

Towards a History of Sound-Symbolic Theories

Traditions of linguistic iconicity and Charles de Brosses' contribution

International conference - Dijon (France), 20th -21st February 2014

University of Burgundy - Burgundy Regional Council

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A significant part of the recent research in cognitive neuroscience nowadays seems to support the assumption of an originally motivated relationship between phonetics and semantics (Rizzolatti and Arbib 1998, Ramachandran and Hubbard 2001, Gentilucci *et al.* 2001, Maurer *et al.* 2006, Rizzolatti and Craighero 2007, Imai *et al.* 2008, Ozturk *et al.* 2012). Given the distrust of most modern linguists on this topic and the scarcity of books of linguistics on it (exceptions are Hinton *et al.* 1994, Hamano 1998, Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001, Bohas and Dat 2007), these scientists have sometimes been forced to mobilize authors of a bygone era to articulate a discourse around the experimental data they have. So Rizzolatti and Craighero cite repeatedly Condillac (1715-1780), while Ramachandran and Hubbard use, without quoting, a famous argument of Nigidius Figulus (98-45 BC.). If, on the one hand, this indicates a weakness of the current research in linguistics facing the challenge of natural sciences, it suggests, on the other hand, that the history of theories on language, through the epistemological hindsight it allows, could provide a valuable ground of mediation to initiate a fruitful exchange between these two disciplinary fields.

The history of theories attributing an important role to relationships of similarity or analogy between sound and meaning in language is indeed rich and ancient. In most major written traditions (Western, Jewish, Arab, Indian, Japanese...), these speculations, often related to issues of the origin or creation of mankind and the world, emerge in the early stages of metalinguistic reflection (the *Upanishads* in India, Plato in Greece, Kuukai in Japan, etc.) and often resurface during major turning points in the history of civilizations (Nigidius Figulus at the end of Roman Republic, John Wallis and Charles de Brosses shortly before the English and French Revolutions, etc.). The formulations of these theories are extremely varied, not only from the point of view of textual genres (scientific, philosophical, literary or religious texts) and from that of their cultural and political functions (mystical or materialistic, revolutionary or reactionary, marginal or institutional theories, etc.), but also in terms of technical, methodological and epistemological solutions (constative theories of the imitation of reality and performative theories of its establishment; iconic theories of the similarity between sound and meaning and indexical theories of the contiguity between voice and world; sound-image, sound-diagram and sound-metaphor theories; onomatopoeic, sound-symbolic or phono-semantic theories, based on the hearing or the articulatory gesture, etc.). Most often forgotten or ignored, these hypotheses are, in addition, a huge heritage of ideas, problems and sometimes solutions about the relationship between language and mind, at times strangely naive, at times surprisingly refined, but always deeply stimulating through their radical difference from the contemporary epistemological framework. It is a heritage that requires the work of linguists, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and epistemologists to be released from its now cryptic encoding and to be relocated in its own cultural coordinates allowing to understand and exploit it.

