

On Linguistic “Unconsciousness”. Some Introductory Remarks

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Abstract: In this article – which may look like a collage of quotations – I aim at mentioning the opinions of some famous linguists with regard to the so called “unconsciousness” of common speakers manifested within the linguistic activity as such (that is during the process of communication). Consequently, I will present the ideas of some American linguists (E. Sapir, L. Bloomfield and Ch. Hockett), taking into account both the opinions of certain European forerunners (H. Paul and F. de Saussure), and the subsequent criticism formulated by E. Coseriu concerning the respective linguistic “unconsciousness”.

Keywords: linguistic unconsciousness, E. Sapir, L. Bloomfield, Ch. Hockett, intuition, reflexive knowledge

1. In this article I will try to present and analyze mainly some introductory remarks from linguistic treatises – highly influential at that time – of certain famous American linguists: Edward Sapir (*Language*, 1921), Leonard Bloomfield (*Language*, 1933) and Charles F. Hockett (*A Course in Modern Linguistics*, 1958). At first sight, while characterizing language or speech, the three of them seem to state the same thing. They all give the impression that they see language as an activity as natural as walking, breathing or the beating of our hearts. Thus, they intend to transmit the idea that speaking is an “unconscious” activity. However, if we scan the texts more carefully, we will observe from these very first sentences some differences which reflect the specific linguistic conception of each of them.

2. Leonard Bloomfield’s linguistic treatise *Language* (published in 1933) starts with the following words: “Language plays a great part in our life. *Perhaps*

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because of its familiarity, we rarely observe it, taking it rather for granted, as we do breathing or walking.” (Bloomfield, 2005, p. 3) By using the analogy between language and breathing or walking, Bloomfield undoubtedly refers to the beginning of Edward Sapir’s treatise, published 12 years earlier, which reads: “*Speech is so familiar a feature of daily life that we rarely pause to define it. It seems as natural to man as walking, and only less so than breathing*” (Sapir, 1921, p. 3).

2.1. From the above mentioned quotation, we can notice that Sapir makes a certain distinction between “walking” and “breathing”. Thus, according to Sapir, the two activities are not perfect equivalents (since walking, unlike breathing, is learnt), as Bloomfield seems to consider them. Nevertheless, Sapir aims to demonstrate that „language [is] a cultural, not a biologically inherited, function” (Sapir, 1921, p. vii). Consequently, “The process of acquiring speech is, in sober fact, an utterly different sort of thing from the process of learning to walk” (Sapir, 1921, p. 3).

2.2. These differences made by Sapir no longer interest Bloomfield in 1933, for he became, in the meantime, an advocate of behaviorism (in a very strict form) and, at the same time, a critic of mentalism. That is why, he refutes introspection, by declaring that he will study language only to the extent in which its manifestations are observable (see Bloomfield, 2005, p. vii-viii). In his opinion, only in this manner will linguistics obtain the right to be considered truly a science.¹ In a brief subsequent paper, *Linguistic Aspects of Science* (1939), Bloomfield supports the same conception: “*In the common sense of many peoples, perhaps of all, language is largely ignored, and its effects are explained as owing to non-physical factors, the action of a «mind», «will», or the like. These terms, as well as the many others*

¹ Eugenio Coseriu criticized in detail Bloomfield’s conception in his study *Forma y sustancia en los sonidos del lenguaje* (1954). I quote here an excerpt from his argumentation: “Ahora, el negar la *mente*, por no tratarse de una *cosa perteneciente al mundo* (o reducirla a actos físicos), es una decisión arbitraria que tiene el mismo carácter «metafísico» y convencional de la decisión contraria: la de negar las *cosas del mundo* porque no pertenecen a la *mente* (o reducirlas a actos mentales). En realidad, no es de ningún modo necesario entender el *espíritu* o la *mente* como sustancias metafísicas para reconocer el carácter «espiritual» de ciertas actividades o la interioridad, la no-mundanía de la conciencia (que sólo significa reconocer la distinción entre *sujeto* y *objeto*, condición ineludible de nuestro conocimiento). El *espíritu* puede *concebirse* simplemente como *concepto*, y no *objeto*: como un concepto deducido de ciertas actividades, el principio único a cual las reducimos para entenderlas como unidad (o como el conjunto de estas mismas actividades). Del mismo modo, la *mente* puede entenderse como puro concepto, como nombre de la *interioridad de la conciencia* (del sujeto como no-integrante del objeto), aunque se pueda demostrar que también tal interioridad es de carácter físico. No se puede negar tal interioridad con el pretexto de que acerca de su existencia sólo tenemos las pruebas ofrecidas por la experiencia corriente (por la «popular view»), porque acerca de las cosas del mundo no tenemos otras pruebas que las de esta misma experiencia: «se dice» que existen las cosas del mismo modo que «se dice» que existe la *mente*” (Coseriu, 1967, p. 136).

connected with them, yield service in daily life, in art, and in religion; that they have no place in science is the contention of many scientists” (Bloomfield, 1939, pp. 12-13).

