

# Continuum and Discontinuity

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There inevitably comes a time when even the best informed minds are tempted to yield to the lure of binarism: when we are no longer concerned with the details of a system, but rather with our vision of the relationship between man and the world. Without going any further it can already be said that the problem of existence is presented to us in terms of a man/world duality, as though we were unable to exceed our subjective vision of things so as to assess their intrinsic reality.

When linguists discovered that they could isolate discrete units called phonemes, they were tempted to oppose the discontinuity of these phonemes – reflecting the underlying discontinuity of the signifiers – to a continuum of prelinguistic experience, a continuum that is not arranged as discrete elements except with reference to any significant units of the language selected for the purpose of communicating this experience to others. At the outset we have nothing but a nebulous mass where only the application of a linguistic grid allows us to discern identifiable units. Even if, in the final analysis, it will prove necessary to doubt the universal validity of this vision of things, we must recognize its usefulness in concretizing a concept of linguistic facts – a concept that has for some time played a beneficent role in research. At least for some of us, this vision should reflect the manner in which the world is gradually organized in our minds each time a perceptible reality is isolated from its context at the instant it receives a name. Allow me to introduce an illustration from personal experience. It was the last day of July in 1914. In our little village in the Savoy the international tension – which would eventually end in general mobilization – was very perceptible; our classes were idle, and teachers and pupils had settled down in a field near the school. I was six. Sitting on the grass, my attention was attracted by a plant with large flat leaves. At that moment someone said the word *plantain* “plantain.” The plant had not been heretofore exactly unknown to me; it didn’t

strike me, at that moment, as a discovery; but it acquired a distinct existence only at that instant in the green carpet of the field when a signifier had definitively isolated it. It was most assuredly the gravity of the hour that engraved this incident in my memory.

We must not conclude from this example, however, that only familiarity with a name enables a person to identify an object or an event. Undoubtedly, if someone presents you with an unknown tool, the sudden awareness of its existence will entail, if not the demand for a specific term with which to designate it, then at least the use of a familiar generic term like "machine"; this is nothing more than a way of honoring the need for a signifier to support the sign without needlessly burdening the memory. But there is no dearth of examples in which the awareness of an entity is grasped by the consciousness without the support of a term by which to refer to it. While I am shaving in the morning, I am well aware of the existence on my face of an area that demands the use of a certain technique or, more simply, a specific approach. I have in mind the area – delimited by the base of the jawbone at the top – which merges with the neck at the level of the larynx. I have been told that there was once a name for this area in Austrian speech. But for some sixty years now I have been shaving it without the benefit of a term by which to identify it.

Louis Prieto often reminded us that our perception of the world involves a corpus of recurrences that we are able to identify precisely despite the absence of any specific designation. Thus words are not a prerequisite for action and we must bear this in mind when we seek to understand animal behavior. For an animal, as for man, a discrete sign – "arbitrary" in the Saussurian sense of the term – emerges as soon as the motivating conditions for an action have disappeared. A cat, for example, might remember that applying its claws to the upholstery of a chair precipitates a certain reaction from the humans around it: they will open the window through which the animal can gain access into the garden.

If it is evident that articulated speech is the most effective and efficient way of analyzing and categorizing the nebulous cloud of experience, nevertheless we cannot regard it as the only way of achieving that goal. First, there are diverse products of human ingenuity whose functional identity results from the exercise of types of activity the undertaking and practice of which do not necessarily presuppose the use of speech. As an example let us consider basket weaving, which pursuit is comprised of a series of acts that are

more likely to be learned by imitation than through detailed explanation.

But there are, above all, discontinuities inherent in the very way in which the world functions. By way of an example we might consider species diversity – specifically, the fact that sexual reproduction can take place only between individual members of particular groups. Thus there is a species *caballus* (horse) that exists and reproduces, not because man is able to create an abstraction that overlooks the differences between one individual of the species and another, but because the genus *Equus* reproduces itself identically. At first glance it would appear that there is no reason not to identify the donkey and the horse – which seemingly differ only in size – by means of a single term. But in this case the constraints of reproduction, yielding only sterile hybrids – mules – impose a distinction which language recognizes and upholds.

