The Principles of Linguistics as a Cultural Science

translated by Liviu Bleoca

"Scientia quo magis theorica, magis practica." (Leibniz)

When we speak about the principles of linguistics as a cultural science, we mean the principles of linguistics we'd like to contribute to, the principles that have guided us in our research, the principles we have tried to apply in everything we have achieved so far.

These principles are few in number, only five and quite simple, but, in my opinion, these five principles and their corollaries are basic.

1. The Principle of Objectivity

The first principle is one that goes beyond linguistics and all other sciences, because it is applied, explicitly or implicitly, in all sciences. It is the principle of objectivity, according to which any science presents or tends to present the object in its objectivity, such as it is *as an object*. This principle was formulated by Plato in his dialogue on the "*Sophist*", in the famous phrase τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν λέγειν, i.e. "to call things by their proper name". Plato was saying there that this is the characteristic, the essential feature of the *true logos*: λέγειν δὲ ὁ ἀληθής λόγος τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν, while the untrue logos says how things are *not*, or how they are viewed from one angle only, or how they used to be, or how they are only at a given moment, and so on.

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It would seem that this is the simplest principle and the easiest to apply: we look at objects, we examine them, and we describe them as they are. In reality, it is the most difficult principle to apply, because we never see objects in all their contexts, in all their necessary connections; we therefore tend to view them partly, we tend to consider things in themselves as they are seen from a certain angle, and quite often we forget to tell ourselves – which would save us in science! – that it is a view from a certain angle, and with certain limitations that cannot be eliminated or ignored.

But what does the principle of objectivity or "to call things by their proper name" mean for a science like linguistics?

If this principle is generally applied to all sciences and if, from this viewpoint, science is anyway universal in each case – even if you dwell upon details, upon most particular things –, because it is about the universality of things as such, in the case of linguistics, this principle of objectivity also implies a second one: the principle of humanism.

2. The Principle of Humanism

This principle is imposed by the fact that, in linguistics, we deal with an object which is a free activity, a human activity, namely an activity that is free in the philosophical sense of the word – that is, an activity whose object is endless, i.e. infinite. Therefore, this is about a constantly creative activity, up to a certain point, an activity like the artistic or the religious one, or like the scientific or the philosophical one. It is an activity of the type we call *culture* or, sometimes, spirit – the spirit being, in reality, nothing else than this creative activity as such, i.e. *enérgeia* as such, which materializes in these historical forms that we call – as concrete forms, materialized in history – *culture*. The spirit is activity and these very forms achieved through activity or this very activity materialized in history, i.e. culture. Among all these forms, one of them, and the fundamental one too – which we have no time to discuss in detail here – is *language* itself.

What does the principle of humanism mean for linguistics and, actually, for the other sciences of culture too?

First of all, this principle means that, in these sciences, we need no hypotheses, because we do not need anything to put "underneath facts" in order to be able to interpret them. This is because, here, we know facts – in a way – by what could be called "*original knowledge*": or even "original science", in the sense used by Husserl, i.e. by that kind of knowledge man has about himself and about everything he does as creative and free subject. This knowledge is undoubtedly intuitive, but it is the very basis and starting point for each cultural science, therefore for linguistics too. That is why, from the very beginning of my activity, I have talked precisely about the speaking subject's intuition. When, much later, the linguists in North America started talking about "the speaking subject's intuition", in reality this was not the same "original intuition" I had in mind, and it became clear that it could not be used as a basis, because they mistook the speaker's original intuitive knowledge for an already reflexive knowledge of the speaker *as linguist*, of the speaker talking about language – while the intuition I was referring to was the intu-

ition that shows in the act of speech and which has no other argument than "this is how you say it in my language" and nothing else (the same intuition that also shows in interpretation, in understanding and in accepting or rejecting without other arguments other people's speech).

This means that, in linguistics as well as in other sciences of culture, we start from what speakers already know as speakers, and we try to argue, to explain the intuition at the basis of the speakers' own act of speech. Using a phrasing that sometimes seemed paradoxical (to some), I once said – and I still maintain it today – that language does not function through and for linguists, it functions through and for speakers. As linguists, we should never forget this! The linguist should therefore start from the speaker or even from himself, but as speaker, as subject of language. Phrased in a more general form, in linguistics – just as in the other sciences of culture – this is the passage from what is "*bekannt*", i.e. "known intuitively", in the sense used by Hegel, to something that is "*erkannt*", i.e. "known in an argued, *well-founded* way". That is why I have often used Hegel's formula – "the passage from *bekannt* to *erkannt*" – or I have tried to situate linguistics within the framework of Leibniz's differentiation of knowledge according to degrees. In *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1684), Leibniz speaks about knowledge as science, ergo *cognitio adaequata* of what is with the speaker a *cognitio confusa*, i.e. an absolutely clear knowledge (for, with Leibniz, "confusa" is not opposed to *clara*), which however has no justification. The linguist's job is to justify this intuitive knowledge.

