*Languagescapes*
ISBN 978-88-255-2958-6
DOI 10.4399/97888255295862
pag. 11–17 (gennaio 2020)

# On the tip of the tongue

Jenny Ponzo, Mattia Thibault, Vincenzo Idone Cassone*

This volume collects works by specialists in different disciplines (semiotics, linguistics, media and literary studies, history of religions, history of culture, analytic philosophy) who present their reflections about two key issues concerning ancient and artificial languages, namely their use and conceptualization across cultures and textual genres[1]. The use of ancient and invented languages or utterances always constitutes a strong mark with respect to the ordinary speech. Together with other non–verbal semiotic systems, the use of such unusual codes and signs often contributes to the creation of a separate discursive dimension having an exceptional or liminal character[2]. This separate domain can have different characteristics; for instance, it can belong to the sacred, the ritual, the ludic, or the emotional sphere. In order to fully grasp the meaning of the various uses of ancient and artificial languages it is necessary to look into the way in which they are conceived by the community of the speakers or, in other words, the semiotic ideologies in which their use is grounded[3]. In this regard, of particular interest are, on the one hand, the social and identity dynamics connected to the use of ancient and invented languages and, on the other hand, the religious, philosophic, and epistemological views underlying it, such as the universalist thrust at the base of the quests for the perfect language in western culture, the beliefs in the possibility of possessing or reconstructing an original or divine language, and the ideal of a purely logic language that can overcome the imperfections of natural languages and improve technology.

A privileged angle for critical reflection about ancient and artificial languages is the study of issues of translation, which crosses several of the essays collected in this volume. Martin Lehnert, for instance, focuses on

* Jenny Ponzo: Università degli Studi di Torino; Mattia Thibault: University of Tampere, Marie Sklodowska–Curie Fellow (GA No 793835); Vincenzo Idone Cassone: Università degli Studi di Torino.

1. For formal attribution, please consider pp. 13–14 as authored by Ponzo, 14–15 as authored by Thibault, 16–19 by Idone Cassone.

2. We use the term "liminal" in the anthropological sense, with a special reference to the classic work by Turner (1967).

3. A semiotic ideology is «a set of basic assumptions» shared by a community «about what signs are and how they function in the world» (Keane, 2003, p. 419).

how Sanskrit Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese between the 1st and the 12th centuries CE. Given the deep structural differences between the two languages, this operation constituted an impressive work of cultural and linguistic adaptation. Through the exploration of the Chinese conceptualization of the sacred language of the Buddhist texts, and in particular of the "a–semiotic account of *mantra* practice", Lehnert demonstrates how the study of the cross–cultural reception of sacred texts can improve our understanding of the interpretative processes at stake when a semiotic ideology tries to understand – and, in this case, to adopt or incorporate – another semiotic ideology. Moreover, this piece invites us to become more conscious and critical towards our own linguistic ideology, which for instance is connected to a notion of language that is hardly applicable to ancient and Oriental cultures.

The fact that sacred words and formulas are hardly translatable is also underlined by Robert Yelle, whose essay focuses on the cross–cultural idea that some utterances – such as spells, but sometimes also proper names – are endowed with a magic power or pragmatic efficacy that is closely connected to their form, which consequently must remain unaltered and untranslated.

The essay of Simona Stano focuses on a specular subject, namely the emotive power of invented musical languages, which lack a well–defined form, or, in Saussurean terms, a *langue*. Grounding her analysis on the studies on glossolalia and on semio–linguistic theory (e.g. Samarin, Jakobson, Landowski), Stano proposes a typology of what she defines as "musical non–religious glossolalia". While they bear similarities with other verbal and non–verbal semiotic systems, these languages are impossible to translate according to a defined system of rules; most of them are based on a voluntary polysemy aiming at a direct emotive and interpretative involvement of the receiver.

