THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE STRUCTURES AND THE EMERGENCE OF ANTIQUE PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

European philosophy is based on two basic oppositions: substance – accident and being – non-being. F. Rastier notes that human language differs from animal sign systems in that the former has a device to perceive non-being, wherein non-being is categorized into that in space and in time. However, the language norms that provide this device take time to shape. Mythological thought perceives and reflects the world "here and now". Thus, the transition from mythology to philosophy becomes possible only with the development of certain linguistic norms. This is only one side of the problem. The other one is that the human mind still puts non-being into certain linguistic forms while thinking of it. Thus, the philosophical analysis of non-being turns into the construction of a certain text, which in itself, is existential in nature. Is it possible to overcome the curse of Parmenides: "What does not exist, can neither be thought nor expressed"? The answer to this question is the essence of this work.

Keywords

Language structure, binary opposition, sign, cognitive semiotics, being, substance.

1. Introduction

The question of the causes of and prerequisites for the emergence of ancient philosophy is perhaps the most developed in the field of historiosophy. For centuries, the origins of Greek philosophical thought have been sought in the political, religious, general cultural and other spheres of the antique society. A typical example of this approach is the explanation of the reasons given by Hegel: "A certain image of philosophy is, therefore, simultaneous with a certain image of the peoples among whom it appears, with their state structure and form of government, with their morality, with their social life, with their skills, habits and comforts of life, with their attempts and works of art and science, with their religions, with their military destinies and foreign relations, with the death of the States in which this particular principle manifested its strength and with the emergence and appearance of new States, in which the supreme principle finds its birth and development" (Hegel, 1993).

In no way disputing the significance of the factors mentioned above, we presume to consider this issue from a fundamentally different point of view, which, to our knowledge, has not been encountered in philosophical research so far. It evolves the

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analysis of the linguistic prerequisites for the emergence of philosophical thought in Ancient Greece.

2. Philosophy as a unity of language and thinking

We should mention at the outset that what has been said about philosophical research does not mean that this problem was not launched at all - an excellent example of such an approach can be an article "Categories of thought and categories of language" by an outstanding linguist of the twentieth century E. Benveniste. The methodological principles of applying the methods of linguistics to the analysis of philosophical works are clearly presented in this article. Since we use this methodology in this paper, we will briefly consider Benveniste's main ideas.

The first two basic provisions relate to the properties of language in its relation to thinking: "One is that the very fact of language ... remains, as a rule, unconscious; with the exception of linguistic research per se, we are scarcely aware of the actions we are performing in the process of speaking. The other ... is that mental operations, regardless of their being abstract or concrete, are always expressed in language" (Benveniste, 1974). Based on this assumption, Benveniste seeks to deal with some ambiguities concerning the nature of language exclusively, but in fact his research goes far beyond the outlined problem, touching on the very core of the issue of the relationship between language and thinking. It is the second position that is point to start with. Below is its formulation, which sounds even stronger: "The linguistic form is ... not only a condition for the transmission of thought, but, above all, a condition for its implementation. The thought we comprehend is already framed in a linguistic framework... The question of whether thinking can proceed without language or bypass it, as if it were some kind of hindrance, turns out to be meaningless" (Benveniste, 1974). That is not to say that language and thinking are identified, many disparate features are observed, but the main message remains unchanged – there is no thinking without language. We can draw a curious parallel from here: the history of philosophy is nothing more than the history of human thought, therefore, the history of the development of language (in our case, ancient Greek) can shed light on some historiosophical issues.

Benveniste chooses Aristotle's "Categories" as the object of his research, pointing out that the text in question seems to have been specially created to consider the relationship between thinking and language. Ten categories, according to the Greek philosopher, describe everything that we can say about being exhaustively enough: "Each of the words expressed without any connection, means either being or quality or quantity or relation or place or time or position or possession or action or passivity" (Aristotle). In contrast to this opinion, Benveniste (1974) expresses the opposite point of view: "such types are primarily linguistic categories and distinguishing them as universal, Aristotle actually gets the basic and initial categories of the language in which he thinks as a result".

What follows is a detailed analysis of each of these categories in terms of their place in the grammatical system of the ancient Greek language. There is no point in giving an exhaustive list of or retelling Benveniste's arguments, but rather turn to the main conclusion: "He (Aristotle) believed that he had defined the properties of objects, but he had established only the essence of language: after all, it is the language, that, due to its own categories, gives us the means of recognizing and defining these properties… What can be said limits and organizes what can be thought" (Benveniste, 1974).