There might be objections to this principle: "Well, the principle in question is undoubtedly valid for whatever is universal, but we cannot know, on the basis of the original knowledge we have about ourselves, the historical data from the past, for instance. We cannot know particular data either, not even the present ones. We cannot learn, on the basis of our original knowledge, Japanese, for instance". This is indeed so. Original knowledge applies only to whatever is universal. Namely, original knowledge makes us understand what language is, what its function is, what a linguistic unit is, but we shall not know what they [its function and the respective unit] are in each case. However, it is for this very reason that, both in interpreting particular facts and in interpreting historical facts, the same original knowledge man has about himself is the basis for interpretation. People believe all too often that the historical interpretation of facts, for instance, is an interpretation that is not filtered by the subject and the subject's intuition. In reality, each and every interpretation in this field – where there are no other hypotheses than those we can conceive with regard to ourselves – is an explanation *from my viewpoint*. It is through this extremely difficult hermeneutic process that we assume the personality and the historical circumstances of the persons we speak about, in order to justify their acts, and ask ourselves what we would have done under similar circumstances, and why we would have done the same under similar circumstances. An English philosopher, who was somehow forgotten for a time due to a different tendency in English philosophy, but who has been appreciated more and more in recent years – Collingwood –, says that when we ask why Brutus killed Caesar, in reality we ask why I – under the historical circumstances of Brutus and Caesar's time – would have killed Caesar. This is not just how we *must* do, says Collingwood, this is indeed how any historian *does*, even if he thinks he does not. Consequently, in history too – this being however an equally synchronous

interpretation – the whole situation is reconstructed to the extent that it is possible and then we ask ourselves: "why would I have done this or that in this situation?" It is the same when explaining linguistic changes. In reality, the question is the same: *why would I have adopted this thing?* Obviously, we have to show, to prove that it is indeed so, that we have arguments for it. The fact that these arguments are sometimes difficult to find does not mean that we can apply another method or that we would get more valid results by using another method. As I once said, while talking about these very interpretations in history, the aesthetic interpretation of a novel may pose certain risks, but this does not mean that instead of an aesthetic interpretation we should weigh the novels to establish their value; because weighing has nothing to do with aesthetic value. And I argued that it is precisely this exactness of humanities, of cultural sciences, that depends on *original knowledge*, on what man knows about himself.

There are several corollaries to the principle of humanism. We cannot discuss them all now, but one seems to us utterly fundamental. It is the question of *the permanent unity between theory and empirical study* (in linguistics and in other cultural sciences, but mainly in linguistics, because there have been so many deviations here).

It is absurd, if we start from what is *bekannt*, to create theories independent of facts and then say that if they do not apply to reality, *tant pis pour la réalité*; no, in this case, the respective theory is faulty, not reality. When speaking about this aberration of the inapplicable theories, the Spanish philosopher Ortega said: "Una teoría que no se aplica no es una teoría, es una estupidez".

This is true about facts too: in reality, there is no empirical study without an at least intuitive theory at its basis. A well-done empirical study is therefore also a contribution to theory, just as theory is always a theory of facts, since theory means recognizing the universal in the particular, in the concrete. And among the numerous things I have learnt from Hegel, this is perhaps the most important from the pragmatic viewpoint of research: the fact that theory is the vision of the universal in the facts themselves, not outside them, it is not the construction of abstract models that are to be applied afterwards.

3. The Principle of Tradition

If the basis of linguistic studies lies each time in this *original knowledge*, in this *original cognizance*, this means that other people, like all people, can also be – in a sense – linguists or at least beginners in this field; certainly, if they are willing to turn from intuition to reflectivity. Hence the third principle: *the principle of tradition*.

I make no distinction between "modern linguistics" and "traditional", "old", or "prescientific" linguistics, as it has often been called. In the entire tradition, we come across these passings from intuition to reflectivity, which undoubtedly have their historical and, quite often, methodological shortcomings, but this does not mean that we should also reject them as ideas, as proposals for solutions, if they are indeed genuine in this respect.

