

## REVIEW ARTICLE

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### CHARLES TAYLOR'S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE\*

Review article of Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal. The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2016. x + 352pp. ISBN978-0-674-66020-5.

The article presents Charles Taylor's critical philosophy of language and it reviews his recent book on the human linguistic capacity. Critical philosophy of language is understood here as a broad (philosophical, social and political) perspective on language characterized by multifaceted concern with the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms involved in language use. The paper discusses Taylor's interest in language and philosophy of language, and focuses on his seminal distinction between the 'designative-instrumental' and 'constitutive-expressive' theories of language. In the former theory language is understood within the confines of Cartesian representational epistemology, whereas in the latter language constitutes meaning and shapes human experience (one of the features important for defining the critical approach to philosophy of language).

Keywords: *Charles Taylor, The Language Animal, critical philosophy of language, designative theory, constitutive theory*

#### 1. Introduction: Charles Taylor's Critical Philosophy of Language

Charles Taylor, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at McGill University, is one of the most important and influential contemporary philosophers; he has published extensively on philosophy and human sciences,

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especially on political philosophy, on the individual and society, and on religion and secularity. His interest in language has been clearly seen already in earlier work, with the papers collected in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Taylor 1985) and *Philosophical Arguments* (Taylor 1995) offering an important critique of the dominant form of philosophy of language. Taylor described the agenda underlying his studies as ‘philosophical anthropology’ (Taylor 1985: 1),<sup>1</sup> and justified the interest in language, linguistics and philosophy in the following way:

Language is a central area of concern in the twentieth century. This is evident on all sides. First, our century has seen the birth and explosive growth of the science of linguistics. (...) But what is even more striking is the partial hegemony, if one can put it this way, that linguistics has won over other disciplines. (...) And then we have to add that some of the most influential philosophical movements of the century have given language a central place; they have not only been concerned with language as one of the problems of philosophy, but have also been linguistic, in that philosophical understanding is essentially bound up with the understanding of the medium of language. (Taylor 1985: 215)

The language debate itself reverberates through a number of hotly debated questions in aesthetics, poetics, literary criticism, philosophy, human sciences. (...) Language makes possible the disclosure of the human world. (Taylor 1995: ix)

The term ‘philosophical anthropology’ might be also applied to Taylor’s most recent book, *The Language Animal*, which develops several of the ideas already explicitly formulated in *Human Agency and Language* (especially in part III, ‘Philosophy of Language’), and also in *Philosophical Arguments*.

Another possible term, adequately describing Taylor’s enterprise, would be ‘critical philosophy of language’, understood as a broad (philosophical, social and political) perspective on language and multifaceted concern with the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms involved in language use and in shaping human experience.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of Taylor’s philosophy of language is manifest especially in his constitutive theory, where language constitutes meaning, in line with his earlier remark: “Obviously a view of human life as constituted by self-understanding is one in which the philosophy of language will play a central role” (Taylor 1985: 9). Thus understood critical philosophy of language bears some interesting affinity to the ‘social turn’ in the study of language, where language is seen as social communication technology for the

<sup>1</sup> He notes, though, that “this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy” (Taylor 1985: 1); at the same time, however, the choice of the term points to deep affinities with Kant’s philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the term ‘critical’ (in contemporary discourse studies), see Hart and Cap (2014), and the references therein; on the ‘critical turn’ (in relation to epistemology), as inaugurated by Kant, see Dreyfus and Taylor (2015: 4-5).

instruction of imagination, in the sense of Daniel Dor (2015).<sup>3</sup> The relation between language and imagination was already mentioned by Taylor in *Human Agency and Language*, where he also stressed the influence of Wittgenstein: “To understand a language you need to understand the social life and outlook of those who speak it. Wittgenstein put it very well: ‘To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.’” (Taylor 1985: 281). The reference here is to *Philosophical Investigations* (Part I, §19); where Wittgenstein also comments, in the context of discussing language-games, that “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (*PI* §23).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *The Language Animal*

Taylor is concerned in *The Language Animal* with the human linguistic capacity, and he demonstrates that it includes “capacities of meaning creation which go far beyond that of encoding and communicating information, which is too often taken as its central form” (ix). Taylor’s philosophy of language is inspired by German Romanticism, and especially the works of Johann Georg Hamann, Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt (hence the acronym HHH). The basic thesis of the book, repeated and justified throughout, is that “language can only be understood if we understand its constitutive role in human life” (261), which reflects his earlier thesis that “understanding language is understanding how we represent things in language” (Taylor 1985: 254), or, in yet a slightly different recent reformulation:

