

## Deconstructing Society through Language: A Grammatical Perspective

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### Abstract

*Every world is a linguistic construction and every language is a metalanguage. Taking this premise as our starting point, this article aims at deconstructing social reality by questioning the concept of the individual upon which it is mainly built. From an initial consideration of the personal pronouns “I” and “You” as deictic elements which lack semantic meaning within the abstract system of language, we will delve into deeper levels of language, those who go beyond the realm of consciousness, culture and will, trying to discover close links between Grammar and Politics.*

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, grammar (deixis), deconstruction, personal and collective identities

Language creates reality by means of its semantic vocabulary. What we understand as Society is an abstract construction which consists of the imposition of concepts and numbers upon something that was “there” but remained undefined. Well-known linguists such as Whorf or García Calvo have studied the power of language to shape reality by means of denomination and have seen the connection between meaning and being. According to these thinkers, things of this world --including individuals of this human society-- come into existence as long as they are baptized with a word and analysed into theoretical components. There is always this requirement of abstract knowledge which is, nevertheless, accompanied by the need to find something concrete, a direct contact with the physical or natural world, what we could refer to as “matter”, a common substance shared by all things that is constantly changing in everlasting flux.

This material reality of the world can be regarded as a pretext to justify the apparent dichotomy between Language and the outside world; actually, Physics needs this division in order to confirm the truth of its hypotheses based on external facts. Nonetheless, the analysis of this Matter within any piece or element of this world we may chose proves unlimited as the matter of things can always be transformed into other things, but it will never reach “the Matter”, one of the highest abstractions we can conceive. This evidence entails us to think that, far from being the limit or ultimate ground of the World’s analytical description, Matter is reduced to its name “matter”, and this reduction of the name to its literal sense of *flatus vocis* makes the World ONE with Language conceived as “noise” “sonority”, in the sense that they both become indescribable, and thus, unknown<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this essential ineffability, both World and Language are paradoxically capable of reflecting on themselves and fabricating ideas about themselves. These ideas become real things and reach the dignity of elements of the non-ideological reality in the same way as the elements of reality acquire the status of ideal or defined beings: for example, the idea of “forest” is considered to be the “existence” or “being” of the forest, and “this shapeless undefined thing that is here” is made to be “a triangle” or “a proletarian”.

The World's awareness of this process of consciousness makes Language become a "thing" of the World subject to description, an object of study, a historical and social being<sup>2</sup>.

What do the World and Language say about themselves? Having acknowledged that Language and social world are two sides of the same coin, inseparable one from the other, let us try to establish close parallelisms and meeting points between the "siblings"<sup>3</sup>.

When we analyse Society, the first thing we can observe is that there is not one society or universe but several societies or universes. Each society affirms itself as an entity through internal coherence and through opposition to the rest, and the consciousness of that entity is equivalent to its reality. Similarly, when we study Language, we notice that there is not only one universal language, but a number of languages which confirm their identity through internal cohesion and through difference with other languages<sup>4</sup>.

In reference to their inner constitution, we find that the individual is the basic institution of Society, and that the so-called idiolect --the language spoken by one person-- is the minimal form of a language. As far as the individual is concerned, he should be the visible face of society but at the same time he must preserve his distinctive personality. Likewise, an idiolect must be an example or copy of a specific language but, concurrently, it must include some stylistic peculiarities.

If we now move on to observe Society in general and from within, we find Life, that is to say, things and people endlessly coming into being; and in the analysis of Language in general, we perceive that it is constantly being produced or realized in speech acts; all at once, we can recognize both in Society and in Language the presence of defined, permanent entities or elements and the existence of fixed rules or laws<sup>5</sup>. There is a continuous interaction between life and social organization, and also between speech and language system. The first is essentially based on a faithful reproduction of the second, and the second consists in foreseeing what is happening or may happen in the first.

Considering the World as an established system, we can distinguish two main components: 1) things --in its wider sense which includes people and events; 2) rules for their organization within the system and also for their mutual relation and functioning in life. In the case of Language, it is constituted by: 1) smallest units of meaning (lexemes); 2) indexes of relation and function (morphemes). Needless to say, these constituents cannot be considered separately.

