THE COLUMBIA HISTORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT

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Émile Benveniste
(1902–76)

Although in France the work of Émile Benveniste is usually considered the founding theory for the poststructuralist movement, as it displaces the focus of the linguistic approach from sign and language to discourse, Anglo-Saxon scholars of poetics and stylistics are more familiar with the writings of literary essayists (such as Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov), philosophers (Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault), and psychoanalysts (Jacques Lacan) who have been greatly influenced by Benveniste’s explanation, reevaluation, and criticism of the so-called Saussurian linguistic theory. Benveniste’s work debunks the very basis of structuralism and its emphasis on the concept of the sign, and in so doing it makes possible such key concepts as discours and écriture. Thus the writings of Continental thinkers of the 1970s follow his lead and explore the effects on discourse theory of this radical change in the way we look at language. Their work is considered the European basis of the so-called deconstructionist movement in the United States and, to a certain extent, of the postmodern movement also. Nevertheless the seminal reevaluation by Benveniste of the Saussurian linguistic theory that dominated the structuralist movement is at the core of the French intellectual reevaluation of the late twentieth century. This pivotal shift in the epistemology of human sciences is generally ignored or overlooked in the presentation of Benveniste in the Anglo-Saxon publications.

Benveniste’s academic and intellectual training did not predispose him to become a revolutionary thinker in the humanities. He earned his doctorate at the Sorbonne as a graduate student of Antoine Meillet, the best-known scholar of the so-called Paris school of linguistics in the first quarter of the century. Although Meillet was a personal friend of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, he is best known for his violent rejection of Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale, published in 1916, three years after the author’s death. Meillet called the book a fraud and declared: “It is a book that the Master did not write and that he would not have written.” Through a well-documented personal correspondence, Meillet knew of Saussure’s deep interest in the anthropological aspect of language and of his late work on classical anagrams. Thus he did not recognize the spirit of his colleague in this polemical book, which foregrounds synchrony and system over diachrony and society. In particular, the main line of the book, according to which “the study of linguistics is the study of language in itself and for itself” (la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même), was totally opposed to the general orientation of Meillet’s school and was perceived as a clear and direct polemical attack on a linguistic tradition dear to Saussure and Meillet. The general philosophy of the Paris school’s linguistic program, of which Benveniste was a student, was based on historical and comparative philology as developed by the Jung Grammatiker, a group of linguists active in Germany since the second half of the late nineteenth century, whose approach was based on the evolutionary model advanced by Charles Darwin for the natural sciences. In Paris, the influence of Émile Durkheim had given the approach a more sociological coloration than it had in Germany, and the anthropological tradition of the study of language in society was then an integral part of the global approach of the study of language according to a historical line of evolution.

Benveniste’s thesis can be considered a model for the type of work done at the Paris school because it combines Indo-European philology—in the form of a study of Sanskrit—
and, in a clearly Durkheimian fashion, a study of the societal organization of the civilization of that early period as it appeared in the texts that were available at the time. His work as a traditional Indo-Europeanist is represented by a philological work on the root of Sanskrit words in *Origines de la formation des noms en indo-européen* (1935, reprinted in 1984) and a theoretical study of the expression of action, *Noms d’agent et noms d’action en indo-européen* (1948). All his studies in the sociolinguistic tradition of the Paris school have been included in the two volumes of *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (1969). Volume 1 is titled *Économie, parenté, société,* and volume 2 *Pouvoir, droit, religion.*

Although these studies were remarkable achievements in themselves and remain authoritative texts in the field of Indo-Europeanist studies, it is Benveniste’s contribution to French intellectualism in the second half of the twentieth century that deserves special notice. In this respect, because of his long involvement with general linguistics, his career parallels that of Saussure.

Although his mentor Meillet had rejected the fundamental doctrine for general linguistics as found in the *Cours de linguistique générale* attributed to Saussure, Benveniste was one of the first linguists trained in the Paris school to look closely at its revolutionary ideas about language. Benveniste, like Saussure, was interested in the phonological changes in the evolution of early Indo-European languages. As theories underlying the new discipline of phonology were still in their infancy, Benveniste had to join the Prague Circle founded in 1926 by Czech (V. Mathesius, B. Trnka, J. Vachek) and Russian linguists (Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy) who wanted to go beyond the descriptive system of sounds as proposed by phonetics and study sound patterns and sound changes as they are systematically affected in the act of phonation (enunciation). The *Cours de linguistique générale* was used by the Prague Circle as the text of reference because it was one of the rare texts in linguistics to provide a general framework for the synchronic study of sounds in language. Because theories were articulated with or against the methodological propositions found in the *Cours*, Benveniste became acquainted with this text very early and started to write on it and on questions of general linguistics at a time when it was not yet a very important field within linguistics. In retrospect, it is extraordinary that one of Benveniste’s most controversial articles on the Saussurian position on sign theory, “Nature du signe linguistique,” was published in the founding issue of *Acta Linguistica* in 1939, whereas by 1946, one of the main French textbooks in linguistics (still, apparently, under the spell of Meillet’s early anathema against the *Cours*) still failed even to mention the name of Saussure.