Language not only serves to describe what we have already identified and singled out, but can also be used to give expression to new ways of talking, thinking, questioning – and therefore bring them for the first time into our repertory. (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015: 104)

The book is composed of three parts. In Part I, ‘Language as Constitutive’, Taylor discusses and contrasts the designative and constitutive views, comments on language growth, and moves beyond information encoding. In Part II, ‘From Descriptive to Constitutive’, he moves from the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac theory to the constitutive approach, with two additional sections on linguistic constitution and constitutive power – ‘Constitution 1: The Articulation of Meaning’, and ‘Constitution 2: The Creative Force of Discourse’. Part III is

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent discussion comparing the proposals of Charles Taylor and Daniel Dor, see Pawelec (2017), who points to some possible areas of convergence in the two discussed approaches.

<sup>4</sup> A complementary perspective on the relations linking forms of life, language and imagination, is offered by Stanley Cavell, who observes, also in the context of Wittgenstein’s thought expressed in *PI* §19, that: “When a form of life can no longer be imagined, its language can no longer be understood” (Cavell 1976: 172).

concerned with ‘Further Applications’, and Taylor discusses there the issue of narratives, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and speculates about the range of human linguistic capacities.

Throughout his work Taylor contrasts two types of theory of language, the ‘designative-instrumental’, with the ‘constitutive-expressive’ one. In the first type, associated with, among other, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Étienne Condillac (hence HLC), “the attempt is made to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behavior, purpose or mental functioning, which is itself defined without reference to language” (3). This is an ‘enframing’ theory, also referred to as the ‘designative-instrumental’ theory, in which language was understood within the confines of Cartesian representational epistemology.<sup>5</sup> Taylor observes that this theory, though highly inadequate to contemporary thinkers (influenced by de Saussure on the one hand, and Frege on the other), has nevertheless survived into analytic post-Fregean philosophy, as well as some approaches within cognitive theory.

On the other hand, the ‘constitutive’ theory presents language as making possible new purposes, new meanings, “and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language” (4). Language in this theory constitutes meaning and shapes human experience. The two theories belong to “very different understandings of human life” (4), with the constitutive theory of language breaking out of the bounds of the enframing (33). As explained by Taylor in his *Philosophical Arguments* language in the ‘designative-instrumental’ (enframing) framework:

[c]an be seen as arising within this framework, and fulfilling a certain function within it, but the framework itself precedes or at least can be characterized independently of language. By contrast, a “constitutive” theory gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings, and hence is not explicable within a framework of human life conceived without language. (Taylor 1995: 101)

Another comparison of the theories was provided in *Human Agency and Language*, where Taylor observed that: “In each dimension we relate the sentence to something different: to the objects it is about, in one; and to the thought it expresses, in the other” (Taylor 1985: 219). Hence, Taylor’s two types of theory of language point to different classes of ontologies, the abstract one in the former case, and the psychological one in the latter.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For further critical remarks on Cartesian epistemology, see Dreyfus and Taylor (2015).

<sup>6</sup> On classes of ontology see Santana (2016), who observes that: “Linguists (and philosophers of language) have long disagreed about the ontology of language, and thus about the proper subject matter of their disciplines. (...) So in answer to the descriptive question ‘What is language?’ we must respond that there are actually many types of language, roughly sortable in to three classes of ontologies, one psychological, one social, and one abstract” (Santana 2016: 501-502).

