ISSN: 2036-6728

RIFL rivista italiana filosofia del linguaggio

Natura umana e linguaggio, 1/2009

The paradox of shibboleth: *communitas* and *immunitas* in language and religion.

Massimo Leone

Department of Philosophy, University of Turin, Italy

e-mail: massimo.leone@unito.it

1. Religion and language: two forms of comparison.

This article revolves around the hypothesis that systematic comparison between religion and language will bring about fresh, unprecedented insights into many religious phenomena, including those which seem to cast a dark shadow on the peaceful life of many contemporary societies (LEONE 2007). Such hypothesis can be formulated in two different ways. According to the milder version, although religion and language intersect on several occasions - for example, language shapes the utterances of a ritual, it substantiates the message of a sacred text, it embodies the prayers of a religious community (KEANE 1997, SAWYER and SIMPSON 2001) - such intersections are mostly incidental and secondary, since religion and language remain two fundamentally distinct domains. The first can be compared to the second, but only as a poet compares two objects in a metaphor: the albatross, indeed, shares some features with the existential condition of Baudelaire, yet the bird and the poet remain two separate elements of reality, and the metaphor could not work without this separateness.

On the contrary, the second, more radical version of the abovementioned hypothesis suggests that religion and language are actually two manifestations of the same dynamics (LEONE 2009). As a consequence, since linguistics and other disciplines are carrying on a project of systematic comprehension of language, new understanding of religion would be gained if such a project was extended to religious phenomena as well (DELORME and GEOLTRAIN 1982, PATTE and VOLNEY 1986). According to this second formulation, comparison between religion and language is not metaphorical but structural: these domains would appear as different

at a superficial level of observation, but would reveal their consubstantiality to those able to grasp their deeper mechanisms.

In other, simpler words, the first version claims that differences between linguistic and religious phenomena are many more than similarities, whilst the second one suggests that the number and nature of these similarities is such that religion and language must share some fundamental ground. It is impossible to choose between these two options, or to reject both, without first clarifying what is meant by such extraordinarily ambiguous words as 'language' and 'religion'.

2. A definition of language.

As far as the first is concerned, it is better to start from a definition of what language is not in the frame of the present article. First of all, the word 'language' must not be intended as designating verbal language only. Verbal language, indeed, can be conceived as a system composed of two planes: an expressive plane, which articulates the sounds that can be uttered by a human voice,[1] and a semantic plane, which articulates the contents that can be thought by a human mind.[2] Yet, there are other ways in which what is thinkable can be expressed: a fresco, for example, or a symphony, or a pantomime. They all adopt different expressive devices (pigments, sounds, gestures), but they all embody the same mechanism: pigments, sounds, gestures are manifested not in order to refer to themselves, but in order to presentify what is absent: the narrative of a remote historical deed, the emotions of a dead musician, the dynamics of a distant action. This mechanism of presentification is what all these expressive devices have in common with verbal language. As a consequence, if articulations of pigments, sounds, gestures or whatever other expressive substance reach a degree of complexity, comparable to that characterizing verbal language, it can be argued that they too are entitled to be designated by the same word: iconic

[1] An articulation is a pattern of differences, for example, the expressive articulation of verbal language is a pattern which distinguishes among different vocal sounds.
[2] For a criticism of this conception of language, KEANE 2003 and 2007.

language,[3] musical language,[4] kinetic language,[5] etc. However, the word 'language', without specifications, does not refer to any of these systems in particular (although, by antonomasia, it is commonly associated with the richest of them, that is verbal language), but to the mechanism of presentification which underlies them all.

Thus, in the frame of this article, the word 'language' will designate *a mechanism which presentifies an absent articulation of thoughts through a present articulation of expressive devices*.

3. Language as a unifying dimension.

In the last century, the development of linguistics and other language sciences has been such, that nowadays most scholars would probably subscribe to the definition of 'language' proposed above even if there could be some disagreement on how complex articulations should be in order to be designated as 'languages' (BENVENISTE 1966 and 1971). For instance, structural semioticians would probably tend to determine this threshold at lower levels than linguists. Some alternative definitions might also be proposed although in most cases they would be complementary, and not contradictory, to the definition proposed by the present article.

Yet, very few would disagree on the main principle of this definition: the word 'language' designates a mechanism; no matter how described, it remains conceptually different from the manifestations to which it gives rise. If these manifestations are experienced as multiple, the mechanism behind them is conceived as unique. This is the conclusion that, with very few exceptions, language sciences have reached: despite the dissimilarities between different languages (verbal language, iconic language, kinetic language, etc.), between different verbal languages (Italian, English, Farsi, etc.), between different evolutions in space and time of these verbal languages

[3] *Cfr* CALABRESE 1985.
[4] *Cfr* TARASTI 2003.
[5] *Cfr* HALL 1966.

(18th-century Sicilian dialect, 19th-century Neapolitan dialect, 20th-century Florentine dialect, etc.), between different speakers or even between different utterances of a same speaker, human language is actually one, it is a reality so systematically shared by human beings of every time and space that it has often been thought of as an element able to distinguish between what is human and what is not.

Such a conception of language has been so insistently supported by scholars that it has somehow become part of contemporary mainstream culture. Nowadays people without a linguistic background are still likely to claim that Italian is a 'beautiful language', for example, or that Chinese is a 'difficult language'.[6] Yet, very few would argue that a certain verbal language is actually 'better' than any other, that it can express thoughts in a more appropriate way than any other language. Such a statement, indeed an absolute nonsense in the frame of language sciences, is usually an expression of linguistic ethnocentrism, or even racism: if language is a mechanism which does not coincide with its multifarious manifestations, then every verbal language has the possibility to exploit this mechanism to its fullest extent, according to the needs of a linguistic community.