It is here that common sense, in suggesting that classes of designated things antedate the words which designate them, seems to triumph. We know that it was against this simplistic vision that the so-called Sapir-Whorf theory, in accord with neo-Humboldtian thought, was formulated. There can be no doubt that every society organizes its world so as to best satisfy its needs in the broadest sense of the term – nutritional needs, reproductive needs, the need for protection from inclement weather, from predators, from supernatural forces – and that the language of that society will constantly attest to this fact. But it cannot be denied that all this is exclusively dependent upon the resources of the habitat, its fauna and flora, and the minerals of its soil and its subsoil. The relationship between the natural world and its cultural artifacts is universally symbiotic. In every language, we find names for them both: names for realities in whose genesis mankind has played no role, as well as for products resulting from human activity, physical or mental. On the one hand, matter, organic or inorganic, is reproduced in its specificity. On the other hand, objects and ideas which are conceived from the outset for a particular purpose have meaning only in relation to that purpose. This results, in every vocabulary, in two polar extremes: that of a concrete object like *banane* “banana,” on the one hand, and that of an abstract concept like *démocratie* “democracy,” on the other.

Identifying a banana poses no problem. If the color of the fruit can vary by type or degree of ripeness, its form nevertheless remains distinctive, and neither its taste nor its smell will be forgotten. The union established in the mind between the word and the

object, or, if you prefer, the apprehension of the sign *banane* (*banana*) is more than likely to occur as soon as the subject encounters the object. The sight of this object will henceforth trigger the word "banane" ("banana") and the sound of the signifier /*banan*/ (/bənænə/) will readily suggest the object. No factor inherent in the context in which the term might be heard could cause a subject to doubt his first interpretation.

Discerning the meaning of a term like *democracy* is not quite so straightforward. The concept of democracy is not in any way obvious or transparent. It would be better, perhaps, if the term could be learned through its immediate association with a definition: "Democracy is a government of the people by the people." But there is a good chance that before a subject has had the opportunity to learn a clear definition of this sort, he has encountered the term in contexts which are so ambiguous, so colored with approval, reservation, or disgust, that he will be quite incapable of attributing a precise meaning to it. It is difficult to imagine how the term *democracy* could be learned correctly, and the only resort, comprehension from context, entails such varied connotations that the term becomes almost worthless for intelligent communication.

Most of a language's lexical items fall somewhere between the two extremes we have just considered.

Even in the case of the name for an animal species – e.g. *le cheval* "horse," specimens of which are easily identified – it is not clear that a child who hears /*ʃval*/ (/hʀs/) in the presence of the animal will immediately be able to link the signifier with the animal rather than with some other aspect of the situation. It is entirely possible that circumstances more or less indelibly color the value that a sign will henceforth have for the subject. Connotations – if we are willing to restrict this term to the specific reactions of each individual subject – will remain. Perhaps more than any new physical circumstance in which the subject will once again be confronted with the referent, it is the variety of linguistic contexts in which he will encounter the term *cheval* (*horse*) which will permit him to discern the values generally associated with the sign.

For most subjects, however, the question of discerning meaning is far less at issue than determining the precise contexts in which a given term might be felicitously employed. Only the linguist strives to discern meaning. The average speaker uses an expression simply because it seems appropriate in a given situation and because he knows by experience that, in that specific context, the listener will

understand the same thing. Consider the speech segment *rouge* "red." In addressing his companion, a man who produces the utterance *mets ta robe rouge* "put on your red dress" has selected *rouge* from among a series of adjectives – not necessarily color terms – to specify the article of clothing he wishes her to wear; in addition to the adjectives *verte* "green" or *noire* "black," he might have selected from among others like *rayée* "striped," *longue* "long," *montante* "ruffled," or a syntheme like *à pois* "polka-dotted" or *à volants* "flounced." The same subject, at a restaurant, might order *un pichet de vin rouge* "a carafe of red wine" in a situation where the choice is unquestionably between *blanc* "white" and *rosé* "rosé." Can we identify the *rouge* of *robe rouge* with that of *vin rouge*? The choice between *rouge* and *verte* in the first case, and between *rouge* and *blanc* in the second, establishes *rouge* as a color term in both instances. If asked, our man would undoubtedly respond that in the first case it is a question of the "color" of the dress, and, in the second, of the "color" of the wine. This might justify a decision not to treat the two "reds" as homonyms in the synchronic language. But on the other hand, the syntactic status of *robe rouge* differs from that of *vin rouge*: *robe rouge* is a syntagm composed of two free monemes, while *vin rouge* is a syntheme consisting of two conjoined monemes which together comprise a unit. Only as a unit is the syntheme capable of further specification; a wine cannot be described as more or less red, but a red wine can be said to be darker or lighter. A similar syntheme is exemplified in the expression *il a vu rouge* "he saw red"; one cannot see more red or less red. Furthermore, in this context, *rouge* is no longer commutable; it cannot be replaced by an adverb like *bien* "well," or *mal* "badly," or *clair* "clearly." What – other than the remarkably consistent signifier /ruʒ/ – can underpin the identity of the moneme across all its usages, if not perhaps the fact that the visual character of the perception of red leaves a marked impression even in the syntheme *voir rouge* "see red," where the reference is, in fact, to an outburst of anger rather than to tinted vision.