Menéndez Pidal, another linguist from whom I have learnt a great deal (again in terms of attitude), said: "en la cultura lo premiero es la tradición, e dentro de la tradición lo

nuevo y lo revolucionario", i.e. "*culture is, above everything, tradition, and within tradition there are the new and the revolutionary*". It stands to reason that this applies also to the object, in our case, the cultural object called language: language is, above everything, tradition, and novelty is sometimes the first revolutionary speech act within tradition.

This helps us understand the *linguistic change* – what has been called "the evolution of languages" – as an internal change due to the inner dynamics of languages, which, in reality, are not static systems of already created or ready-made things, but systems of virtualities, systems of methods to speak, not just spoken systems. If we apply this principle to a particular language, we can say, for instance, that Romanian is not only the Romanian language that has materialized in texts, but the Romanian language with all its possibilities, therefore everything that may appear in the future as Romanian language, on the basis of the same virtualities, the same possibilities.

This principle also has an important application in connection with language correctness and so on: whatever is well-done and is necessary for/in certain speech needs/circumstances is correct.

I was saying that the principle of tradition applies to the object as well as to the knowledge of the object, consequently it applies also to the history of linguistics. This is the origin of my special interest – which sometimes has not been understood correctly – in the history of linguistics, and of my viewpoint with respect to the history of linguistics: namely, to see in each case whatever was profitable, what was the intuition of the objective truth, and what could be taken over and objectively enlarged upon. This, from Aristotle to Humboldt and beyond, in each case. My activity is therefore based on an effort to understand the whole science of linguistics and the whole philosophy of language of the past as activities dealing with the same issues. This premise banks on my boundless trust in man and his possibilities: it is a premise according to which people have always been intelligent, and therefore, if they sincerely and genuinely questioned what this or that thing was, then they also tried to give at least partly valid solutions. And if they could not provide wholly valid solutions, what we are supposed to do in history, in the history of a certain discipline and, in general, in interpreting a science or in the interpretation of interpretations, is to search for the grain of truth instead of criticizing whatever is wrong, obsolete, whatever had no consequence and could not have any consequence. It is good to point out and understand the shortcomings, but this activity of pointing out shortcomings is utterly counterproductive for the progress of science. Quite on the contrary, for the progress of science, it is profitable to see what is the true intuition, what is the grain of truth in a theory, explanation or interpretation, despite the historical moment and the shortcomings resulting from historical circumstances.

4. The Principle of Antidogmatism

This means to accept, with regard to the various types of linguistics and viewpoints on linguistics and language, a fourth principle: *the principle of antidogmatism.* Sometimes, the fact that I have constantly tried to find out what is good in each

theory or description, and *to select* precisely what was, in my opinion, true or at least partly true has been interpreted as a sort of option for eclecticism. I am happy that here, in Cluj, the interpretations I have mentioned remarked the very fact that this is not eclecticism, but critical rationalism; namely, to recognize the truth or the at least *partly true* intuition, where you find it, without making any concessions or giving up the unity of your outlook or theory.

When lecturing to my students, I phrase this aspect in a much simpler form: no mistake is *only* mistake, therefore even mistakes can be interpreted in terms of what is a grain of truth or at least a valid starting point, later deviated by partialness, arbitrariness, etc.

If we want to phrase the same thing on a much higher level, then we can refer to what Leibniz said about *philosophical systems*. He said that all philosophical systems are true in what they affirm and false in what they deny. Hence follows this generosity which I consider a duty of the scholar or of the scientist, this generosity with regard to each direction of linguistics. And even when I come to reject a whole theory, I do not reject it before I understand it *from within*, as I call it: what are its reasons, *why* this or that mistake was made.

[...] I think we can recall here at least two current interpretations of two linguistic trends.

The linguistic outlook of the great Danish linguist Hjelmslev has been quite often rejected with no other arguments except that allegedly what he proposed was an "algebra of language", i.e. it is mathematics rather than linguistics and, in fact, he cannot even be understood. Well, when we hear that something "cannot be understood", we should realize that this is, in most cases, self-criticism; it actually means: "*I* cannot understand", "*I* am not able to understand"; and the answer would be in this case: "then try to understand..." Now, about the other thing – that one can say that linguistics should not be a science of this kind –, we must first understand why it was necessary and even inevitable that linguistics should be this "algebra of language" to Hjelmslev. Hjelmslev considered that the language *as language* is only form, with no substance and independent of a certain substance; and he therefore understood that the study of language as language is a purely formal study. This is open to argument, but then we must discuss the principle itself, we cannot just say: "we simply reject this idea". And we shall also have to take into consideration the fact that Hjelmslev referred to the study of language *as language*, not to the study of language as materialized language, as speech, etc. On the contrary, Hjelmslev was also the director of a phonetics institute, and there he dealt with experimental phonetics and carried out an empirical study of sounds, and so on.