4. Language ethnocentrism: the invention of barbarians.

This conception of language as a unifying potential, equally shared by all human beings in every époque and place, has not always been mainstream. Indeed, the idea of the superiority of a particular verbal language unfortunately is recurrent in the history of humanity, as it is witnessed by the etymology and history of the word 'barbarian' (SAUSSURE 1972: 262).

This term came into English through Medieval Latin from the Greek '*βάρβαρος*', which used to mean "someone whose first language is not Greek". It is an imitative word, '*bar-bar*' representing the impression of random hubbub produced by hearing a

[6] From the linguistic point of view, such statements have practically no meaning, and reveal nothing but mainstream social judgements about uses of verbal languages. Socio-linguistics appropriately deals with this subject.

language that one cannot understand. Ethnocentrism led 4th-century BCE Greek culture to consider barbarians as children, unable to speak or reason properly, as cowardly, effeminate, luxurious, cruel, incapable of controlling their appetites and desires, politically unfit to govern themselves. On the basis of this prejudice authors like Isocrates promoted a war against Persia (HALL 1989). Later on, prejudice against the supposed superiority of a particular verbal language became a constant source of ethnocentric propaganda, as it is demonstrated by its recent resurgence in the frame of conflicts within the ex-Yugoslavia (SELLS 1998; WESCHLER 2004).

All these ethnocentric phenomena rely on the fact that the linguistic dimension of human life intrinsically embodies a tension between two contradictory poles: on the one hand, language as a structural mechanism is a unifying characteristic of all human beings; on the other hand, the manifestations of this mechanism are an inexhaustible source of diversification.[7] Language indeed is always, as it has been defined earlier, *a mechanism which presentifies an absent articulation of thoughts through a present articulation of expressive devices*. However, such articulations may vary considerably between different times, different spaces, different human groups or even between different individuals within the same human group.

Therefore, when ethnocentric movements wish to mark the difference between insiders and outsiders, between those who belong to a certain ethnical group and those who do not, they neglect the unifying nature of language and stress dissimilarities between different articulations. In some cases, this emphasis on the superiority of a particular articulation goes as far as perentorily denying the linguistic nature of every alternative pattern: 'foreign' languages are considered as mere noise, and compared to the unarticulated sounds uttered by animals. From the point of view of language sciences, though, such political, ethnocentric conceptions of language are steeped in contradictions. It is now clear to all scholars that the particular shape of such or such articulation is not significant in determining whether it inheres to the linguistic dimension. What matters, indeed, is the mechanism through which two articulations are related in order to become a presentifying and a presentified reality, a signifier and

[7] The myth of Babel is based on this contradiction (STEINER 1975).

a signified. Furthermore, when linguistic articulations are used in order to mark the identity of a social group, they give rise to a series of contradictory phenomena which could be labeled as "the paradox of shibboleth".

5. The paradox of shibboleth.

The word 'shibboleth' originates from the Hebrew word '*שבולת*', which literally means "ear of grain" or "torrent of water." In modern English, it designates any language usage indicative of one's social or regional origin, or more broadly, any practice which identifies the members of a group. The source of this etymology is a Biblical story, contained in the Book of Judges (12: 5-6):

> Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say 'Shibboleth'," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell at that time."[8]

From the point of view of modern phonetics, this dramatic test consisted in distinguishing between those able to utter a voiceless palato-alvear fricative [ʃ] and a voiceless alveolar fricative [s]. The first sound, indeed, was present in the Gileadites' phonetic articulation, whilst it was absent in that adopted by the Ephraimites. In the course of history, other linguistic shibboleths have been created to discriminate between different human groups, although fortunately not always with such sanguinary purposes.

Yet, it is inevitable to suspect that among the forty-two thousand people who failed the test and were killed by the Gileadites, there were also some non-Ephraimites unable to pronounce the sound [ʃ], as well as some Ephraimites among the survivors

[8] English Translation from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition.

who were able to imitate it. But shibboleth is not a myth only because it is an unreliable proof of ethnical belonging. It is a myth especially for the following reason: ethnical propaganda requires tools of discrimination in order to divide humanity between insiders and outsiders, or worst, between humans and non-humans. In other words, ethnical propaganda requires frontiers. However, as linguists and semioticians have been finding out more and more in the last century, differences in language are not shaped as frontiers but look more like thresholds.

6. Frontiers versus thresholds.

There is a deep conceptual difference between a frontier and a threshold. A frontier is usually unidimensional. It is the place of a sharp discrimination between two different realities: on one side of the invisible line one is in Italian territory and must abide by the Italian law; on the other side of the line, one is in French territory and must comply with French regulations (LEONE 2008). On the contrary, a threshold is usually bidimensional. It can be defined as the area of a continuum where two opposite values reach a state of balance. As one approaches the frontier between Italy and France, Italian dialects will contain more and more French elements, while French dialects will present more and more Italian features. In fact, it is only the political imposition of a frontier that distinguishes between Italian dialects which contain many French elements and French dialects which show many Italian features; in the proximity of the threshold, indeed, values will tend to converge toward a state of equality.[9]

Some language scientists have even formulated the hypothesis that all the linguistic articulations adopted by humans belong to the same family, and would therefore be elements of the same continuum. Thus, the perception of sharp discriminations among linguistic forms such as those between national idioms, would be nothing but an

[9] Consequently, when linguistic atlases wish to represent differences and similarities between two or more areas, they adopt the same graphic devices used by meteorological graphs (such as isobars, for example), in order to stress that linguistic variations are not abrupt but evolve along a continuum.

illusion. However, as Ferdinand de Saussure first understood, this hypothesis, albeit fascinating, is impossible to demonstrate. This is because scholars lack the necessary historical information on the way in which languages have evolved since the emergence of verbal language as a human device of signification (SAUSSURE 1972: 63).