But if we are able to discern a unique identity for *rouge*, can we really assume one, in synchrony and for all users, in the case of *table* "table," for example, where it is justified by the etymology, and deny it to *fraise* "strawberry" where formal identity (homonymy), resulting from multiple paronymous attractions, gives rise to a vague sense of a semantic unity transcending even such diverse meanings as *fruit du fraisier* "fruit of the strawberry plant," *mésentère*

*du veau* "calf's mesentery," *colerette plissée* "small pleated collar," *outil d'acier servant à forer* "drill bit," and even *visage* "face" whence the meaning *présence (inopportune)* "(inopportune) presence" as in *ramener sa fraise*. The lexicographer, whose job it is to provide information, must transcend the linguistic behavior or intuition of the average user. But the linguist, who seeks to understand how language works, cannot be satisfied with the reaction of the learned or cultivated speaker with respect to his language. His research must first and foremost seek to explain how linguistic communication is affected by the speaker who does not reflect upon what is taking place inside him while he is speaking. For the latter it is clear that the formal identity of the signifier provides the fundamental organizational principle underlying the significata, yet without inhibiting the functional identification of signifiers as different as *va*, *all-*, *aille*, and *i* for the moneme *aller* "to go," or forcing a reunification of homonyms and polysemes. The French language works just as well for the speaker who has no conscious awareness of the suppletion in the paradigm of the verb *aller* as for the speaker who has never thought to reconcile *table (de cuisine)* "(kitchen) table" with *table (de multiplication)* "(multiplication) table."

We can undoubtedly see, to some extent, the implication that all this has on the various possible paradigmatic structures underlying the significata. Every quest to discover isomorphy – i.e., to uncover among the significata a principle of organization parallel to that which has been demonstrated to hold among the signifiers, defined by their successive articulation of isolated phonemes and monemes or, more generally, by a succession of distinctive units and significant units – naturally runs into the difficulty that distinctive function plays no role in the organization of significata. Such a quest for isomorphy is likely to fail if it does not encompass a domain of significata appealing to the highest level of abstraction. These are what we call modalities, and they elude specific definition; the most we can say is that they comprise "the end of a branch," that is, that they are not susceptible to further specification or qualification. Included in this category are such grammatical values as the plural number, the past tense, and the perfective aspect. Here again, as in phonological analysis, we discover a domain which might be characterized as discrete, discontinuous, i.e., comprised of a finite number of units that are defined, in Saussurian terms, as those that are distinct from, that is, do not overlap with, other units belonging to the same class of commutation.

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The other class of elements that can, along with the modalities, be linked to the grammatical domain, are the functional connectors, or indicators. These require the presence of at least two members of discourse which the connectors conjoin. They can, like the modalities, sometimes attain a high degree of abstraction: *à* "to" categorically denotes proximity; *de* "from" categorically suggests distance. But they cannot escape the universal pursuit of language to account for the infinite variety perceived in the world. Even if we begin with elements that in and of themselves comprise complete utterances – *up!*, *down!*, *dehors!* "out," *ouste!* "out" – we soon end up, through adverbial usage, that is to say, through predicate determination, with their characteristic function as connective elements. Thus we cannot impose, once and for all, a limit on the number of connections that might be expressed. Alongside the six cases of Latin and the four of German, a whole gamut of prepositions has come into being; these complement the cases and reflect a tendency to replace them, while their ranks, in turn – as a result of the expansion imposed on the vocabulary by the perpetual need to better communicate an infinite variety of experiences – are constantly being swelled by the incorporation of such synthematic constructs as *au cours de* "in the course of," *en dépit de* "in spite of," *histoire de* "out of (e.g. curiosity)." Even if this experience, prior to confrontation with the resources of a given language, cannot be envisaged as a perfect continuum – since simple perception implies the beginning of an analysis – it will nevertheless entail constant fermentation, that is, modification, within the realm of the linguistic material that must serve for its expression. Faced with this developmental process, the formalist will find himself in an embarrassing quandary unless, of course, he resolves to resort to abstractions. Anyone who believes, after a careful examination of contemporary modes of behavior, that the only valid synchrony is a dynamic one, will certainly reject this solution. Such a scholar can console himself with the thought that it is impossible to reduce the mass of linguistic significata to a finite number of semantic features.