does not seem to me to be imputable to a relaxation of his critical attention. I would see instead a distinctive trait of the historical and relativist thought of the end of the nineteenth century, an inclination often met with in the philosophical reflection of comparative thought. Different people react differently to the same phenomenon. The infinite diversity of attitudes and judgments leads to the consideration

sure. Whoever says system says arrangement or conformity of parts in a structure which transcends and explains its elements. Everything is so *necessary* in it that modifications of the whole and of details reciprocally condition one another. The relativity of values is the best proof that they depend closely upon one another in the synchrony of a system which is always being threatened, always being restored. The point is that all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference. Opposed to each other, they maintain themselves in a mutual relationship of necessity. An opposition is, owing to the force of circumstances, subtended by necessity, as it is necessity which gives shape to the opposition. If language is something other than a fortuitous conglomeration of erratic notions and sounds uttered at random, it is because necessity is inherent in its structure as in all structure.

It emerges, then, that the role of contingency inherent in language affects denomination insofar as denomination is a phonic symbol of reality and affects it in its relationship with reality. But the sign, the primordial element in the linguistic system, includes a signifier and a signified whose bond has to be recognized as *necessary*, these two components being consubstantially the same. *The absolute character of the linguistic sign* thus understood commands in its turn the dialectical *necessity* of values of constant opposition, and forms the structural principle of language. It is perhaps the best evidence of the fruitfulness of a doctrine that it can engender a contradiction which promotes it. In restoring the true nature of the sign in the internal conditioning of the system, we go beyond Saussure himself to affirm the rigor of Saussure's thought.

## SUBJECTIVITY IN LANGUAGE

If language is, as they say, the instrument of communication, to what does it owe this property? The question may cause surprise, as does everything that seems to challenge an obvious fact, but it is

SUBJECTIVITY IN LANGUAGE originally appeared in *Journal de psychologie* (1958). Reprinted from *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, by permission of the University of Miami Press, copyright 1971.

sometimes useful to require proof of the obvious. Two answers come to mind. The one would be that language is *in fact* employed as the instrument of communication, probably because men have not found a better or more effective way in which to communicate. This amounts to stating what one wishes to understand. One might also think of replying that language has such qualities as make it suited to serve as an instrument; it lends itself to transmitting what I entrust to it—an order, a question, an announcement—and it elicits from the interlocutor a behavior which is adequate each time. Developing a more technical aspect of this idea, one might add that the behavior of language admits of a behaviorist description, in terms of stimulus and response, from which one might draw conclusions as to the intermediary and instrumental nature of language. But is it really language of which we are speaking here? Are we not confusing it with discourse? If we posit that discourse is language put into action, and necessarily between partners, we show amidst the confusion, that we are begging the question, since the nature of this “instrument” is explained by its situation as an “instrument.” As for the role of transmission that language plays, one should not fail to observe, on the one hand, that this role can devolve upon nonlinguistic means—gestures and mimicry—and, on the other hand, that, in speaking here of an “instrument,” we are letting ourselves be deceived by certain processes of transmission which in human societies without exception come after language and imitate its functioning. All systems of signals, rudimentary or complex, are in this situation.

In fact, the comparison of language to an instrument—and it should necessarily be a material instrument for the comparison to even be comprehensible—must fill us with mistrust, as should every simplistic notion about language. To speak of an instrument is to put man and nature in opposition. The pick, the arrow, and the wheel are not in nature. They are fabrications. Language is in the nature of man, and he did not fabricate it. We are always inclined to that naïve concept of a primordial period in which a complete man discovered another one, equally complete, and between the two of them language was worked out little by little. This is pure fiction. We can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it. We shall never get back to man reduced to himself and exercising his wits to conceive of the exis-

*his is the man as  
knowing*

tence of another. It is a speaking man whom we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and language provides the very definition of man.

All the characteristics of language, its immaterial nature, its symbolic functioning, its articulated arrangement, the fact that it has *content*, are in themselves enough to render suspect this comparison of language to an instrument, which tends to dissociate the property of language from man. Certainly in everyday practice the give and take of speaking suggests an exchange, hence a "thing" which we exchange, and speaking seems thus to assume in instrumental or vehicular function which we are quick to hypostasize as an "object." But, once again, this role belongs to the individual act of speech.

Once this function is seen as belonging to the act of speech, it may be asked what predisposition accounts for the fact that the act of speech should have it. In order for speech to be the vehicle of "communication," it must be so enabled by language, of which it is only the actualization. Indeed, it is in language that we must search for the condition of this aptitude. It seems to us that it resides in a property of language barely visible under the evidence that conceals it, which only sketchily can we yet characterize.

It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of "ego" in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being.

The "subjectivity" we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as "subject." It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that that "subjectivity," whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. "Ego" is he who *says* "ego." That is where we see the foundation of "subjectivity," which is determined by the linguistic status of "person."

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you*

in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*. Here we see a principle whose consequences are to spread out in all directions. Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to "me," becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language, of which the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence. It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. This polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: "ego" always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to an "interior/exterior" opposition, and, at the same time, they are reversible. If we seek a parallel to this, we will not find it. The condition of man in language is unique.