Yet, it remains that language is mostly a complex patchwork of thresholds, rather than a pattern of frontiers. This ultimately depends on the fact that language, according to the Danish linguist and semiotician Louis Hjelmslev, involves not only form, but also matter (HJELMSLEV 1943). This conception may seem complicated to those who are not familiar with structural linguistics, but must be understood in order to realize how shibboleth is a political and propagandistic myth, and how, as it will be explained later, discriminatory uses of verbal language and religion can be compared.

7. Matter, form and substance.

According to Hjelmslev, language is composed of two planes, expression and content, which in their turn are composed by three *strata*: form, matter and substance. These terms designate complex concepts, which contemporary linguistics has inherited from a long and multifarious philosophical tradition.[10] Perhaps, the simplest way to explain their meaning is to adopt a metaphor. Children in many cultures like to play at the beach with little variously shaped moulds, which they fill with sand in order to obtain three-dimensional objects. The linguistic concept of matter before any possible articulation can be compared to sand before it gets molded. The linguistic concept of form, instead, can be compared to the little mold that the kid uses in order to shape a heap of sand. Finally, the linguistic concept of substance is nothing but matter articulated by a form, and can be compared to the object molded by the kid by filling the mold with sand.

Thus, for instance, in the expressive plane of verbal language ‘matter’ is the continuum of vocal sounds which humans can utter, without any articulation

[10] Mainly, Greek ancient philosophy and, in particular, Aristotle.

whatsoever; ‘form’, on the contrary, is the pattern of differences through which this continuum is articulated and transformed into a substance. Such a conception of the linguistic mechanism can account for differences between articulations. For instance, some linguistic articulations such as that of the Italian idiom do not use voiceless uvular plosive sounds [q], which appears, instead, in other articulations such as those of Arabic and Syriac.

It is important to remember that in structural linguistics, the dialectics between matter, form and substance does not concern only the expressive plane, but also the semantic one (or content) (GREIMAS 1966). The concepts of matter, form and substance are more difficult to grasp in relation to this second plane. In this domain, ‘matter’ is everything which can be thought by the members of a given cultural community, whilst ‘form’ is the way in which a given cultural community articulates what is thinkable through the use of a language. It is easier to understand what matter, form and substance of the semantic plane are by comparing different articulations, elaborated by different cultural communities. Probably, systems of parenthood and their linguistic denominations provide the clearest example. In Farsi, eight different words translate the English word ‘cousin’. In fact, the semantic form that articulates the contemporary Iranian system of parenthood distinguishes between a male and a female cousin, and also distinguishes among cousins depending on whether they are children of either sisters or brothers of either one’s mother or father. The proper emergence and manifestation of language takes place at the moment of semiosis, that is, when an expressive substance is related to a semantic substance through a complex process called “enunciation” (MANETTI 1998, COQUET 2008).

Shibboleth is a myth because it neglects the fact that semiosis usually involves a tension between a matter without significant differences and a form which selects some differences and makes them significant. The form can discipline the matter, but the substance thus produced will never be perfectly isomorphic to the form itself. The child molds the sand by always using the same shape, but the object thus obtained is not the shape itself, but something which reflects both the uniqueness of the mold and the untamable irregularity of the sand. This is why every object will be slightly different from the others, albeit in a barely perceptible way.

Analogously, linguists know that individuals who belong to a linguistic community, if this expression bears a sense whatsoever, do not use their language in a completely identical way. Actually, phonetic inquiry has pointed out that even when a single individual utters the same word many times, each utterance is going to be slightly different from the others. Through its forms, language tries to minimize the noise introduced by these meaningless variations, and to maximize meaningful regularities. Yet, variations are never completely eliminated, as it happens in the functioning of machines,[11] since forms must deal with the unpredictability of the matter. As a consequence, language constantly remains the place of an intense dialectics between regularity and irregularity, between homogeneity and heterogeneity, and the variations always remain potential elements of a further re-articulation of the system.[12]

But if language is a mechanism which introduces thresholds more than frontiers, and tensions between regularities and irregularities more than rigid discriminations, how can someone be judged either as an insider or an outsider, a citizen or a barbarian, a human or an animal, on the basis of a shibboleth?

8. Pertinence, community and immunity.

The answer to this question requires one to dwell at length on three concepts: the semantic notion of ‘pertinence’ and the political ideas of ‘community’ and ‘immunity’.

Every time an ethnocentric movement elaborates a shibboleth, that is, a linguistic device able to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, it carries on a discrimination similar to the political imposition of a frontier over a territory. As

[11] And their malfunctioning could demonstrate that even in machines variations are always possible.