The primacy of language over thinking is an idea that was not a novelty in the days of Sepir and Whorf, who are referred to most often when the theory of linguistic

determinism is being mentioned. However, Benveniste does not limit himself to a simple statement and his analysis beyond the above categories. His research becomes truly philosophical when he writes: "Behind the Aristotelian terms, a comprehensive concept of 'being' emerges. Without being a predicate itself, 'to be' is a condition for the existence of all these predicates" (Benveniste, 1974). Considering the verb 'to be' precisely in the system of the Greek language (Koine) allows linguistics to link linguistic norms and the very core of philosophy: "... only in such peculiar linguistic conditions could the entire Greek metaphysics of 'being' have originated and flourished and the magnificent images of the poem by Parmenides and the dialectic of Plato's 'Sophist'... The very structure of the Greek language created the prerequisites for a philosophical understanding of the concept of 'being'" (Benveniste, 1974).

Benveniste's analysis seems complete given that he compares the use of the verb 'to be' in Greek with a similar use in Ewe – the language of a fundamentally different structure. And yet, in our opinion, this analysis is not fully completed and the methodology itself, proposed and used by the French linguist, urgently requires that it be completed.

Benveniste considers two key aspects – firstly, the use of the category of being and secondly, the application of possible predicates to the latter from the point of view of their position in the language structure. In both cases, however, it begs to involve paired categories. The analysis of being is impossible without its opposite – non–being, it is no coincidence that the first recorded written monument of philosophical thought – the famous saying of Anaximander - speaks precisely about being and non-being. When considering predicates, another pair of categories is needed: substance – accident. Complementing Benveniste's methodology with some later developments (recall that the first edition of General Linguistics was published in 1969), one can get unexpected conclusions not only about the content of antique philosophy, but also about its very origin.

3. Language strategy changing as the basis of the "substance - accident" opposition

First, it makes sense to consider the second case – the possibility and conditions for the occurrence of the 'substance – accident' pair, since it is associated with the separation of ancient Greek into a special class, as opposed to ancient Egyptian, Phoenician, etc. which were its contemporaries. But before we proceed directly to the languages of that era, the typology of languages should be dwelled upon.

Modern linguistics uses various typologies and classifications of languages, among which a classification by the type of language strategy or a content typology, can be observed. Languages are divided into *nominative, ergative* and *active* ones. Currently, the most common languages are nominative and ergative. In the first type, the strategy of constructing an utterance is based on subject-predicative relations with an emphasis on the dominant role of the acting subject; in the second one, the result of the action of this subject is at the center of the utterance. Of course, this division is not absolute – ergative sentences can occur in nominative languages and vice versa; obviously, we are speaking of the dominant, prevailing strategy only. That is, if a native speaker of a nominative language needs to talk about building a house, the most common variant of a sentence will be "I built a house", while in ergative – "The house was built by me". All European languages belong specifically to the nominative ones.

Only two strategies – nominative and ergative – had been believed to be used for a long time. But, as Klimov (1972) pointed out, "At present, it is possible to compare the third – the active system - to both of these integral systems". The proto-Indo-European language was precisely the language of the active type, as Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1974) showed. One of the most surprising characteristics of active-type languages is the lack of an adjective as part of speech. Quality and attribute are the integral essence of an object in its being and when they change, the word for the object also changes. The most striking example explaining this linguistic strategy is the concept of snow in the Eskimo language, where there are separate concepts for falling snow, melting snow, thin snow, etc. According to the legend, the number of such concepts reaches half a thousand, although F. Boas, who first drew attention to this phenomenon, indicated only four. Quantity, however, does not matter to us at all, the principle itself is important – not to attribute different qualities (expressed by an adjective) to the same object, but to create new concepts for it, expressed in different words, primarily verbs. So, a native speaker of the nominative language, seeing a rock-fall, will say "falling stones" (participle + noun), while a Hopi or Natku Indian will pronounce only one word, which can most accurately be translated as "to stone" (by analogy with "to evening", "to dawn", etc.) (Slobin, 1974). For a person using a nominative strategy, it is natural to separate the subject and the attribute. In ancient Greek, the transition from the active to the nominative type completed, which cannot be said, for example, about ancient Egyptian, in which adjectives and so-called verbs of quality were not distinguished between. Therefore, Ancient Egyptian, like the rest of the dead languages of the Afrasian family, refers to languages with an active strategy. The emergence of a new part of speech fixed the possibility of highlighting the unchangeable essence and variable features by means of thought. It was precisely the structure of language that allowed the first Greek philosophy of nature to appear as an attempt to isolate an unchangeable, permanent origin – substance, while variable signs fell under the category of accidents. Before the emergence of an adjective, before distinguishing it from a noun and a verb, it was impossible to pose such a question itself, since there was no linguistic form in which the difference between an object and a sign could be fixed in thought and expressed in language. Of course, this assumption requires careful and comprehensive analysis; nevertheless, in our opinion it shows the possibilities of linguistic analysis in the field of philosophy clearly enough: "...the grammatical meanings of a given language channel the attention of the speaking community in a certain direction and due to their obligatory compulsory nature, influence poetry, beliefs and even philosophical thought" (Jacobson, 1985). Perhaps we can even say that the ancient Greeks were doomed to create philosophy in the modern sense of the word and the ancient Egyptians, despite a fairly high cultural level, a complex system of social organization and developed religious and mythological ideas, etc., were basically unable to do this, because they did not possess the necessary means of language.