Taylor provides a meticulous analysis of Locke's and Condillac's view through Herder's standpoint, and observes that the latter's theory of language is holistic "in the way that the traditional view he was criticizing was not" (12). An important feature of Herder's holism was holism of meaning: "a word only has meaning within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life" (17). A more recent application in philosophy of this insight can be found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*; Taylor stresses that according to Wittgenstein "our words only have the meaning they have within the 'language games' we play with them, and these in turn find their context in a whole form of life" (21). However, as remarked by Hilary Putnam "The real problem is not to describe the language game we play with words like 'meaning' and 'understanding' but to answer the deeper question, 'What is the point of the game?'" (Putnam 1975: 36).<sup>7</sup>

Taylor's analyses and his philosophy of language transcend language: this "holism of meaning is inextricably connected to the fact that human beings as linguistic animals also live in a bigger world, which goes beyond the episodic presence" (21-22); furthermore, with humans, enacting a meaning lies fully within the linguistic dimension: and hence this enacting "can help constitute a meaning which wasn't in our world before" (45). In the constitutive approach language can open human beings to new possibilities in two ways: the accessive and the existential. In the accessive "we sense that language is enabling us to have 'reflective' awareness of what previously was there" (46), in the existential way we see that language "is opening us to new human meanings, new existential possibilities" (46). Taylor also observes that "linguistic beings can be sensitive to distinctions which are lost on prelinguistic animals. Important among these are distinctions involving moral or other values" (28). These fragments (and the following discussion) demonstrate how Taylor's philosophy of language can justify the linguistic foundations of values (an important aspect of the critical approach).

In Chapter 2, 'How Language Grows', Taylor looks at the ontogenesis of language. His claims here are rather traditional (and even controversial): "the first obvious fact is that children can only become speakers by being taught language" (52). In contemporary theories, influenced by the Chomskyan approach, the first (not always that obvious) fact is that there needs to be a necessary mental state enabling language acquisition, and acquisition is triggered by experience (i.e. contact with language). Taylor further claims that "language cannot be generated from within; it can only come to the child from her milieu – although once it is mastered, innovation becomes possible" (55). Again, in the generative (and not only) paradigm language is – by definition

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<sup>7</sup> See, however, a recent study by Sebastian Sunday Grève, who considers Wittgenstein's language-games as constituting a logic for philosophy, "clear and simple models for logical analysis" (Grève 2018: 180).

– the generating device<sup>8</sup>, and the notion of Universal Grammar is of utmost importance for language acquisition. In this chapter Taylor also mentions ritual and ceremonies, noting that though human life is inconceivable without them, the “performative dimension seems to have withered” (82). Nevertheless, the continuing importance of ritual is further explored in Chapter 7, devoted to the creative force of discourse.

Chapter 3 moves ‘Beyond Information Encoding’, and Taylor argues here for the superiority of the HHH by providing an analysis of the shortcomings of the HLC. He claims that the functions of description and information-coding are very far from exhausting the functions, uses and potentials of language, and that the descriptive function cannot be exercised independently of the other functions (88-89). He also discusses linguistic awareness and linguistic consciousness, and observes that “the world as we live it at any time is full of things and states which we can describe, matters that we can formulate; and at the boundary, there are others that we can’t yet articulate, but might be invited to at any moment” (93), in this context he also stresses the constitutive force of discourse. An apt metaphor concludes this chapter: ‘The “country” of language goes way beyond the “province” of information-encoding, important as this is’ (99).

In Chapter 4 Taylor looks back in more detail at the theory which Herder challenged, and identifies the following main features of the account of language developed by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac: its dependence upon the Cartesian model of epistemology, its tendency to reify the mind, voluntarism, and two kinds of atomism (applied to the objects of thought, and to the subjects of thought), its “constitutional anti-Cratylism, which carries with it a phobia against tropes of all kinds” (111). Final sections of this chapter look at the legacy of the designative-instrumental view of language, at the “post-Fregean successors of HLC [who] are still immersed in various ways in the modern epistemology which stems from Descartes” (116). Taylor seems to parallel here the theories of language proposed by Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett on the one hand, and Noam Chomsky on the other. Whereas it is possible to attribute a post-Fregean approach to language (especially semantics) to the former philosophers, Chomsky’s approach (the prominence of syntax and rejection of Fregean semantics) definitely does not qualify as post-Fregean. This issue is connected with the fundamentally different ontologies and epistemological assumptions underlying these approaches, very briefly (and admittedly inadequately): more ‘linguistic’ for Chomsky, whereas ‘philosophical’ for Dummett and Davidson.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the figuring dimensions of language. An important aspect of figuring is that it “is not arbitrary; we grasp it, and often approve it, because it fits” (130). Taylor devotes considerable attention to the consequences

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<sup>8</sup> See *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky 1957) for an early discussion of language as a device that generates grammatical sentences, and more recent studies on Universal Grammar, which consists of the mechanisms specific to the faculty of language, arising in the course of evolution of language (cf. e.g. Chomsky 2007, 2016).

of the Saussurean thesis of arbitrariness (stressing that it needs modification), and to symbols and metaphors within different theories and approaches, including Black's and Davidson's approaches, and Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive theory of metaphor.