[12] The dynamic nature of linguistic systems would be unaccountable without considering this intense dialectics between significant regularities and insignificant exceptions; exceptions indeed can become significant if the system includes them among its articulations.

geographers know, there is no such thing as a 'natural frontier'. Even those elements of a territory, which are commonly considered as "natural frontiers", such as mountain ranges, rivers or even oceans, are not natural at all. On the contrary, the history of geography and cartography shows that their "naturalness" was shaped through a long and complex cultural process. Analogously, there are no such things as "natural frontiers" in language: language indeed is an extremely complicated patchwork of continua, where the dialectics between forms and matter, substantiated through the process of semiosis and enunciation, introduces an incalculable quantity of variations. The result is that language is a reality which cannot be pushed toward absolute homogeneity (this is the dream of ancient grammarians, royal academies of language and linguistic ethnocentrism), but neither can it be impelled toward absolute heterogeneity, for a common mechanism underlies different linguistic manifestations.[13]

As a consequence, given the non-discriminatory nature of language, transforming a linguistic threshold into a frontier implies the political determination of a pertinence (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The Gileadites, for example, decided that the ability to pronounce the sound [ʃ] was a discriminatory linguistic element apt to single out who was an Ephraimite and who was not. Among the infinite number of regularities and variations characterizing the human use of language, only a single phoneme was considered as pertinent. A man could adhere in many other ways to the 'language of the Gileadites': he would not be considered as such if he was not able to utter that phoneme. At the same time, a man could diverge in many ways from the stereotype of 'the Gileadites' language': as long as he was able to reproduce the sound [ʃ], he would be judged as an insider.

Once the contradictory 'unnaturalness' of every shibboleth has been pointed out, the following question arises: who decides? How is a certain linguistic element isolated

[13] Indeed, the notion of idiolect, that is a language used by a single individual, is a theoretic abstraction which cannot correspond to any reality: an idiolect would not be a language, because it could not signify anything to anyone. Even those manifestations of language which entail more variations than regularities (the language of artists, mystics, "fools") must necessarily embody a dialectics between the temptation of an idiolect and the unavoidable reality of the social dimension of language (WITTGENSTEIN 2001: sections 244 – 271).

from the continuum of human language and considered as pertinent in order to discriminate between those who belong to a given community and those who do not? A quick answer to such a question is: power. It is power, and its complex morphology within a certain society, that creates shibboleths of all sorts. However, a more considered answer requires one to expound on the opposite concepts of community and immunity.

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has proposed a brilliant definition of these two terms. Whilst the American neo-communitarianism and the organicistic sociology of German derivation have related the notion of community to the idea of belonging, identity, propriety, meaning by 'community' that which identifies individuals with their ethnical group, their land, and their language, Esposito has pointed out that the original term 'community' bears, instead, a radically different meaning (ESPOSITO 1998). In fact, 'common' is what is not owned by anyone. What is 'common' begins where what is private ends, where what is appropriable ends, since 'common' is actually what is not of one, but of many, or even of everyone. Therefore, the idea of commonality, the idea of community, is not related to the idea of sameness, but to the idea of otherness. The etymology of the word 'community' confirms this hypothesis: it derives from the Latin word '*communitas*', that, in turn, contains the word '*munus*', whose complex meaning could be translated as 'gift,' 'obligation' or 'duty'. Thus, according to Esposito, the members of a community are not identified by a common belonging, but by a common duty of "alteration," by a reciprocal obligation impelling everyone to partially give up one's personal identity in order to address the other, in order to "expropriate" oneself in favor of the other (LEONE 2006). This is the meaning of *munus*: a disposition to establish a relationship with the other, by losing something of oneself, by partially depriving oneself of one's own identity.

As a consequence, the idea of community implies a loss, a subtraction and an expropriation, since it does not refer to a fullness, to a totality, but to an emptiness and to an alteration. Therefore, a community is also felt as a risk, as a threat for the individual identity of its members, for it exposes them to a contact which can also be the source of a contagion (LANDOWSKI 2006). Fear of this danger pushes modern societies to enact what Esposito calls "processes of immunization": if *communitas* impels individuals to step beyond themselves, then *immunitas* rebuilds their identity,

protects them from a risky contiguity with the others, exempts them from the *munus* of opening themselves to otherness (ESPOSITO 2002). The Latin term '*immunitas*', in fact, also contains the word '*munus*', but it denies it, thus reverting the logics of the community.

The linguistic dimension of human existence is based on the notion of *communitas*: linguistic idiosyncrasies are curtailed in order to open a subjectivity to another subjectivity. Indeed, conceiving language as a universal mechanism, and at the disposal of every human being seems even to entail the perspective of a universal community. Yet, history suggests that dynamics of immunization, such as the invention of barbarianism or the creation of shibboleths, have been constantly present in the linguistic evolution of humanity.

However, in the domain of verbal languages most modern societies have emphasized the concept of *communitas* more than the notion of *immunitas*. Linguistic ethnocentrism has not been completely subdued,[14] but the idea that different verbal languages are nothing but manifestations of the same phenomenon has mostly prevailed among scholars and, as it has been pointed out earlier, has also become an element of mainstream culture. Linguistic varieties continue to be the object of different social connotations, some of them derogatory, and verbal language remains a target of persistent political pressures (JOSEPH 2004). However, the idea that there is no hierarchy among idioms, that their differences are mostly arbitrary, is more and more predominant. Overall, societies have adopted a functional understanding of language: it is a tool of social life. Different groups shape this tool in different ways, but its function is always the same, to the extent that all these tools are, to a certain degree, interchangeable. The immunization effects of language have been emphasized less and less, its communication effects more and more.

Many phenomena have contributed immensely to such a linguistic globalization, some of the most important being the concept and usage of lingua francas, the theory and practice of translation and scholarly research in comparative linguistics. It is

[14] The second article of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes language among the human characteristics which should not become a ground for discrimination.

important to carefully consider these three dynamics of cultural history, since it is exactly in such domain that comparison between language and religion will be particularly fruitful.

