

Multilingualism in works of Linguists and Philosophers of the first half of the 20th century

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ABSTRACT

La dinamica dei processi linguistici e culturali nel mondo e in Europa durante il XX secolo ha dimostrato l'interesse dei ricercatori per il fenomeno della formazione del carattere transnazionale dell'identità europea. L'articolo studia questo tema attraverso il multilinguismo che è stato discusso da filosofi e linguisti russi ed europei della prima metà del secolo scorso. Secondo A. Meillet (1866-1936) la situazione linguistica in Europa in quel periodo era problematica. Un gruppo di pensatori considerava la molteplicità delle lingue come un ostacolo alla comunicazione tra i popoli e cercava di creare una lingua universale (Esperanto). Altri riconoscevano l'importanza di ogni lingua che esprimeva l'identità nazionale dei popoli. Alcuni autori cercarono di spiegare la diversità delle lingue con la leggenda della Torre di Babele, che appare come l'immagine dell'Europa multilingue. Il problema della natura divina del linguaggio umano interessò, più degli altri, i filosofi russi N. Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), S. Bulgakov (1871-1944), P. Florenskij (1882-1937). Essi dimostrarono come il problema non fosse puramente linguistico, ma anche epistemologico e cognitivo. Il tema appare di nuovo in opere di pensatori contemporanei dell'inizio del XXI secolo. Essi sono alla ricerca dell'unità nella diversità linguistica e culturale dell'Europa. Nelle loro opere, l'immagine transnazionale della cultura europea si manifesta a livello di idee e valori condivisi tra diversi popoli.

Parole chiave: identità europea, multilinguismo, Bulgakov, Trubetzkoy, Torre di Babele, lingua universale

European Multilingualism. Emergence of concept

The first half of the 20th century was a crucial period for the emergence of many concepts and notions which determined the scientific directions for the next decades. It particularly concerns some concepts related to the diversity of languages and cultures such as *multilingualism* and *multiculturalism*¹. According to Umberto Eco's remark the history of Europe begins not from the dates of great political events and

¹This topic is especially relevant for multilingual and multicultural Europe and for the formation and existence of the concept of *European identity* today. The concept of *European identity* itself appeared in 1973.

battles but from the dates of linguistic events. “Europe first appeared as Babel of new languages. Only afterwards was it a mosaic of nations” (Eco 1995, 18). The idea that the main drama of Europe consists in the language fragmentation as a multilingual civilization forces us to reflect on the positive and negative sides of these linguistic processes as well as to trace their main regularities.

In the early 20th century certain European intellectuals observed the main paradox in the contemporary linguistic situation in the world and in Europe in particular². On the one hand they spoke about the multiplicity of languages, on the other hand they noted the idea of the unity of humanity.

Linguistic paradox in Europe of the early 20th century

A French linguist Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) was very interested in the phenomenon. On the one hand the world was moving towards the unification of civilization, on the other he noticed the desire of more and more nationalities to possess their own language. In his book *Les langues dans l'Europe nouvelle* [Languages in New Europe] (1928) he spoke about “the paradoxical linguistic situation in Europe today” because “the world tends to have only one civilization, but the languages of civilization are multiplying” (Meillet 1928, 2).

Describing the linguistic situation in Europe after the First World War the linguist observed new political, economic and social conditions that resulted from the last war and determined new languages in the world. He highlighted the fact that multilingualism was an essential quality of the European civilization and that “the languages which serve as organs of this civilization are very diverse and are constantly becoming more numerous. The knowledge of German, English, Spanish, French and Italian is no longer enough for anyone who wants to keep in touch with the modern civilization” (Meillet 1928, 9-10).

Speaking about the coexistence of different civilizations such as European, Chinese and Arab-Muslim the linguist stated that their relatively small number can be explained by the inescapable fact that the world was gradually moving towards the *unity of civilizations*. We can see this paradox everywhere in the world because “the number of languages of civilization used by cultured men to express their culture is growing without benefit to universal culture and yet the right of those who create or develop them cannot be disputed” (Meillet 1928, 3). Looking at contrasting universal culture and national cultures he remarked that there was no way to resolve this contradiction in the present state of Europe.