And so the old antinomies of "I" and "the other," of the individual and society, fall. It is a duality which it is illegitimate and erroneous to reduce to a single primordial term, whether this unique term be the "I," which must be established in the individual's own consciousness in order to become accessible to that of the fellow human being, or whether it be, on the contrary, society, which as a totality would preexist the individual and from which the individual could only be disengaged gradually, in proportion to his acquisition of self-consciousness. It is in a dialectic reality that will incorporate the two terms and define them by mutual relationship that the linguistic basis of subjectivity is discovered.

But must this basis be linguistic? By what right does language establish the basis of subjectivity?

As a matter of fact, language is responsible for it in all its parts. Language is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise. We are of course talking of language in general, not simply of particular languages. But the concordant facts of particular languages give evidence for language. We shall give only a few of the most obvious examples.

The very terms we are using here, *I* and *you*, are not to be taken as figures but as linguistic forms in-

personal pronouns  
deixis

dicating "person." It is a remarkable fact—but who would notice it, since it is so familiar?—that the "personal pronouns" are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be. A language without the expression of person cannot be imagined. It can only happen that in certain languages, under certain circumstances, these "pronouns" are deliberately omitted; this is the case in most of the Far Eastern societies, in which a convention of politeness imposes the use of periphrases or of special forms between certain groups of individuals in order to replace the direct personal references. But these usages only serve to underline the value of the avoided forms; it is the implicit existence of these pronouns that gives social and cultural value to the substitutes imposed by class relationships.

Now these pronouns are distinguished from all other designations a language articulates in that *they do not refer to a concept or to an individual.*

There is no concept "I" that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept "tree" to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer. The "I," then, does not denominate any lexical entity. Could it then be said that *I* refers to a particular individual? If that were the case, a permanent contradiction would be admitted into language, and anarchy into its use. How could the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? We are in the presence of a class of words, the "personal pronouns," that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the "subject." And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.

Language is so organized that it permits each speaker to *appropriate to himself* an entire language by designating himself as *I*.

The personal pronouns provide the first step in this bringing out of subjectivity in language. Other classes of pronouns that share the same status depend in their turn upon these pronouns. These other classes are the indicators of *deixis*, the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the "subject" taken as referent: "this, here, now," and their numerous correlatives, "that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow," etc. They have in common the feature of being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the *I* which is proclaimed in the discourse.

It is easy to see that the domain of subjectivity is further expanded and must take over the expression of temporality. No matter what the type of language, there is everywhere to be observed a certain linguistic organization of the notion of time. It matters little whether this notion is marked in the inflection of the verb or by words of other classes (particles, adverbs, lexical variations, etc.); that is a matter of formal structure. In one way or another, a language always makes a distinction of "tenses"; whether it be a past and a future, separated by a "present," as in French [or English], or, as in various Amerindian languages, of a preterite-present opposed to a future, or a present-future distinguished from a past, these distinctions being in their turn capable of depending on variations of aspect, etc. But the line of separation is always a reference to the "present." Now this "present" in its turn has only a linguistic fact as temporal reference: the coincidence of the event described with the instance of discourse that describes it. The temporal referent of the present can only be internal to the discourse. The *Dictionnaire générale* defines the "present" as "le temps du verbe qui exprime le temps où l'on est." But let us beware of this; there is no other criterion and no other expression by which to indicate "the time at which one *is*" except to take it as "the time at which one *is speaking*." This is the eternally "present" moment, although it never relates to the same events of an "objective" chronology because it is determined for each speaker by each of the instances of discourse related to it. Linguistic time is

*self-referential*. Ultimately, human temporality with all its linguistic apparatus reveals the subjectivity inherent in the very using of language.

Language is accordingly the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth "empty" forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself and which he relates to his "person," at the same time defining himself as *I* and a partner as *you*. The instance of discourse is thus constitutive of all the coordinates that define the subject and of which we have briefly pointed out only the most obvious.

THE ESTABLISHMENT of "subjectivity" in language creates the category of person—both in language and also, we believe, outside of it as well. Moreover, it has quite varied effects in the very structure of languages, whether it be in the arrangement of the forms or in semantic relationships. Here we must necessarily have particular languages in view in order to illustrate some effects of the change of perspective which "subjectivity" can introduce. We cannot say what the range of the particular phenomena we are pointing out may be in the universe of real languages; for the moment it is less important to delimit them than to reveal them. English provides several convenient examples.

In a general way, when I use the present of a verb with three persons (to use the traditional nomenclature), it seems that the difference in person does not lead to any change of meaning in a conjugated verb form. *I eat*, *you eat*, and *he eats* have in common and as a constant that the verb form presents a description of an action, attributed respectively and in an identical fashion to "I," "you," and "he." Similarly, *I suffer*, *you suffer*, *he suffers* have the description of the same state in common. This gives the impression of being an obvious fact and even the formal alignment in the paradigm of the conjugation implies this.