9. Lingua francas.

The first element, that is, the emergence, diffusion and usage of lingua francas, is in many cases the outcome of one of the most ancient and common human activities: trade. Since the very beginning of human history, contact between different groups has often generated the notion that each human group was not completely self-sufficient, and some of its needs and desires could be better fulfilled through systematic and organized contact with other groups. Communication of objects conceived as goods is the form that many of these groups have adopted in order to enable a circulation of resources among different communities. Such a circulation was an occasion for *communitas*, or an opportunity for merging two or more human groups into a bigger *communitas*. At the same time, generally these contacts have generally been experienced as a possible source of contagion. Thus, processes of immunization have been introduced in order to regulate trade. In some extreme circumstances, communities have been so afraid of any contact with outsiders that they have developed a regimen of autarchy. Nevertheless, very few human groups have been so self-secluded as to shun any occasion for trade or exchange. More often, immunization tools, such as money, have been adopted in order to avoid the risk of uncontrolled contacts. Verbal language can also be considered as one of these tools, or maybe the most important of them.

Through contact between human groups, individuals were confronted with a paradoxical evidence: different communities used different languages and as a result, comprehension was not always easy. Yet, individuals also realized that in most cases these different languages presented some commonalities and as a result, comprehension was not always impossible. Trade, therefore, brought about the necessity to explore this mysterious space between heterogeneity and homogeneity, between incomprehension and comprehension. Such a space was a place of

"alteration," according to the meaning that Esposito gives to this word, not only for the relationship between individuals, but also for the relationship between languages: commercial negotiation, indeed, entailed a previous strategy of linguistic negotiation. Such a cultural dynamics was quite different from that underlying, for example, the domination of a human group over another. In this last circumstance the empty space between two communities was simply occupied by the dominant culture and its language. Peer to peer negotiation, instead, required a more complicated *bricolage* of languages. Of course, very few negotiations have been as equalitarian as to create a perfect balance among all the groups involved. Yet, the very institution of this linguistic negotiating, albeit functional to the establishment of commercial trade, would implicitly acknowledge the existence of a common ground of humanity among all the participants (HABERMAS 1981).

Historically, the term 'lingua franca' referred to a verbal language spoken along the South-Eastern coast of the Mediterranean between the 15th and the 19th century (MEIERKORD and KNAPP 2002: 9). It contained linguistic elements from Southern Italian dialects, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Turkish, Greek and Farsi.[15]

Mainstream culture and also several linguists have extended the meaning of the expression "lingua franca" so as to cover different varieties of contact languages, that is, languages which are used in the encounter between different linguistic communities. Nevertheless, 'lingua franca' originally designated what contemporary linguists would rather denominate as 'pidgins.' 'Pidgin' is the name given to any linguistic variety created, usually spontaneously, out of a mixture of other varieties as an instrument of communication between speakers of different tongues.[16]

The concept of mixture, central in the linguistic definition of pidgins, was fundamental in determining the original meaning of the expression "lingua franca".

---

[15] The use of languages of this kind, though, predates their first denomination as "lingua franca." Several scholars indeed formulate the hypothesis that characteristically multilingual areas such as the Pacific region or Papua New Guinea were the cradle of the first lingua francas, originated by the desire or the need of trade.

[16] As a consequence, pidgins are usually classified as "auxiliary contact languages".

Nowadays, "lingua franca" metaphorically denominates contact languages which do not entail this mixture to a relevant extent, such as English as an international instrument of communication. Yet, originally lingua francas would not imply the adoption of a particular idiom as a contact language, but the emergence of an idiom from the contact itself. Therefore, such an emergence is quite different from the phenomenon of the colonial imposition of languages, or the elitist creation of an artificial language of communication (ECO 1993).[17]

In these phenomena contact languages emerge from extremely unequal linguistic situations: a colonizer imposes its presence and activities on a colonized, a scholar or a group of scholars wish to bestow a common artificial language upon a linguistically multifarious society. An ideal lingua franca, instead, is always a product of mixture, a pidgin arising from a state of perfect linguistic balance among all those who participate in the negotiation. In addition, a lingua franca is not a Creole. Pidgins become Creole languages when a generation whose parents speak pidgin to each other teach it to their children as their first language. In the usage of a lingua franca, pidgin is not a 'mother tongue', but a linguistic phenomenon which arises from a desire (or a need) *communitas*: participants in the linguistic negotiation speak a mother tongue, which is also one of the elements defining their subjective identity, but they decide to transform it partially, to 'alter' it in order to enable a contact with otherness. Thus, the usage of a lingua franca, at least in the original meaning of the expression, does not entail a negation of subjective identity, but a dialectics between immunization and communication, subjectivity and community, between sameness and difference.

Historical evidence shows that lingua francas have rarely embodied a state of perfect balance between all the linguistic identities involved. Indeed, even the term "lingua franca" itself suggests the presence of a bias, since this expression was probably created by medieval Arabs, who used the term 'Franks' to designate all the inhabitant of Western Europe. The historical 'lingua franca', that is, the pidgin spoken in many South-East Mediterranean harbors from the 15th Century on, was mostly based on

[17] Since language is a peculiarly social phenomenon, these attempts of imposition are either doomed to fail (as in the case of scholarly search for the perfect or universal language) or to require a strategy of capillary social control (as in the case of many linguistic colonialisms).

romance languages like Italian, Spanish or French. The same unbalance characterizes other pidgins adopted as lingua francas, such as *Chinglish*, Caribbean pidgins, Russenorsk, Fanakalo, etc.

Yet, what is interesting from the point of view of the present article is not so much the outcome of these efforts of linguistic negotiation, as the actual presence of such attempts. Through the creation of pidgins, human beings have realized more and more that although their subjective identity and their identity as members of a human group were shaped also by verbal language, this shape was not delimited by rigid frontiers, discriminating between sameness and difference, but rather by movable thresholds, which to a certain extent could be displaced in order to enable the encounter between human beings belonging to different communities.