4. The opposition of "being - non-being" and the development of the system of verbal tenses

The analysis of the "being – non-being" pair from the point of view of language structures that let this pair to exist of in the form of linguistic and therefore, mental categories, is perhaps the most difficult to carry out. Nevertheless, the proposed methodology makes it possible to adequately cope with this task.

The general line of evolution of Greek thought is traditionally characterized as a transition from myth to logos. Traditionally, this process is associated with the special

"rationalism" of the ancient Greeks: "The fact that the mythology of the Greeks itself is considered by many scientists as a primitive way of explaining the phenomena of the surrounding world indicates that the myth-thinking of the Greeks was originally (genetically) intellectual in nature. And the anthropomorphism (unlike the zoomorphism of the mythology of the ancient Egyptians and other peoples of the Ancient East) of the religious and mythological representations of the ancient Hellenes itself is the evidence of their natural inclination to rational, logical thinking" (Cassidy, 2003).

However, such assertion raises a number of questions, the most important of which is the following one: what does the concept of "natural, original genetic inclination" mean? F. Cassidy tends to treat it as almost a biological predisposition of the Greeks to philosophy, but the possibility of a different interpretation of this phenomenon was shown above. Now we can try to analyze the mythological attitude to the world itself from the standpoint of semiotic-linguistic analysis.

One of the characteristic features of the myth, as noted by almost all researchers, is the lack of clear boundaries between opposites – normal and paranormal, natural and social, object and subject, subject and name, etc. In our opinion, the most important of such opposites is the pair "eternal – temporary". "The idea of a break between the eternal and the temporary ... is first outlined in Plato" (Cassidy, 2003). "... the Homeric epic reflects various historical epochs: the hoary antiquity, the recent past and modern life for Homer" (Cassidy, 2003). The myth is not experienced as a story about long–past events; it is a phenomenon of life that is continuing at the present moment. Belief in the reality of mythological events is neither historical nor anti-historical, but rather *non-historical*, the long-past is perceived as relevant. Myth does not depend on time, this is what always happens here and now: "There was no ... experience of history as a specific, unique and irreversible process in antiquity" (Losev, 2000), "The event was turned into a miracle and the story into a mystery" (Losev, 2000).

It does not seem to make sense to multiply confirmations of the non-historical nature of the myth, citing an increasing number of quotations. Summarizing what has been said, it should be noted that myth is a constantly relevant experience of being. We will attempt, within the framework of the proposed methodology, to consider this phenomenon from the point of view the ancient Greek language structure.

First of all, it should be noted that there was no single ancient Greek language, common to all Greek tribes and unchangeable in time. The archaic ancient Greek language differed significantly from the language of the antique classics. And the possibility of a fundamentally different understanding of the worldview of the ancient Greeks of the Homeric era lies in this difference.

The archaic ancient Greek language retained many features of its proto-Indo-European origin. First of all, it applies to the verb system: "The Indo-European verb system had a peculiar structure. It did not present a single conjugation system, but a number of independent verbal stems; verbal stems belonging to the same root existed independently of each other, without having certain necessary connections between them. This condition is largely preserved in the Greek language, especially in the language of Homer" (Chantren, 1953). One of the most important characteristics of the verb in its modern understanding is the ability to change in tense. And at this point, we can see the first surprising feature – the archaic system of verbal tenses differs sharply from the one we are familiar with: "It has been known for long that the Indo-European verb system did not rely on the category of tense. It rested rather on the way the action was performed, than on the temporary relationship, i.e. it relied on the opposition, which was of a generic