Let us emphasize however that it is just the multiplicity and similarity of European languages which can be seen on the level of common notions and concepts and which allow us to speak about the specificity of

²We would like to note that in Europe in the 19th century the interest aroused by the linguistic multiplicity was enormous. Thanks to the research dedicated to comparative linguistics the description of languages became a guiding principle of linguistic study and the phenomenon of language diversity was no longer considered a handicap for humanity but as its wealth. We can take W. Humboldt (1767-1835), W. Whitney (1827- 1894), A. Schleicher (1821-1868), M. Müller (1823-1900) as an example.

the European Civilization and prove the equality of its peoples. The civilization according to the linguist is becoming more united, the languages and even the great literary languages express the same things in different yet similar ways, the notions do not vary in terms of the words which express them, and all the languages of Europe tend to be the copy of each other (Meillet 1928, 2-3). Moreover, the author links the emergence of universal democracy to the emergence of universal modes of expression and communication.

Most importantly, this historical period was characterized by the atmosphere of international communication in the world and the people did not feel isolated but had a sense of belonging to the international community. Many intellectuals acknowledged the importance of international unification and sought to remove communication barriers among peoples. Many of them thought that one of these obstacles was the multiplicity of language.

New Tower of Babel

In the early 20th century, the scientific and technological revolution influenced the interaction of cultures and values in the world. The atmosphere of the world unification did not lie only in the linguistic field but also in the scientific one. It was not a coincidence at that time that many scientists compare the modern multicultural world with the *Tower of Babel*.

For example, Jean-Gaston Darboux (1842-1917), a famous French mathematician in his article on the birth of the International Association of Academies in 1900 tried to justify the reason for the unification of research organizations. He compares the organization of scientific work at the international level with the *Tower of Babel* as an enormous scientific production which must be unified and coordinated. He observes a great change in the scientific movement of that time: while at the beginning of the 19th century it was limited to a small number of nations, in the early 20th century it extended across the whole world. He declared the main condition of the scientific work of his time which was *the unity in the diversity* of methods and measurements. If definitions are not the same, if the units adopted are different, if instruments chosen to take the same measurements are not comparable in different countries, if nomenclatures change from country to country, the researchers are losing their time (Darboux 1901).

The titles of some books reflect the idea of the need for an international auxiliary language and help us grasp the atmosphere of understanding and cooperation among scholars of all countries at that time. Two French authors Louis Couturat and Léopold Léau in the book of *Histoire de la langue universelle* [History of the Universal Language] (1903) stated the idea of the necessity of an auxiliary international language that imposes itself with increasing urgency and evidence as relationships of any kind among nations develop. They say that the desire for communication was observed primarily in the scientific world and was associated with the scientific progress of their time: “Soon it will be possible to travel around the world in forty days; telegraphy (even wireless) is available from one side of the Atlantic to the other; telephones are available from Paris to London, Berlin and Turin. These communication facilities have led to a corresponding extension of economic relations: the European market extends over the whole world...” (Couturat and Léau 1903, 7-8).

Nostalgia for the universal language

It is not surprising, that at the turn of the century there were many attempts to create a universal language that would provide communication in the multicultural and multilinguistic world. One of the best-known and the most successful of them was Esperanto (1887), an international language that was intended to help facilitate communication among people of all backgrounds and cultures. During his life, Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), the creator of Esperanto was fascinated by the idea of making a tolerant world free from the war that is rooted in the plurality of languages. However, artificial manmade languages could not substitute the natural ones and did not last long. It seems that the supreme advantage and value of Esperanto was to express the unity of European civilization speaking related languages³.

Joy of cultural and linguistic diversity in the world.

N. Trubetzkoy - *The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Languages* (1923)

The topic of the confusion of languages in Babel appears in the works of many European intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century. They believed that this myth could help to understand the causes of the multiplication and transformation of languages. Some of them, such as a Russian linguist and philosopher Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890-1938) saw this situation from a philosophical and religious perspective. One example that explains this linguistic paradox in the world can be found in his article *Vavilonskaja bašnja i smešenie jazykov* [The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Languages] (1923).