10. A dialogue of deaf.

Given the definition of language proposed by the present essay, the creation of pidgins cannot be a phenomenon concerning verbal languages only. Languages containing different expressive articulations can also be the object of a process of negotiation. Probably, one of the most significant examples of this kind of pidgins is *Gestuno*, an international sign language sometimes used by people with severe hearing disabilities at global forums such as the World Federation of the Deaf, international events such as the *Deaflympic games*, and informally during travels or in socialization among people of different nationality. The need for such a pidgin was discussed at the first World Deaf Congress in 1951. However, this kinetic lingua franca mostly emerged from spontaneous interaction, when delegates with different linguistic background tried to communicate with each other. In 1973, a WDF committee ('the Commission of Unification of Signs') published the first standardized vocabulary. It was called "*Gestuno*" (a fusion of the Italian words '*gesto*', gesture, and '*uno*', one) or "International Sign Language of the Deaf". This lexicon contained approximately 1500 words and was mainly the result of a negotiation, seeking to avoid, for instance, those gestures which could be offensive in some cultures, or promoting those signs which could be more easily understood by the international

community. *Gestuno* was not a perfectly balanced lingua franca: the contribution of American and European kinetic lexicons was predominant, and Asian or African users might encounter more difficulties in its usage. Furthermore, the elaboration of this pidgin, although mostly spontaneous and unsystematic, arose more from the forerunning initiatives of a small group of individuals than from the linguistic activities of an entire mass of speakers.[18]

This particular phenomenon, as well as other analogous processes in the rest of the world, deserve keen attention, since they show how human conditions generally considered as a source of disability can actually be an occasion for the development of different abilities, which the majority of people do not possess, or do not possess to the same extent. The study of intercultural communication, in particular, not only in the domain of verbal language, but also in the broader field of communication among diversities, can learn immensely from the analysis of those strategies which 'disabled' individuals have elaborated in order to communicate with each other or with people with different abilities. For instance, linguists have noticed that people who use sign language, even in the absence of any lingua franca, are more proficient at interlinguistic communication than non-signers (RUSSO CARDONA and VOLTERRA 2007). Among the strategies adopted by signers, three are particularly interesting for the development of intercultural communication. First of all, the adoption of a flexible grammar: *Gestuno* has been considered by several linguists as a lexicon, more than a language, since individuals who choose to speak it must predominantly rely on their own national grammar. Thus, speakers of Gestuno, as well as speakers of the pan-European kinetic language, tend to smooth the rigidity of their grammar in order to increase the effectiveness of linguistic interactions. Grammatical norms are therefore treated as thresholds more than frontiers: during linguistic negotiation, they are slightly displaced by all the participants, ideally to an equal extent, until a place of mutual comprehension is created. Such an activity of

[18] At the moment, though, several linguists follow with increasing interest the creation of a pan-European kinetic language, whose development is not being planned but totally spontaneous.

grammatical ‘alteration’ is accompanied by a second strategy, which is the adoption of a larger lexicon. Analysts have realized that in interlinguistic conversation signers tend to use a richer vocabulary, since a greater amount of synonyms gives them more chances to establish a common lexical ground with a signer of different nationality. This is a strategy that verbal communication also adopts. For example, Anglophone speakers interacting with speakers of Romance languages try to clarify the meaning of their discourse by mainly using English words of Latin derivation which they would normally avoid in informal conversation. Thus for instance, a sentence like “the temperature has augmented” is awkwardly formal for a native speaker of English but is more comprehensible than “the temperature has increased” for a native speaker of Italian (“*la temperatura è aumentata*”) or French (“*la température a augmenté*”). The third element which characterizes the emergence of pidgins in sign communication is the usage of an extensive formal system of classifiers. Used to describe things, classifiers cross linguistic barriers pretty well.

These three strategies, a flexible grammar, an enlarged lexicon and a transferable system of classifiers must be born in mind, since they might play a central role in several kinds of intercultural communication, including that between different religions. Indeed, if the expression ‘dialogue of deaf’ has become a metaphor of uttermost incomprehension, strategies adopted by people with severe hearing impairment in order to overcome their linguistic problems might be fundamental for an effective reframing of other communication troubles.

11. Translation.

The emergence and elaboration of lingua francas is inextricably related to the manifestation of some spontaneous processes of linguistic negotiation, whose cascading effects might give rise to a complex pidgin. Many of these spontaneous processes can be labeled as ‘translation’. This term, though, must be construed broadly, not only as an operation involving two verbal languages, such as literary translation, but as an activity between two linguistic or semiotic articulations (Torop 1995). For example, when signers seek to convey the content of a verbal utterance,

what they do is trying to produce an occurrence of sign language whose content can be at least comparable to that of the verbal utterance. In other words, the translating articulation is modeled so as to express more or less the same content of the translated articulation.

It is impossible to determine the origin of translation as a human practice. Indeed, it can be argued that translation has existed since the existence of three elements: 1) linguistic differences; 2) a contact between such differences; 3) the willingness of reducing the breadth of these differences. Once again, trade must have been one of the human activities which probably more than any other necessitated recurrent recourse to translation.

If translation is a very ancient feature of human communication, theoretic insights on this activity are more recent. In the 'Western' world, for example, they date from the considerations of Roman intellectuals like Cicero and Quintilian in front of the task of translating the Greek thought into the Latin language (NERGAARD 1995; OSIMO 2002). This theoretic approach, which eventually led to the establishment of the field of 'translation studies' in the 20th Century, has brought about a multifarious variety of insights, among which two in particular are extremely relevant for the topic of the present introduction. First, translators and scholars have emphasized the commensurability of verbal languages: different linguistic articulations exist in the world, but none of them is so alien as to be untranslatable. Such a conception, which implicitly affirms the unifying nature of language, reached its highest development with Chomsky's linguistics, according to whose insights it is possible to transmit a conceptual content whatsoever through a language whatsoever (CHOMSKY 1965).