2.3. An entire different conception is that of Bloomfield in 1914, when he published his first version of his treatise titled *An Introduction to the Study of Language*. Influenced, at that time, by W. Wundt’s psychology (see also Bloomfield, 1933, p. vii), the American linguist did not refrain in those years from using the term *introspection*, as noticed from the first sentences of the third chapter, *The Mental Basis of Language*¹, from the above mentioned book: „Language plays a very important part in most of our mental processes, few of which, indeed, are entirely free from linguistic elements. [...] In short, a very little introspection shows that nearly all of our mental life contains speech-elements” (Bloomfield, 1914, p. 56).²

3. Mention must be made that there is a European tradition in this regard. The American linguists referred to above undoubtedly knew, for instance, Hermann Paul and Ferdinand de Saussure’s works of reference in which they had discussed, in their epoch, about the so called “unconsciousness” of speakers.

3.1. Thus, Hermann Paul, the German Neogrammarian linguist, in his famous book, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (1880), referring mainly to phonetic changes, distinguished more “degrees of consciousness” (see Paul, 1891, pp. 36-64). For a start, he makes a general remark, concerning the automatism of highly practiced activities: “It rather lies in the nature of the psychical organisation that all ideas which originally operated merely by consciousness receive by practice the capacity of operating automatically; and that this automatic operation is the first and indispensable condition of the speedy course of ideas demanded in every position of daily life and in language as well” (Paul, 1891, p. 41).³ Then, H. Paul

¹ In 1943, when Louis Hjelmslev published his most important book in Danish (known mainly in its English version, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*), he clearly stated the mental nature of language: “But language is no external accompaniment. It lies deep in the mind of man, a wealth of memories inherited by the individual and the tribe, a vigilant conscience that reminds and warns.” (Hjelmslev, 1963, p. 3).

² Let us record the variations of expression that Bloomfield makes along the years on one of his introductory statements: „Language plays a very important part in most of our mental processes...” (Bloomfield, 1914, p. 56); “Language plays a great part in our life.” (Bloomfield, 2005, p. 3); “Language plays a very important part in science” (Bloomfield, 1939, p. 1).

³ Six decades later, L. Hjelmslev, the Danish linguist, would support the same idea: “...it is in the nature of language to be overlooked, to be a means and not an end, and it is only by artifice that the searchlight can be directed on the means of knowledge itself. This is true in daily life, where

discusses about those linguistic moments or events which make the speaker pass from the state of “unconsciousness” to that of “consciousness”: “On the other hand, however, the unconsciousness of the elements does not exclude an exact control over them. We may utter or hear a group of sounds to which we are accustomed without ever thinking that it is in fact precisely this group, made up in such and such a way; but as soon as in a single element a departure from the usual is observed – which departure needs to be but very slight – it is noticed, unless indeed any extraordinary obstacles supervene to prevent it; and each departure from the accustomed unconscious course of ideas naturally forces itself upon our consciousness. *Of course it does not follow that, with the consciousness of the departure, the consciousness of its nature and cause is also given*” (Paul, 1891, pp. 41-42).

3.2. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (published posthumously in 1916), is less subtle than Hermann Paul, pretending that the common speakers “are largely unconscious of the laws of language”: “On ajouterait que *la réflexion n’intervient pas dans la pratique d’un idiome; que les sujets sont, dans une large mesure, inconscients des lois de la langue; et s’ils ne s’en rendent pas compte, comment pourraient-ils les modifier? Fussent-ils même conscients, il faudrait se rappeler que les faits linguistiques ne provoquent guère la critique, en ce sens que chaque peuple est généralement satisfait de la langue qu’il a reçue*” (Saussure, 1955, p. 106)¹. A page further, he resumes the same idea: “Une langue constitue un système. [...] Car ce système est un mécanisme complexe; l’on ne peut le saisir que par la réflexion; ceux-là mêmes qui en font un usage journalier l’ignorent profondément” (Saussure, 1955, p. 107).²

4. Let us now return to the American tradition. It is well known that Bloomfield’s treatise *Language* (1933) highly influenced the American linguistics from the next decades (overshadowing, unfortunately, Sapir’s *Language*). Such a major influence was acknowledged by Charles F. Hockett, another great American linguist, whose

language normally does not come to consciousness; but it is equally true in scientific research” (Hjelmslev, 1963, p. 5).