The other example is that of Leonard Bloomfield. In Hjelmslev's case, it is about a particular outlook on language that asks for a particular method. In Bloomfield's case, they said: "what can we do with a type of linguistics that does not deal with signification or that cannot tell us anything about signification?" This principle is open to argument, but we have to understand it first, and we also have to understand that, for Bloomfield, this elimination of signification was a sacrifice he considered absolutely necessary in order to ensure the complete, radical objectivity of linguistics. He knew all too well that – and the first definitions are taken from *Language* – "the linguistic form is a significant form", "so-and-so is a significant form". He was therefore aware that the whole

grammar and lexicology are *"semantics"*. However, if we admit that signification is something to be found only in conscience, then we cannot study signification, because conscience is not intersubjective; and consequently, owing to this outlook on science, the objective science must observe what can be observed intersubjectively, what could be observed even by a device (or a well-made machine). This outlook on science excludes introspection, it excludes the fact of speaking about what the linguist, as a speaker, knows too well. This was therefore a sacrifice and we must understand it as such; or, if we choose to be critical, we should say why it cannot be so, and why we cannot give up the study of signification; that is, we have to show that scientific objectivity itself requires that we study signification, because, in this case, the object can be recognized as object only when we assign it a signification. Otherwise, if we don't assign it a signification, it is not a sign either, it is not a word.

5. The Principle of Public Utility or Responsibility

Lastly, the 5th and last principle, *the principle of public utility* or *the principle of public responsibility* follows from the fact that when we speak about language and speech, we speak about what all speakers know intuitively as speakers, and we speak about a permanent activity of man, an activity man is interested in, which quite often leads him to political passions, an activity which is also instrumental – in order to learn other languages, to communicate with other cultures, or, in practical life, simply to contact other communities, and so on. Understood in this humanistic sense, linguistics cannot remain in an ivory tower, it cannot ignore the questions raised by speakers with regard to language and speech. This is the primary source of my interest in applying it in translation, language learning and teaching – and what I am trying to do here is to show the unity, in my opinion, of all forms of activities in the field of linguistics. In reality, this does not mean "to descend from beautiful and lofty theories into the deep valleys of the Josaphat". No; this is one of the scientist's duties. He must understand that he has a public responsibility: since this activity of translation, for instance, exists, linguists must explain translation and also help translators pass from an exclusively intuitive knowledge to a reflective knowledge. If the issue of language teaching presents itself – and it does, especially today, so acutely and everywhere –, then we undoubtedly need an understanding of language teaching, namely a theoretical understanding which we could, at the same time, apply. This is the explanation of some of my writings, which might seem utterly practical, but which are in fact practical because they start from a theory that *asks* for their application. Let us say it, yet again, with the words of someone who understood both theory and practice – Leibniz, whom I quoted in these very books on language teaching and the teaching of national languages: *"scientia quo magis theorica, magis practica"*, i.e. *"the more theoretical science is, the more practical it is"*. Therefore, no trace of contempt for practical issues, quite contrary!

Hence also the interest in the political aspects of language. It goes without saying that language – mainly common language and exemplary language – also represents a political issue for certain communities. The mere fact of adopting a certain language, of rec-

ognizing a certain otherness as one's own dimension is already a political act. The linguist must also explain this political significance of speech and languages. He is supposed to explain at least the meaning of the so-called "struggle between languages", of "linguistic planning", and so on.

Lastly, from the speaker's point of view, language is also an instrument (his and the community's), that asks for a certain materialization according to specific norms. And this awareness with regard to norms is to be found with each and every speaker, and, in reality, in whatever we do as conscious subjects, in any field. The speaker therefore wants to speak better, or he wants to speak correctly, because he sees this very norm, which is not only his, but the community's as well, and a norm of the language itself. He thus asks himself: "is this correct in Romanian?" He does not just affirm: "this is how I say it", he asks himself if what he says is correct. Hence the interest in the issue of correctness, in the issue of the exemplary language, in whatever actually interests the speaker, and also in establishing literary traditions and common language traditions, in all practical issues, and consequently in "linguistic planning" too, as I was saying. No issue is too minor, no fact is too unimportant if these issues and facts are also considered to have a sound scientific basis from the perspective of a universal and, at the same time, humanistic theory.

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