Aside from this basic structure, there is a law of abstraction which rules the processes through which functions and relationships among things and words are consolidated so that they become a "whole" thing or a word "in its own right"<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, we can distinguish different degrees of abstraction regarding things and words: from those which are tangible (e.g. "an individual") to those which are economically perceivable (e.g. "a nation's subject"), or theoretically conceivable (e.g. "human beings"), or unconceivable but logically thinkable (e.g. "personal identity") so as to reach the point where we find things or words which are unthinkable, that is to say, beyond abstraction (e.g. "Being", "Non-Being", "I").

Together with this capacity of abstraction or conceptualization which accompanies our human understanding, we find a correlative need of concrete knowledge as we pointed out at the beginning of this reflection. It is quite obvious that this concrete condition or sensation of things is not something that things can have in themselves -- as it is the case of their social, generic or abstract reality-- but it is directly linked to the act of their appearance.

However, the specific existence that occurs with that emergence depends on the hand, eye, heart, etc. that witnesses this emergence, that is to say, it depends on “me” who becomes the center of Life. “I” am the place where the abstract reality of the World and the current manifestation of that World converge (García Calvo 1973: 251).

We are penetrating the most subconscious level of language, where we find those words which in grammatical terms are called deictic elements. These elements do not mean anything, they do not designate or predicate: they just point to a space that is not semantically defined but it is determined by the speech act in which they are used. This space is not a blank space, but it is formed by a system of coordinates, the core of which is the original deictic element “I”. “I” am the place where what is said coincides with the action of saying it. Moreover, when we say “I” we also mean “you” because in this pre-grammatical field, the words speak through my mouth or through yours freely, and we can become speakers or addressees at different turns as we surrender to the ebb and flow of dialectics.

Going further in the argument, we could dare say that these primary deictic elements are the basis for the formation of personal and social identities built upon a false compromise between “the world of deixis” and “the world of meanings” that leads to the imposition of a proper noun and a common noun upon “you” or “I” who initially were “anybody” that was speaking or listening regardless any sexual or class distinction: for instance, “I” become “Peter Smith, a business man”. And “you” become “Patsy Nicholson, a secretary”. In addition, we both become members of the group “Humankind”, equal to any other member (so that we can be counted), but at the same time unique, different. Obviously, this marriage between the general and the particular proves illogical and contradictory but this is how democratic societies based on the faith in the individual develop (Campillo 2001: 220-221).

Let us continue examining the linguistic processes involved in the construction of pluralist societies conceived as closed sets of subjects ruled by governments and laws. We have already seen the conversion of “I” and “you” into real people, individuals with an ID card who are not different to the State, to the Bank or the Police, because they belong to the same reality (the reality of Power) and contribute to its perpetuation. The next step is to study the conception of “we” and “you” as the plural forms of “I” and “you”, together with the birth of the third person singular and plural. How does this occur in language?

In the pre-grammatical field to which deictic elements point to, there are different kinds of relationships and oppositions between elements. Together with the relationship “I-here” or “I-you”, we find the relationship “me-us” which here does not imply a difference in number. Nevertheless, in our world of ideas we tend to interpret “us” as a plural form in two different ways: 1) As a set of “I’s” (I+I+I...), which means that we have to convert “us” and “I” (pure indexicals) into ideas of “ourselves” and of “me” in order to be able to count them. This mathematical interpretation is not possible because when we say “us”, we mean “I” with “you” or with other people who are not “I”; 2) As the sum of “I” + “you” or + “he” or “other people”. This is not mathematically plausible either because elements which are not homogenous cannot be counted. As a result, “us” has to be logically understood not as the plural form of “me” but as the place where the separation or distance between “I” and “you” is omitted (García Calvo 1983: 158).

However, this non-numerical opposition is the basis for the creation of numbers in general and for the establishment of the grammatical category of number in particular.

Here we have the different stages in the formation of number: 1) “us” = first person that includes the listener → “us” = First person that excludes the listener; 2) “us” that excludes “you” is projected on the singular outside “you” → emergence of “you” = you with others; 3) Creation of the third person: “he-they”. The numerical interpretation of “they” as homogenous elements of a set will influence the impossible reinterpretation of “us” and “you” as the plural forms of “me” and “you”; 4) Transfer of the grammatical category of plural to the semantic words of a language.