Now a number of verbs do not have this permanence of meaning in the changing of persons, such as those verbs with which we denote dispositions or mental operations. In saying *I suffer*, I describe my present condition. In saying *I feel* (*that the weather*

*is going to change*), I describe an impression which I feel. But what happens if, instead of *I feel* (*that the weather is going to change*), I say *I believe* (*that the weather is going to change*)? The formal symmetry between *I feel* and *I believe* is complete. Is it so for the meaning? Can I consider *I believe* to be a description of myself of the same sort as *I feel*? Am I describing myself believing when I say *I believe* (*that . . .*)? Surely not. The operation of thought is not at all the object of the utterance; *I believe* (*that . . .*) is equivalent to a mitigated assertion. By saying *I believe* (*that . . .*), I convert into a subjective utterance the fact asserted impersonally, namely, *the weather is going to change*, which is the true proposition.

Let us consider further the following utterances: "You are Mr. X., *I suppose*." "*I presume* that John received my letter." "He has left the hospital, from which *I conclude* that he is cured." These sentences contain verbs that are verbs of operation: *suppose*, *presume*, and *conclude* are all logical operations. But *suppose*, *presume*, and *conclude*, put in the first person, do not behave the way, for example, *reason* and *reflect* do, which seem, however, to be very close. The forms *I reason* and *I reflect* describe me as reasoning and reflecting. Quite different are *I suppose*, *I presume*, and *I conclude*. In saying *I conclude* (*that . . .*), I do not describe myself as occupied in concluding; what could the activity of "concluding" be? I do not represent myself as being in the process of supposing and presuming when I say *I suppose*, *I presume*. *I conclude* indicates that, in the situation set forth, I extract a relationship of conclusion touching on a given fact. It is this logical relationship which is materialized in a personal verb. Similarly, *I suppose* and *I presume*, are very far from *I pose* and *I resume*. In *I suppose* and *I presume*, there is an indication of attitude, not a description of an operation. By including *I suppose* and *I presume* in my discourse, I imply that I am taking a certain attitude with regard to the utterance that follows. It will have been noted that all the verbs cited are followed by *that* and a proposition; this proposition is the real utterance, not the personal verb form that governs it. But on the other hand, that personal form is, one might say, the indicator of subjectivity. It gives the assertion that follows the subjective context—doubt, presumption, inference—suited to characterize the attitude of the



speaker with respect to the statement he is making. This manifestation of subjectivity does not stand out except in the first person. One can hardly imagine similar verbs in the second person except for taking up an argument again *verbatim*; thus, *you suppose that he has left* is only a way of repeating what "you" has just said: "*I suppose that he has left.*" But if one removes the expression of person, leaving only "*he supposes that . . .*," we no longer have, from the point of view of *I* who utters it, anything but a simple statement.

We will perceive the nature of this "subjectivity" even more clearly if we consider the effect on the meaning produced by changing the person of certain verbs of speaking. These are verbs that by their meaning denote an individual act of social import: *swear, promise, guarantee, certify*, with locutional variants like *pledge to . . . , commit (oneself) to . . .*. In the social conditions in which a language is exercised, the acts denoted by these verbs are regarded as binding. Now here the difference between the "subjective" utterance and the "nonsubjective" is fully apparent as soon as we notice the nature of the opposition between the "persons" of the verb. We must bear in mind that the "third person" is the form of the verbal (or pronominal) paradigm that does *not* refer to a person because it refers to an object located outside direct address. But it exists and is characterized only by its opposition to the person *I* of the speaker who, in uttering it, situates it as "non-person." Here is its status. The form *he . . .* takes its value from the fact that it is necessarily part of a discourse uttered by "I."

Now *I swear* is a form of peculiar value in that it

places the reality of the oath upon the one who says *I*. This utterance is a *performance*; "to swear" consists exactly of the utterance *I swear*, by which Ego is bound. The utterance *I swear* is the very act which pledges me, not the description of the act that I am performing. In saying *I promise, I guarantee*, I am actually making a promise or a guarantee. The consequences (social, judicial, etc.) of my swearing, of my promise, flow from the instance of discourse containing *I swear, I promise*. The utterance is identified with the act itself. But this condition is not given in the meaning of the verb, it is the "subjectivity" of discourse which makes it possible. The difference will be seen when *I swear* is replaced by *he swears*. While *I swear* is a pledge, *he swears* is simply a description, on the same plane as *he runs, he smokes*. Here it can be seen that, within the conditions belonging to these expressions, the same verb, according as it is assumed by a "subject" or is placed outside "person," takes on a different value. This is a consequence of the fact that the instance of discourse that contains the verb establishes the act at the same time that it sets up the subject. Hence the act is performed by the instance of the utterance of its "name" (which is "swear") at the same time that the subject is established by the instance of the utterance of its indicator (which is "I").

Many notions in linguistics, perhaps even in psychology, will appear in a different light if one re-establishes them within the framework of discourse. This is language in so far as it is taken over by the man who is speaking and within the condition of intersubjectivity, which alone makes linguistic communication possible.

discourse  
intersubjectivity  
communication