character. On this basis, three groups of formations that formed a conjugation system were distinguished: the presence formations, the aorist formations and the perfect formations. According to popular opinion, the forms of presence expressed the concept of an imperfect action, the forms of the aorist – the concept of a perfect action, while the forms of the perfect meant a state as a consequence of the action" (Safarevich, 1964). "The three main tense foundations were those of the present (of which the future should be regarded as a variant), the aorist and the perfect ones... the difference between these three foundations was not temporary, but specific in nature: they expressed rather the nature of the process itself...than the time at which the action took place. The present tense form denoted action as a continuing process; the aorist designated it in complete abstraction from duration: the perfect tense, standing somewhat apart and gradually losing its original meaning in the Greek language, before it disappeared completely, had denoted the state of the subject or object of action" (Chantren, 1953). The future tense turned out to be only a variant of the present in the very structure of the language and it could not be perceived precisely as the future, i.e. non-existent at the moment. The past had two forms, the analysis of which leads to interesting results.

The perfect tense, as Chantren points out, lost its meaning, although there should be distinct understanding that we are talking about archaic ancient Greek, considering the language of the Koine era had an explicit system of tenses at that time: "The Greek verb had... seven tenses: four main tenses and three historical tenses, namely:

The main tenses: 1) present
2 – 3) future I и III
4) perfect;
The historical tenses: 1) imperfect
2) aorist
3) plusquamperfect" (Sobolevsky, 2000).

There is no contradiction here: the original perfect was as if "dissolved" between the present and the aorist, since it did not express time of action, but rather an actual state, which was the result of some past action; however, it reappeared again, bearing a clearly temporal characteristic. The same thought was expressed by Benveniste (1974): "It is clear that the perfect tense was not a part of the system of tenses of the Greek language and stood apart, indicating, depending on the conditions of use, either a special way of representing the action in time or the mode of being of the subject". Since we are now interested in the archaic Greek language, which still retained many features of the pan–Indo-European grammatical structure, we can say that the perfect tense in the era of Homer was an expression of a state, notably a state at the present time.

Careful consideration of the aorist tense leads to similar results. This temporal form did not have direct relation to the past either: "... the past could serve to express the present in phrases of general meaning, maxims or sayings: for example, Homer said ος κε θεοις επιπειθητ ιμαλα τ`εκλυον αυτου with the aorist, translated into our language by the present: "God's Mercy is poured out upon his people". This type of aorist is called gnomic: it serves to express an action that does not essentially belong to any time and like any experienced truth, can relate both to the future, the present and the past... in most languages; the present tense seems to be the most convenient for this gnomic use. But in French, as in Latin, the future can also be used for this purpose: "Pulcra mulier nuda erit quam purpurata pulcrior" (Plautus, The Ghost, v.289) *(A beautiful woman will be more beautiful naked than dressed in purple)*" (Vandries, 1931). We can observe a similar phenomenon in the Russian language: in the statement "Здесь проходит железная

дорога", the present tense of the verb "проходит" does not actually have a semantic temporality. The railway was built in this place in the past, is running now and obviously, will run in the future. But for the Russian language, as Vandries points out, the form of the present tense is more common in such statements. Notably, the archaic ancient Greek preferred the gnomic aorist and this fact represents a lot to think about.

Once again, the use of the aorist to express both past, present and future tenses is indicative of the timeless nature of mythological thinking. The forms of language constricted the temporal perception of the world and affecting this perception by their very structure, forced an archaic language speaker to treat the past as the actual present unconsciously. Thus, the ancient Greek language of the Homeric era was not able to provide a device *to conceive non-being*. Howbeit, in Rastier's opinion (2003) (which we fully share), "in relation to the language of animals, the peculiarity of human language is the ability to talk about what is not here, that is, to create a zone of remoteness". However, based on the above, it becomes obvious that this feature is not found in the language initially, at least as far as the "zones of remoteness" in time are concerned.

5. Conclusion

Philosophy begins when the opposition of "being – non-being" arises. It is the device to conceive non-being provided by the grammatical forms of language that gave rise to Western European philosophical thought as a whole. However, as it was shown above, such device is not found in the ancient Greek language initially, it emerges much later than the Homeric language appeared. Rigid linguistic norms of expressing temporal relations did not take hold immediately; even in cases when there were three tense forms in the language, there were neither general rules of conjugation in time nor the forms of the present tense at first; the difference between past and future tenses was found in a word-stem, i.e. suppletive formation was developing. The changes in temporal word forms were acquiring a regular character over time, providing the means to conceive non-being from an analytical perspective, i.e. to speak about non-being.

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