Gabriele Marino deals with another case of untranslatability of an invented idiom, namely with James Joyce's *Finnegans wake*, which is notoriously a key text in the history of semiotics, because it inspired Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (1962). Marino's reflection is based on a principle similar to that expressed by William James in his study of religious experience (Lecture II): «We must study the more extreme cases». Indeed, according to Marino, the *Finnegans wake*, the only possible translation process of which consists in a decoding (always partial and idiolectal) followed by a new and always provisional codification, must be considered not as an exception that, as such, does not quite count for the elaboration of theories about the processes of meaning making, but on the contrary as a model and as a privileged case study. Marino's article is also significant from another perspective, namely the study of the use of ancient and artificial languages in literature. Literary

texts have often been a fertile ground for metalinguistic and semiotic reflections, and for the experimentation of new linguistic forms, from neologisms to brand new languages. Moreover, literature can be the touchstone of ideas circulating in a given culture. This is the case with the subject dealt with by Jenny Ponzo, who studies how Italian writers represent the use of liturgical Latin, largely abandoned after the Second Vatican Council in favor of vernacular languages. Through the analysis of literary texts, Ponzo postulates a generational gap consisting in the attribution of different meanings to the liturgical use of this ancient language in authors belonging to the pre–conciliar generation and in post–conciliar authors. The restoration of Latin is particularly longed for by a minority of young Catholics in search for a strengthened religious identity based on traditional roots.

When we think of invented or constructed languages (conlangs), languages such as Interlingua, Esperanto or Volapück easily come to mind. These were all attempts to create a common language that, thanks to a highly rational structuring of its morphology, semantics and syntax, would be logical and easy to learn for native speakers of all other languages. All these attempts ultimately failed. Other conlangs, however, were able to have an important cultural impact, not because of their being easy to learn or practical, but, in fact, being quite the opposite. Fictional conlangs – like the elvish languages invented by J.R.R. Tolkien, Star Trek's Klingon and, more recently, Dothraki and High Valyrian from Game of Thrones – play an important role not only in the works of fiction containing them, but in the capacity of the latter to create and structure fictional worlds and to influence and shape their fandoms.

Markus May focuses exactly on the importance that *in vitro* languages have in world building, both in the science fiction and in fantasy genres. While the use of such languages is so well–established that parodies abound, many authors are well aware that language policy in imaginary worlds reflects the ideological framework of the possible world. The same language, argues May, can be used to convey to the audience very different messages. For example, while Klingon has been traditionally used in the franchise to signal an otherness that is always in need to be interpreted and understood, in its last installment, *Star Trek: Beyond*, it indicates an otherness that is now unbridgeable. While Klingons are presented as "evil" enemies, their language become a symbol of untranslatability and can be interpreted as a symptom of the shifting political discourses in the United States. Conlangs, however, are not necessarily a reflection of the ideologies engraved in the possible worlds in which they are featured, but can, in some examples, precede them. This is the case with the languages invented by Tolkien, which were seen by the author and Oxford professor as instruments of *mythopoesis*.

The use of fictional conlangs, however, sometimes exceeds the boundaries of the possible worlds. Mattia Thibault investigates the use of such languages in the "real world" and its relationships to fandom and playfulness. Focusing in particular on the Klingon language invented by Mark Okrand, Thibault tries to understand why a language that is very hard to learn and has very few speakers is nevertheless able to attract more than half a million students on the popular learning app Duolingo decades after the peak success of its related TV series. The evolution of the language is parallel with that of Klingon culture and the makeup used to represent them on screen, therefore substantiating the similarities between the study of conlangs and the practice of cosplay. The fact that some Klingon language enthusiasts are not Star Trek fans, however, suggests that the pleasure of learning this language is not only due to the possibility of identifying with the fictional aliens (mimicry) but also to the challenge posed by the complexity of the language itself (agon, according to the terminology proposed by Caillois 1958).

Invented languages, however, do not always need to be complete. Vincenzo Idone Cassone, in his comprehensive overview of the use of fictional languages in digital games, shows how "gamelangs", ranging from simulacra to planned languages, offer a paradigmatic example of the many issues pertaining to communication, translatability and untranslatability in an interactive environment. From the random icons of Simlish to the gradual letter substitution that translates Al'Bhed into English, many games use systems that look, or sound like languages, but are in fact devices that only imitate languages and are designed for specific in–game purposes.