In 1937 the Collège de France, in keeping with its original tradition of being the first of the institutions of higher education to offer new and often controversial disciplines, created a new chair in general linguistics. It was offered to Benveniste, who had been, with André Martinet, the best-known scholar in France of this new aspect of the study of language. Benveniste accepted that very prestigious position and held it until his death.

Benveniste’s influence as a general linguist can be divided into two distinct periods: 1935 to 1968 and 1969 to 1976. Although an extraordinary body of work was elaborated in total continuity between 1935 and 1976, nevertheless Benveniste’s reflection on language is marked by the clean break he made in 1968 from the Saussurian linguistic tradition. Unfortunately, in the United States, it is often the Benveniste of the first period who is recognized, the close reader and knowing exegete of the *Cours,* and very little mention is made of his far-reaching later work. Unknown as well is his exceptional contribution, in the early 1970s, to the elaboration of the key concepts of Continental poststructuralism.

Benveniste’s works in general linguistics were collected in the two volumes of *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966, 1974). His contribution to general linguistics and to the more global field of the theory of communication during the first period can be presented under four groupings that foreground subjectivity in language:

*Language* is first and foremost an act of communication. Contrary to the *Cours,* which is mostly a theoretical presentation of the organization and system of langue (rules of grammar and vocabulary), Benveniste studies language as an act of utterance in a context that includes aleatory spatiotemporal markers.

Because language is an act of communication, it is necessary to distinguish between the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance. In any utterance, there is the speaking subject (*sujet parlant*) and the topic under discussion.

In the case of pronouns, the nature of language in context gives value only to the pronouns of the first and second person; and the third person becomes a nonperson. This study of pronominalization in relation to the general theory of the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance had a considerable influence during the structuralist period in literary theory and in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This work was completed by a crucial addition devoted to the formal study of deictics and anaphors that explicitly mark the spatiotemporal orientation of the pronoun and thus give it its “value” in the utterance.

Two distinct narrative modes coexist in a narrative text. Taking into consideration the given copresence of the subject of utterance and the subject of enunciation,
Benveniste, while studying the French system of verb tenses, proposed to distinguish between histoire (story) and discours (discourse). Histoire is uttered without direct intervention by the speaker in the first person (sans aucune intervention du locuteur).

During this early period of his work, Benveniste patiently reformulated the Saussurian vulgate in general linguistics and posed the centrality of the act of the language and of the speaker; his main contribution was the progressive elaboration of linguistics of enunciation from the bases presented in the Cours.

In the late 1960s, several comparisons with the course notes of the students in the three seminars in general linguistics given by Saussure at the University of Geneva demonstrated the selective editing of the posthumous text of the Cours by two students. As Meillet had so vigorously proclaimed in 1916, the Cours did not fully represent Saussure's views on language. Within two years, it had lost its authoritative and intimidating power, and, in 1971, with Jean Starobinski's publication of Les mots sous les mots: Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure, the debate raged over the "real" (anthropological) Saussure and the "fake" Saussure of the synchronic and systematic Cours.

In this climate of intellectual instability, Benveniste offered the necessary leadership out of a rejected, linguistic structuralism. He ushered in a new generation of poststructuralist studies that adopted his central operative concept of discours to lead the reflection on texts and documents out of the somewhat stifling linguistic mold. His foundational act was the slaying of the concept of sign that was essential to the Cours and to structuralism. In 1969 Benveniste wrote in "Sémiologie de la langue": "We must go beyond Saussure's concern with the sign as a unique principle" determining the structure and the function of language.

During the last years of his life, Benveniste expanded on this new definition of discours without reference to the Saussurian sign. He constructed a theory of the universe of discourse as a system in which meaning is constituted "beyond the sentence." In this final conception of the production of meaning in discourse, he relies on elaborate relationships of presupposition, context, argumentative coherence, and the worldview of the speaker (sujet-parlant). Calling this a "second-generation semiology," Benveniste proposed the elaboration of a metasemantics that would eventually provide the utterance's ultimate "sense" (signification).

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Further Reading