The conceptualization of deictic elements together with the emergence of numbers will definitely lead to the birth of individuals socially interacting with one another and to the consideration of people as objects of manipulation and trade (García Calvo 1995: 85).

What is important to underline is that before or below this social world made up of conflicting identities, there is something (a world that is not even a world) which has no name, a boundless fluid community formed not by individuals but by people who share Language, an “I” and “you” who are interchangeable and who belong to the subconscious realm of language, which has no semantic vocabulary, as opposed to the realm of culture, consciousness and will, where we can find the semantic words of a language.

It is relevant to realize that there is an endless war between both levels of Language as one is constructing reality (Halliday 1979:247) and the other is deconstructing it. Moreover, if one lets himself think and feel, one can see without much effort that this contradiction in Language is the same one we can find between I and “the I”: on the one hand, we believe with unquestioning acceptance that we are a person with a proper noun and a date of birth and death; on the other hand, there is something in us which does not accept this condemnation to knowledge and death, showing disobedience of heart and mind. This war is true politics and whereas the individual is not capable of any rebellion as he is a subject of power, “I”, who is free from any definition, is always rejecting and questioning the World constructed by meanings, the World of patriarchal Law, of things being what they are.

Furthermore, Language, the blessed Language can open for us a new dwelling of real communion, where “I” am continually becoming “you” in the act of speaking, and “you” are constantly becoming “I”. “You” and “I” are neither separated nor together in the same way as the entities of this reality are, these individuals who form couples, and from couples they create social groups or sets. “You” and “I” cannot stop in one place, we jump from mouth to mouth and do not belong to any Homeland. In parallel, I --conceived as a person or real entity-- am constituted by a series of linked ideas from which I myself find it difficult to detach, and this attachment to my own individual reality begets the need of defending social reality as a whole<sup>7</sup>.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise the power of the Word as a source of authentic revolutionary action against the Science of Reality, and as an instrument of the soul’s dissolution. It is time to stop living on false illusions: we do not know who we are or where we are. Indeed, honest research into elemental grammar can carry out a psychoanalytic task which has direct political and social consequences.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Whorf, the illusion of meaning has come to an end in Western Indoeuropean languages, and this fact opens new possibilities in the understanding of Language as sound. In fact, all languages are inspired by a kind of universal rhythm analogous to Music or Mathematics (Paz 1982: 33). We should remember that Music is present in the first recordings of the *Homus symbolicus* (E. Trias, «La música como agitación total, El Pais, Lunes 17 de Septiembre de 2007»).
- <sup>2</sup> This refers to idiomatic languages or languages of Babel as opposed to common or garden Language which does not belong to the semantic world. As I reasoned in a previous research article, “The Speaker (or consciousness) of the world cannot be spoken about because it would no longer be the subject who speaks, but the object about which something is uttered (Petisco 2011: 204).
- <sup>3</sup> We are following Agustín García Calvo’s description of world and society (García Calvo 1973: 225-268)
- <sup>4</sup> Moreover, societies develop an image of the natural universe that confers them their feigned natural character. In parallel, Languages are also presented to speakers as something natural; therefore, the whole nature will necessarily be linguistically constructed (AGC 1973: 229-230).
- <sup>5</sup> A kind of universal grammar if we evoke Chomskian theories on language, the great discovery that there is an underlying organization or grammatical wisdom which rules any speaker’s intuitions regarding grammatical precision and which, according to the American thinker, is mostly unconscious (Chomsky 1981: 14-15).
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the colour of things becomes a colour in its own right, and the additive relationship between several objectified colours becomes the Colour in its own right (on which Physics can theorise); or the copulative grammatical relationship between “Anthony and Valery” is translated into the new word “couple”; or the defining relation “John’s wife” leads to the words “dependence”, “possession”.
- <sup>7</sup> In this regard, we should remember Foucault’s words in *Words and Things*: It is a relief to think that the concept human being is a recent invention, a figure that has only existed for two centuries, a mere page in our knowledge that will be turned as soon as he finds out a new shape (quoted by Fernández Mengual 2005: 31).

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