The second important conclusion is that translation always implies a fundamental dimension of linguistic negotiation. It is the final statement of Umberto Eco's essay on the semiotics of translation: in translations, 'faithfulness' is nothing but the capacity of negotiating the best possible solution at any given moment (2003). Another philosophical trend, which in the 20th-century can be considered as beginning with Walter Benjamin and culminating with Jacques Derrida, reinterprets this process of negotiation as involving not only the translating articulation, but also the translated one (BENJAMIN 1969; DERRIDA 1987). According to such a trend, the translated text and the translating one are not related due to a hierarchical and genealogical

relationship of *immunitas*, but due to a *communitas* where both texts and both languages are inevitably transformed by their contact. In other words, translation would be the embodiment of that process of evolution through contact and negotiation which has been clearly identified by linguists in the development of pidgins.

12. Comparative linguistics.

If trade and other kinds of human exchanges promoted the practice of translation and the creation of lingua francas, theoretic investigation on the possible unity of different verbal articulations has been developed more recently. Such an approach has followed two general trends: on the one hand, an attempt at reconstructing the synchronic unity of language: different verbal manifestations have been conceived as embodiments of a common mechanism; on the other hand, an effort to recuperate the diachronic unity of language. Such a project has been typical of a particular branch of language studies called 'linguistic prehistory'. This discipline "correlates information from historical linguistics with information from archeology, ethnohistory, history, ethnographic analogy, human biology and other sources of information on a people's past in order to obtain a clearer, more complete picture of the past." (CAMPBELL 2000)

Through comparative methods, linguistic homeland and migration theory, cultural inventories from reconstructed vocabularies of proto-languages, loanwords, place names, classification of languages, internal reconstruction, dialect distributions, etc. scholars have formulated the hypothesis that many languages, which currently appear as different from each other, can be traced back to the same roots. Thus, different languages such as Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian have been considered as derivations of the same hypothetic language, the Proto-Finno-Ugric. An analogous conjecture has been put forward in relation to other linguistic areas, such as the Proto-Mixe-Zoquean cultural area or the Proto-Mayan area. Nevertheless, it is mainly in the field of the so called "Indo-European studies" that this project of reconstructing the structural and historical unity of a multifarious linguistic and cultural area has been more productive.

A conference given by William Jones (1746-1794) in Calcutta on February 2, 1786 is generally considered as the first manifestation of the hypothesis that languages as different as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic and ancient Farsi might have the same origin. Nevertheless, Indo-European linguistics as a modern discipline is generally thought to have had its commencement with an essay Franz Bopp (1791-1867) published on the morphology of Sanskrit verbs in 1816. As pointed out by the most prominent historians of this discipline, its early development was fostered not only by a new anthropological interest in Asia, and India in particular, but also and especially by the methods elaborated by comparative anatomy (LEHMANN 1993). The morphological strategy adopted by Bopp for the comparison of languages, indeed, was analogous to the method Linneus had used for the classification of species, or to the strategy that enabled George Cuvier (1769-1832) to publish in 1812 his *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes*.

This period of human history can be labeled as "the age of comparison", but also as "the age of typology": specialists of Indo-European linguistics, as well as comparative anatomists, not only sought to pinpoint similarities and dissimilarities between species, fossils, grammars; they also tried to elaborate a typology whose criteria could account for the emergence of this dialectics between homogeneity and heterogeneity. They, therefore, implicitly suggested the presence of a common logic, a common structural mechanism, underlying this dialectics, and formulated the hypothesis that the study of forms, the analysis of their internal articulations, could be the most effective method to understand the deep nature of such a mechanism.

13. Conclusion.

The present article has claimed that language and religion can be compared in either a metaphorical or a structural way. The rationale of such a comparison ultimately depends on the way in which the concepts of "language" and "religion" are defined. "Language" has been increasingly conceived as a unifying dimension of human existence, mainly for two reasons: it has been considered as a mechanism whose different manifestations do not deny the unity of the mechanism underlying them, and

it has been construed as a place of continua and thresholds more than a place of discriminations and frontiers. Throughout history, language has been used as a tool of *immunitas*. However, starting from modernity, its ability to bring about effects of *communitas* has been prevailing. This trend was particularly evident in linguistic phenomena related to trade, such as translation and the creation of lingua francas, as well as in the comparative approach to linguistic differences.

The term 'religion' cannot be defined in the same way in which the meaning of the word "language" has been determined. When the definition of a word is acceptable, all the elements of reality that can be referred to by that word must be considered as appropriately described by the definition. However, controversies about the definition of religion are still far from reaching any largely shared conclusion (ASAD 1993, MASUZAWA 2005 and LEONE 2007).

Nevertheless, the conceptual frame set by the present article paves the way for the possibility of reaching a definition through a systematic comparison between language and religion. What is religion, indeed, if not *a semiotic mechanism which presentifies the absent articulation of an invisible reality through the present articulation of a visible reality?* Given this definition, comparison between language and religion will have to deal with the following, urgent questions: 1) Is the linguistic concept of lingua franca somehow exportable to the religious field? 2) Is religious translation a legitimate idea? 3) Is it possible to compare religions in the same way in which scholars have been comparing verbal languages? In other words: is a modern conception of religion, an understanding of it as a field of *communitas* more than as a field of *immunitas*, possible in the 21st Century, a Century haunted by the temptation of religious fundamentalism? Or, on the contrary, are contemporary religious cultures doomed to be configured as nothing but shibboleths? The author of the present paper is carrying on a long and complex research project, which will hopefully be able to give some suggestions about these questions.