The second part of the book concludes with two chapters devoted to different modes of linguistic constitution and constitutive force of certain descriptions and discourse: 'Constitution 1: The Articulation of Meaning', and 'Constitution 2: The Creative Force of Discourse'. In Chapter 6 Taylor takes on the issue of semantic innovation. He returns to Humboldt's remark that "possessing a language is to be continuously involved in trying to extend its powers of articulation" (177), on which Taylor comments "we always sense that there are things we cannot properly say, but we would like to express" (177). The chapter provides interesting philosophical observations on the potential universality of the linguistic system, especially the issue how novel meanings can be described and formulated (in connection with various philosophical traditions, development of culture and ethics). Very importantly, Taylor stresses that "constitutive theories must go for the full range of expressive modes (what Cassirer called the "symbolic forms")" (263), pointing to yet another source of possible inspirations.

Chapter 7 discusses the creative power of discourse, and looks at performative speech, speech events, and the pragmatics of speech, in the tradition of both Emile Benveniste, on the one hand, and John Austin and John Searle, on the other. In this chapter Taylor also makes a strong claim (echoing the work of Searle) that "a complex of key phenomena, norms, footings, institutions, social orders, political structures and the offices that figure in them are constituted and transformed in discourse" (283), and concludes with stressing his position that understanding language "involves seeing it in the context of meaningful enactment, and the whole range of symbolic forms" (288).<sup>9</sup>

Part III offers two sketches on further applications of Taylor's approach: on meanings in narratives (where the telling of stories in fact and fiction is seen as a creative and constitutive feature of language), and on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis viewed in the light of the constitutive uses of language. In Chapter 8 Taylor defends the idea that "stories give us an understanding of life, people, and what happens to them which is peculiar (i.e., distinct from what other forms, like works of science and philosophy, can give us), and also unsubstitutable (i.e., what they show us can't be translated without remainder into other media)" (291), and that "it is through story that we find or devise ways of living bearably in time" (319).

A general conclusion on the range of human linguistic capacity closes the volume. Taylor stresses that the linguistic capacity is not only intellectual but also embodied, social and shared, "it sustains a shared consciousness of the world,

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<sup>9</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) offer an interesting comparison of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Searle on action.

within which individuals differentiate themselves by becoming particular voices in an ongoing conversation”, and that “our language straddles the boundary between ‘mind’ and body; also that between dialogical and monological” (333).

### 3. Conclusion

Taylor mentions in the Preface to *The Language Animal*, and once again in the closing lines of the volume, that he intended to complement the original project with a study of certain strands of the post-Romantic tradition (x; 345); though this second part remains to be completed, the present book is rich in insights into Romantic and post-Romantic poetics and theory of language. This is a very refreshing book, rich in thought and ideas, transcending the field of philosophy of language. In the opening sections of the book Taylor observes that “all major philosophers have their theories of language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Davidson, Derrida” (3) (and one might easily add numerous names to this short list), the reviewed book clearly demonstrates that Charles Taylor has his own, distinctive, highly original, and hopefully influential, critical theory of language. In 2016 Charles Taylor was awarded The Berggruen Prize. This prize is “awarded annually to a thinker whose ideas are of broad significance for shaping human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity”.<sup>10</sup> *The Language Animal* perfectly fits into this description.

Noam Chomsky, another immensely influential and important contemporary American thinker, asked in his 2013 Dewey lectures the famous question: “What Kind of Creatures Are We?” (cf. Chomsky 2016), echoing Kant’s question: “What is Man” (posed in his *Logic*, 1800). Charles Taylor provides the answer: we are “the Language Animal”. Crucial methodological and theoretical (probably even impassable) differences notwithstanding, Taylor’s and Chomsky’s books provide fascinating examples of contemporary inquiry into human language, the language faculty and linguistic capacity.

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<sup>10</sup> As reported by *Daily Nous* – <http://dailynous.com/2016/10/04/charles-taylor-wins-million-dollar-berggruen-prize/>



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