¹ In translation: “Again, it might be added that *reflection does not enter into the active use of an idiom – speakers are largely unconscious of the laws of language; and if they are unaware of them, how could they modify them? Even if they were aware of these laws, we may be sure that their awareness would seldom lead to criticism, for people are generally satisfied with the language they have received*” (Saussure, 1959, p. 72).

² In translation: “A language constitutes a system. [...] The system is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflection; the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it” (Saussure, 1959, p. 73).

massive handbook, *A Course in Modern Linguistics* (1958), opens with the following words: “This book is about language, the most valuable single possession of the human race. Everyone, in every walk of life, is concerned with language in a practical way, for we make use of it in virtually everything we do. *For the most part our use of language is so automatic and natural that we pay no more attention to it than we do to our breathing or to the beating of our hearts*” (Hockett, 1958, p. 1).¹

4.1. Unlike his notorious American forerunners, after having remarked himself the “automatism” of linguistic activities, Hockett mentions the moments when speakers become “conscious” of the way language works: “But *sometimes our attention is drawn*: we are struck by the fact that others do not speak quite as we do, or we observe a child learning to talk, or we wonder whether one or another way of saying or writing is correct” (Hockett, 1958, p. 1). As seen, he refers to the manner in which speakers relate (as receivers), most often critically, to the others’ speech.

4.2. Otherwise, Hockett affirms (just as H. Paul and F. de Saussure) that “...*native control of a language does not in itself imply conscious understanding of how the language works, or ability to teach it* – any more than having cancer automatically makes one a specialist in cancer diagnosis and therapy” (Hockett, 1958, p. 2). We must admit, however, that Hockett’s analogy between the fact of knowing a language (as mother tongue) and the fact of suffering from a serious disease is not the most appropriate.

5. Referring to what H. Paul and F. de Saussure said, Eugenio Coseriu always showed an adversity against using terms as *unconscious* and *unconsciousness* when characterizing the common linguistic activity (see Coseriu, 1958, pp. 32-35 and Coseriu, 1992, pp. 214-234). Following Aristotle and Leibniz, he considers that linguistic knowledge is a “technical” knowledge (cf. O.Gr. *téchne*), a “know how” (cf. Munteanu, 2017, pp. 204-206); accordingly, speaking as such can never be an unconscious activity: “Considerado en su índole, el saber lingüístico es un *saber hacer*, es decir, un *saber técnico*. A veces se pretende que el hablar es un actividad «inconsciente» o que los hablantes «no tienen conciencia» de las normas de la lengua que hablan [...]; pero ésta es una idea infeliz y contradictoria, que debe

¹ Also cf. John Dewey’s observation regarding the similarly “natural” way in which thought works: “No one can tell another person in any definite way *how he should think, any more than how he ought to breathe or to have his blood circulate*” (Dewey, 1989, p. 113).

desecharse. Una actividad no-patológica de la conciencia despierta no es y no puede ser «inconsciente»” (Coseriu, 1958, p. 32).

5.1. What is more, the Romanian linguist makes a clear distinction between “to know how to use the linguistic instrument” and “to understand the linguistic instrument used”. In other words, this is the distinction between the knowledge of the speaker and the knowledge of the linguist: “La verdad es que los hablantes tienen plena conciencia del sistema y de las llamadas «leyes de la lengua». No sólo saben *qué* dicen, sino también *cómo* se dice (y cómo no se dice); de otro modo no podrían siquiera hablar. Es cierto, por otra parte, que no se trata de la «comprender» el instrumento lingüístico (que es asunto del lingüista), sino de *saber emplearlo*, de saber mantener (rehacer) la norma y crear de acuerdo con el sistema” (Coseriu, 1958, p. 34).

5.2. In addition, when trying to explain certain linguistic facts, the common speaker himself can make mistakes frequently, becoming a “naive linguist”. According to Coseriu, the common speaker can offer only the first justifications; his reflexive knowledge is insufficient (it is a *cognitio clara distincta inadaequata*, in Leibniz’s classification; cf. Coseriu, 1992, p. 230). On the contrary, the reflexive knowledge of the linguist tends to offer the final justifications.

6. Despite the criticism formulated by Coseriu, the problem of linguistic “unconsciousness” is far from being fully clarified. The confusions are generated by the ambiguity of the term *consciousness* itself, which may have multiple significations (sometimes depending on various philosophical or psychological schools). That is why I intend to analyze, in a future article, the way in which John Dewey discusses about the concept of “consciousness” in relation with language (and especially with different aspects of meaning).

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