Trubetzkoy was very interested in the relationship between the universal European individual in languages and cultures. He noted that European culture was subordinate to the law of the diversity of national cultures, that is why the communication among different peoples is difficult and with a certain degree of difference among cultures, it becomes quite impossible. Considering the universal value and unifying role of Christianity Trubetzkoy came up with the idea that the diversity and autonomy of cultures and languages was necessary: Christianity is above races and cultures, but it does not abolish their variety and individuality. Trubetzkoy interpreted the episode of the Tower of Babel as follows: God decided that the universal culture did not make sense and therefore gave people the joy of having different cultures and languages. According to the linguist, there is a clear intrinsic link between the construction of the tower and the notion of the universal and homogeneous culture.

Trubetzkoy sees the sinfulness of modern European civilization in levelling out and abolishing all the individual and national differences throughout the world and introducing similar forms of life, social and state structures and concepts. Breaking down the spiritual foundations of life and culture of peoples “this uniformity of cultures does not and cannot replace them by any other spiritual foundations and imposes external forms of life resting only on material, utilitarian or rationalistic foundation” (Trubetzkoy 1923,

³At early 20th century, some Russian writers and poets examine the multiplicity of languages and dream of the universal and primordial language, the one before Babel. The futurist Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922) is a good example of such poets. Khlebnikov creates *zaum* [the transmental language which represents a universal system of signs, making a bridge not only among arts but also among peoples. The rules of semantisation of sounds could perfectly become common to all peoples (Khlebnikov 1921 [1970]).

113). Such processes in European civilization bring a great devastation to the souls of Europeanized peoples, making them spiritually barren, morally indifferent or “feral”.

According to Trubetzkoy this state of European civilization leads to the establishment of that state of humanity which the Scripture depicts as immediately preceding the Babylonian pillar and this state must inevitably lead only to a new attempt to build the tower of Babel. All internationalism is not accidental but essentially godless, anti-religious and full of human pride. This view of the diversity of languages is very interesting because it shows us the positive sides of this phenomenon and makes us think about the use of national cultures and languages in global scale.

Language Multiplicity in Christian perspective. S. Bulgakov - *The Philosophy of the Name* (1953)

The philosophical framework of this article is the beginning of the twentieth century, a key moment when different movements of ideas about the linguistic diversity were manifested in Russian culture. After a long period of positivism, Darwinism and social issues the interest of the intellectual élite shifted on history, philosophy and literature, giving rise to numerous texts and articles of very different genres and styles. One of the specificities of early twentieth-century Russian philosophy is the particular appeal of thinkers for Christian themes and subjects which imply the idea of the rebirth of man and even of all humanity goes back to the Christian faith. Part of the Russian philosophical thought of this period is characterized in particular by a renewal of religious mysticism in accordance with the Eastern Christian tradition which followed into footsteps of the Church Fathers (Denys the Areopagite, Saint Gregory of Nyssa).

Certain Russian thinkers viewed the language multiplicity [“mnogojazyčie”] in the world in religious perspective⁴. Problem of a Divine nature of human language interested Russian philosophers S. Bulgakov (1871-1944), P. Florenskij⁵ (1882-1937), A. Losev (1893-1988) [see Losev 1927]. In their works they proved that the problem is not purely linguistic but epistemological and cognitive as well.

Sergei Bulgakov supported the idea of the original language sent by God and believed that all human languages were derived from it. He was especially interested in studying the period of the first universal language existence. Bulgakov’s universalist approach to the language and language diversity was reflected in his works of 1920-1930, the period in which he was particularly absorbed in his linguistic studies⁶.

⁴ In his book *The Philosophy of the Name* Bulgakov used the Russian term “mnogojazyčie” as “multiplicity of languages in the world”. In the modern Russian language, the term “mnogojazyčie” is synonymous with “multilingualism”. The multilingualism is defined as the ability to speak multiple languages or the use of multiple languages.