Theories of this type are found for example (at very different levels of development) in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (II, 22), and in Plato (*Cratylus* 422e-427d), Epicurus (*Letter to Herodotus* 75-76), Nigidius Figulus (in Gellius, X, 4), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*De compositione verborum*, XVI, 4), Origen (*Contra Celsum*, I, 24), Iamblichus (*De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, VII, 5), Augustine (*De Dialectica*, VI and VII), in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and in Kuukai (*Shoji Jisso Gi*), Abhinavagupta (*Paratrisikavivarana* and *Tantraloka* c. III), Ibn Jinni, Abraham Abulafia, Henry of Ghent (*Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, c. LXXIII), Jacob Boehme (*Mysterium magnum*), John Wallis (1653: ch. XIV), Leibniz (1710 and 1765: ch. III, 2), Giambattista Vico (1744: ch. I, 3, 57 and II, 2, 4), Charles de Brosses (1765: ch. I and VI), Condillac (1775: ch. I, 2), Court de Gébelin (1774-1783 and 1776), Pierre Joseph André Roubaud (1785), Melchiorre Cesarotti (1785), Dieudonné Thiébaud (1802), Carlo Denina (1804), Charles Nodier (1808 and 1834: ch. I-III), Abel-François Villemain (1835), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836: ch. 10), Ernest Renan (1848), Honoré Chavée (1849), Karl Wilhelm Heyse (1856), Adolphe Pictet (1859), Hensleigh Wedgwood (1866), Edward Tylor (1871), Jean Pierre Brisset (1883, 1900, 1913), Georg van der Gabelentz (1891), Wilhelm Wundt (1900: ch. I, 1), Maurice Grammont (1901 and 1933: ch. III), Otto von Jespersen (1922: ch. XX-XXI), Edward Sapir (1929), Wolfgang Köhler (1929), Richard Paget (1930), Stanley Newman (1933), Dwight Bolinger (1949), Maxime Chastaing (1958, 1962, 1964, 1966), Jean-Michel Peterfalvi (1964, 1966, 1970), Roman Jakobson (1965), Pierre Guiraud (1967: ch. III), Ivan Fónagy (1983 and 2001), Stanislav Voronin (1983), and probably many others that we do not yet know.

The critical literature on the subject is now abundant. Just recalling some basic benchmarks, a starting point can perhaps be found in the Sixties with, on the one hand, André Padoux' key PhD dissertation, *Recherches sur la symbolique et l'énergie de la parole dans certains textes tantriques* (1963; en. tr. *Vāc: the concept of the word in selected hindu tantras*, 1990) and, on the other hand, Peterfalvi's review of the experimental researches on sound symbolism (1965). In the Semitic field, a turning point is represented by Gershom Scholem's *Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala* (1970) tracing the first scientifically accurate profile of the Kabbalist theory of language in the Middle Ages. Despite his sarcastic approach, Gérard Genette's *Mimologics* (1976) represents another milestone as the first attempt to provide an overview of the Western tradition. For the modern era, one can supplement it with Roman Jakobson's and Linda Waugh's *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979: ch. 4) and with Philippe Monneret's *Le sens du signifiant* (2003: ch. 1-2). In the 1980s, researches on the subject are growing. One can cite at least Thomas Kasulis' work on Kuukai (1982), Jürgen Trabant's ones on Humboldt (1985, 1990, 1992), Moshe Idel's on Abulafia and the Kabbalah (1987, 1988, 1989), Donatella Di Cesare's on Humboldt and Hamann (1989, 1998, 2001), Stefano Gensini's on Leibniz (1991, 1995), Irene Rosier-Catach's on Henry of Ghent (1995), John Joseph's (2000) and David Sedley's (2003) on the *Cratylus*, Raffaele Torella on Abhinavagupta (2004), and Luca Nobile's on de Brosses and Condillac (2007, 2011, 2012). The time may have come to attempt a new synthesis. It is significant, from this point of view, that Keith Allan, editor of the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics* (2013) just asked Margareth Magnus for a chapter on the history of sound symbolism.

This conference aims to gather papers on the sound-symbolic theories of the past. Several types of approaches and questioning are possible. What kind of relationship does the theory exactly establish between sound and meaning of language? Which kind of forms, elements or phenomena are involved? Is it possible to explain the assumed sound-symbolic values through an analysis of phono-articulatory or graphico-visual properties? What are the criteria for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the theory? What is its function in the author's thought? What is its role in the contemporary cultural context? What are the descriptive, methodological, epistemological, metaphysical implications?

The conference languages are English and French.
Presentation time will be 20 minutes (+ 10 minutes of discussion).

Proposals will consist of a 500 words abstract with a brief bibliography.
They should be sent by email to Luca Nobile: luca.nobile@u-bourgogne.fr

The deadline for submission of proposals is 30th October 2013.
Acceptance will be announced on 30th November 2013.
The conference will be held on 20th-21st February 2014 at the University of Burgundy, Dijon.

Selected papers will be submitted to the publisher John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
Articles submitted for publication must be written in English.

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