References.

ASAD, Talal (1993), *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1969), "The task of the translator – An introduction to the translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*" in Id. (1969), *Illuminations – Essays and Reflections*. Engl. Transl. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, pp. 69-82.

BENVENISTE, Émile (1966), *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard.

BENVENISTE, Émile (1971), *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*, Paris Gallimard.

CALABRESE, Omar (1985), *Il linguaggio dell'arte*, Milan, Bompiani.

CAMPBELL, Lyle (2000), *Historical Linguistics. An Introduction*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

CHOMSKY, Noam (1965), *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

COQUET, Jean-Claude (2008), *Le istanze enuncianti – Fenomenologia e semiotica*, ed. Paolo Fabbri, Milan, Bruno Mondadori.

DELORME, Jean and GEOLTRAIN, Pierre (1982), "Le discours religieux" in COQUET, Jean-Claude, ed. (1982) *Sémiotique – l'École de Paris*, Paris, Hachette, pp. 103-126.

DERRIDA, Jacques (1987), "Des tours de Babel", in Id. (1987), *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre*, Paris, Galilée, pp. 203-235.

ECO, Umberto (1993), *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella storia europea*, Rome-Bari, Laterza.

ECO, Umberto (2003), *Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di traduzione*, Milano, Bompiani.

ESPOSITO, Roberto (1998), *Communitas: origine e destino della comunità*, Turin, Einaudi.

ESPOSITO, Roberto (2002), *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*, Turin, Einaudi.

GREIMAS, Algirdas Julien (1966), *Sémantique structurale, recherche de méthode*, Paris, Larousse.

HABERMAS, Jürgen (1981), *Theorie des Kommunikative Handelns*, 2 vols, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

HALL, Edith (1989), *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press; New York, Oxford University Press.

HALL, Edward Twitchell (1966), *The Hidden Dimension*, Garden City (NY), Doubleday.

HJELMSLEV, Luis (1943), *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, Copenaghen, Ejnar Munksgaard.

JOSEPH, John E. (2004), *Language and Identity – National, Ethnic, Religious*, Houndmills and New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

KEANE, Webb (1997), "Religious language" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, n. 26, pp. 47-71.

KEANE, Webb (2003), "Semiotics and the social analysis of material things" in *Language & Communication*, n. 23, pp. 409-425.

KEANE, Webb (2007), *Christian Moderns – Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, California University Press.

LANDOWSKY, Eric (2006), Les interactions risquées. *Nouveaux actes sémiotiques* nn. 101, 102, 103.

LEHMANN, Winfred (1993), *Theoretical Bases of Indo-European Linguistics*, London and New York, Routledge.

LEONE, Massimo (2006), "Ospitalità permanente. Intorno alla semiotica dello spazio sacro" in *Carte semiotiche*, 9-10, pp. 117-131

LEONE, Massimo (2007), "La religione tra libertà e oppressione" in Flores, Marcello, ed. *Diritti umani – Cultura dei diritti e dignità della persona nell'epoca della globalizzazione*, 6 vols, Turin, UTET, v. 3, pp. 273-313.

LEONE, Massimo (2008), "Appunti per una semiotica della frontiera", in *Solima - Margine, Soglia, Confine,Limite:istituzioni,pratiche,teorie*:www.media.unisi.it/solima/documenti/Leone_%20Appunti_semiotica_frontiera.pdf

LEONE, Massimo (2009), "The semiotic therapy of religious law", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, v. 22, n. 3, pp. 293-306.

MANETTI, Giovanni (1998), *La teoria dell'enunciazione – L'origine del concetto e alcuni più recenti sviluppi*, Siena, Protagon.

MASUZAWA, Tomoko (2005), *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

MEIERKORD, Christiane and KNAPP, Karlfried, (2002) "Approaching lingua franca communication" in Meierkord, Christiane and Knapp, Karlfried, eds. 2002. *Lingua Franca Communication*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, pp. 9-28.

NERGAARD, Siri, ed. (1995), *Teorie contemporanee della traduzione*, Milan, Bompiani.

OSIMO, Bruno (2002), *Storia della traduzione – Riflessioni sul linguaggio traduttivo dall'antichità ai contemporanei*, Milano, Hoepli.

PATTE, Daniel and VOLNEY, Gay (1986), "Religious Studies" in Sebeok, Thomas A., ed. (1986) *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, 3 vols, Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, Mouton de Gruyter, v. 3, pp. 797-807.

RUSSO CARDONA, Tommaso and VOLTERRA, Virginia (2007), *Le lingue dei segni – Storia e semiotica*, Rome, Carocci.

SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de (1972), *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Tullio de Mauro, Paris, Payot.

SAWYER, John F.A. and SIMPSON, J.M.Y., eds. (2001), *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion*, Amsterdam and New York, Elsevier.

SELLS, Michael A. (1998), *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

SPERBER, Dan and WILSON, Deirdre (1986), *Relevance – Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, B. Blackwell.

STEINER, George (1975), *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, New York, Oxford University Press.

TARASTI, Eero (2003), *Signs of Music – A Guide to Musical Semiotics*, Berlin and New York, Mouton de Gruyter.

TOROP, Peeter (1995), *Total'nyĭ perevod*, Tartu, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.

WESCHLER, Lawrence (2004), *Vermeer in Bosnia: A Reader*, New York, Pantheon Books.

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1953), *Philosophische Untersuchungen - Philosophical Investigations*, the German text, with a revised English translation by Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edition, Malden. MA, Blackwell Publishing.