⁵ The sentence of S. Cassedy can be of interest in this context: “Florenskij’s relation to the philosophy of language in the twentieth century in his own country and abroad is a very odd one indeed. If one had to describe this absurdly versatile man, one would come up with a list of terms, but “philosopher of language” or “linguist” would probably not be among them. And yet Florenskij owes his “rediscovery” in recent years precisely to his speculations on language” (Cassedy 1995, 289). See Ferrari Bravo’s book about *Slovo* (2000).

⁶ Bulgakov borrows from W. Humboldt the idea that “the language is born only of itself; the languages depend on the nations to which they belong” (Bulgakov 1953, 45). He represents the language exploring its universal structures and its relation to mind and national culture.

In 1920 Bulgakov worked on his book *Filosofija imeni* [The Philosophy of the Name] (1953), in which he made clear the distinction between a language as a divine creation and a language as a historical and social phenomenon. Such understanding of the double nature of the language is explained by Bulgakov's Christian vision of the world and the Universe. Best of all this difference is expressed in the part called "Čto takoe slovo?" [What is a word?] in which he spoke out against the psychological laws and evolutionism that were very popular in his contemporary language studies. He remarked that the "language is a historical and social phenomenon with the number of clothes that it puts on or takes off according to time, circumstances, environment [...]" (Bulgakov 1953, 38).

Like most of his contemporaries the philosopher tried to explain the proliferation and transformation of languages by the legend of the Tower of Babel. According to The Book of Genesis first God gave people a single language understood by everyone, but they sinned by pride. As a punishment God separated them by giving them different languages. Bulgakov carefully studied the history of the linguistic disaster at Babel. Paradoxically, the scientist insisted on the existence of a single language that was expressed by means of several languages. He wrote that a careful reading of the story on the Tower of Babel clearly suggested that there was a unique common natural language, that God veiled by a multitude of different languages. The Bible reads: "the whole earth used the same language and the same words" (Gen. XI, 1). Thus, for Bulgakov as a Christian such unity is paramount, and it forms the basic nature of the language⁷.

Bulgakov put forward an original idea that even before the accident of Babel there existed languages belonging to three branches of Peoples (Japhethites, Semites and Hamites) but despite all the phonetic and grammatical differences people could understand each other because they possessed the gift of common language. We believe that Bulgakov meant the common ability of people (before Babel) to perceive and convey the meaning and divine ideas. He spoke about the divine quality that people lost after the catastrophe of Babel. According to Bulgakov there was no question of creating new languages after Babel but there was a problem of misunderstanding the idioms of the same language. He expresses the main idea: the language was born in Babel⁸.

But what was the language before the fall of Babel? What became of its verbal qualities and properties after? Why does Bulgakov emphasize the idea that everyone spoke the same language? In our opinion, S. Bulgakov gives the answers to these questions stating that language should be studied not only from the theological but from semiotic and linguistic points of view as well.

In Bulgakov's time Saussure's linguistic theory became popular, yet the Russian author did not quote him in his book. Imagining the virtual dialogue between Bulgakov and Saussure we can conclude that they hold radically different positions on the issue of the origin of languages. Bulgakov explains the origin of the language by divine providence while for Saussure this point was irrelevant.

⁷ It should be noted that both authors (Bulgakov and Trubetzkoy) while insisting on the unifying role of Christianity have an opposite approach (positive and negative) even though they express basically the same idea of plurality of unity in the spirit of ontological holism. Yet this axiological difference can give us some food for thought on the phenomenon of linguistic diversity.

⁸ U. Eco expresses the same idea in his book *In Search of the Perfect Language* (1995). He draws our attention to the fact that the text of the Bible clearly points to the existence of several languages before Babel.

The philosopher studied the enigma of the first single internal language that existed before the disaster at Babel at the beginning of his book *Philosophy of the name*. Bulgakov looked for the first language that would represent the unity of form and content and serve to express the Truth. This can explain Bulgakov's high interest to the hypothesis of a single primary language. This language is not arbitrary; it represents the unity of form and content despite the difference in phonetic form⁹.

He developed this idea by showing how, after the Babel confusion, various dialects and languages were formed. After the mixture of languages at Babel the inner meaning of words became dark and men could no longer understand each other simultaneously as they did before.

According to the philosopher, even after Babel *internal speech* continued and still potentially continues to contain all possible languages. The legend of Babel helped Bulgakov to explain the universal nature of human language¹⁰. Facing the diversity of languages, Bulgakov sees the difference among them on a purely formal level (voice organs of people, differences in the words, roots and word structure) and focuses on the idea of the universal inner content of languages. He believes that the catastrophe of Babel did not touch the element-sense (universal ideas) of the word; otherwise, it would have destroyed the highest creation of God - Man.

Such understanding of the language by Bulgakov is determined by his Christian perception of the world as a Divine manifestation. According to Bulgakov universal ideas are manifested in all languages. They allow people to communicate and translate from one language to another. The quest for a unique language among all peoples represents the overcoming of the Babylonian curse and redemption. With his thesis on the existence of universal ideas Bulgakov appears as one of the successors of Plato, neo-Platonists, Fathers of the Church and Vladimir Soloviev (1853- 1900). Bulgakov views this human capacity to understand each other as one of the proofs of the existence of a common inner language that can be manifested in various forms: written, oral and gestural.

The Russian philosopher approaches the culminating and contradictory point of his conception of the language: the common ideas are embodied in different words and these are used to transmit them. Although they are realized in particular languages these ideas are the same for all speakers. They represent the *lógos* or the inner language that is innate in humans. To sum up we would like to emphasize that unlike many of his contemporaries exploring similar linguistic problems Bulgakov transposes the framework of his study into the field of religious philosophy. He creates his own conception by trying to link linguistics and the Orthodox religion.

⁹ According to his linguistic conception, the word is seen not as a simple sign as in the Saussure's theory but as a human and at the same time divine creation. Based on this idea Bulgakov explores the relationship between *form* and *content* and demonstrates its non-arbitrary character. This Bulgakov's contradictory view of the linguistic sign opposed to the Saussure's theory becomes intelligible when we transpose it into the framework of the religious philosophy of language. This is an alternative point of view to Saussure's semiotics.

¹⁰ Bulgakov examines the phenomenon of *inner language* and builds his own model of it by combining several approaches: theological, philosophical and linguistic. His reflections on the *inner speech* are in a certain way in the continuity of those of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), Russian psychologist known for his historical-cultural theory of the psyche.

In the first half of the 20th century the theme of the language multiplicity and that of the search for the first and universal language that had been forgotten after the events of Babel were redeveloped. For Russian intellectuals this issue has become preponderant and we have seen the emergence of a number of works devoted to this subject.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of language multiplicity always attracted much attention of European researchers. Not only in the field of linguistics but also in philosophy and religious philosophy do thinkers contemplate the importance of the processes that take place in the field of languages. They were interested in the active role of multiplicity of languages and their interaction with various areas of human activities. It contributed more to the emergence of multilingualism.

We can see that the first half of the 20th century became decisive in the formation of this concept. Multilingualism is one of the interesting phenomena of international human society and it represents one of the current objects of research in different areas of knowledge in the contemporary period. The term of multilingualism is so common in different fields of linguistics that it could be seen as an object of studies and a scientific concept and at the same time it can be the vector of politics and ideology (see Tremblay 2019). It can support ideologies providing the same specifics of peoples' view of the world. The topic of multilingualism is especially interesting to linguists and philosophers nowadays. The multilingualism is based on the principle of language multiplicity and diversity. The "unity in diversity" is the slogan of many European thinkers who shape their own views about the multiplicity of languages and cultures trying to find the common ground for a dialogue¹¹. What unites them and is manifested in their works is the idea that multilingualism is an inevitable fact of human society with its *pros* and *cons*.

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¹¹ It is the motto of the European Union (2000). It signifies how Europeans have come together to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent's many different cultures, traditions and languages (european-union.europa.eu).

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