Some works can go even a step further, as shown by Bruno Surace's reflections on "unsignified signifiers". Some pretend–languages can be used to evoke the fascination with writing that an illiterate child can prove in front of a book – it is the case of the "meaningless" written language presented in Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus,* completely made up of signs that designate but do not denote, that point towards a content which does not exist. Others, like the scatological language of Mr. Merde in Leos Carax's episode in *Tokyo!,* propose a reflection on language policies and taboos. Surace concludes that we are facing "simulations" of language that proceed from imperfection and find meaning through it.

Finally, Ilaria Fiorentini illustrates how similar techniques can be used not for artistic means, but to create comic and playful effects. Fiorentini analyses a specific example of Special Internet Language Variety, the *Italianini,* an ironic variety of Italian used on the Facebook group "Canini&Gattini". Fiorentini offers us a thorough examination of the language variety and of its use of the suffix –ini (indicating, in standard Italian, something small and cute, but systematically abused in Italianini) that demonstrates how

the members of the group are perfectly aware of the community–building aspect of the linguistic manipulation they operate.

Furthermore, many of these languages are tied to the rhetoric of a "perfect language" (Eco, 1993): in many ways, they have been preserved, changed or devised by speakers, under the shared aim to create a language free from the problems of traditional ones (ambiguity, arbitrariness, obscure meaning, connotations, and metaphors) or to restore a language of different nature, connected to the mythical past or to the boundaries of human meaning–making. Under the assumption of intrinsic special features and unique characteristics, many natural and artificial languages have been considered as paradigmatic examples of perfection, or the stepping stone towards that never–ending goal. For instance, Andrea Bianchi describes the philosophical debate that led, between the end of nineteenth and the begin of twentieth century, to the development of logical studies. In this period, the modern founding fathers of analytic philosophy, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, all began discussing the possibility of a logically perfect language (in opposition to natural ones) which could be adequate to their philosophical purposes. This idea had a beneficial impact for the development of the modern discipline of logic, despite being abandoned shortly thereafter. Bianchi, however, suggests that the necessary evolution of these concepts can be found in Fodor's notion of the language of thoughts, which seems to possess the main characteristics a logically perfect language is required to have.

On a completely different perspective, Andrea Valle describes the peculiar case of the "BASIC code" present in Umberto Eco's book, *Foucault's Pendulum*. By focusing on the enunciative practices and elaborating alternative programs fulfilling the initial objective, Valle shows how programming languages are not simply functional and efficient strings of orders, but always involve complex interactions between the syntax and semantic aspects, and between the planes of expression and content. These issues are paradigmatically shown by a series of trans–code translations, observing the different effects of the algorithms on the three notations: the written program, the sequence of instruction, and the algorithm flowchart. Programming languages, as a result, are depicted as sharing and embodying many characteristics of the so called "natural" ones, while also distancing themselves from them.

Of course, the rhetoric of the perfect language is not limited to the expressive function of artificial languages but is also shared through different linguistic perspectives of users and speakers. Cultural, historical, and symbolic values and ideologies are waved together through the different purposes of speakers, leading to linguistic change, recover, or preservation. These dynamics are evident in the cases of recovery of ancient and dead

languages, which are quite frequent in today's world. In this respect, James Hamrick proposes a reflection about Ge'ez, the liturgical and classical language of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Despite being a dead language, Ge'ez continues to play a significant role for the Orthodox Christians of those countries, because of the widely shared belief that Ge'ez was the language of the Creation and the universal language spoken before the events of the Tower of Babel. Hamrick describes the contemporary diffusion of Ge'ez and its religious and cultural roots, linking the beliefs of interviewed Ge'ez speakers to the linguistic properties of this Semitic language, showing many inferences which strengthen the aesthetic and religious fascination for the language itself. Furthermore, Hamrick also shows the reborn interest for the language connected to the black nationalist movements in Eritrea. Through these characteristics, Ge'ez plays a significant role in connecting the past with the present, the national identity with the religious sphere, the myths with the contemporary history.

Ugo Volli focuses on the complex relationships between natural and artificial components, tradition and use, by looking into the modern rebirth of Hebrew as a living language, especially promoted by Eliezer Ben Yehuda. Through the description of Ben Yehuda's endeavor, Volli analyzes the dynamics connected to the conversion of an «ancient language into an artificial one», and the peculiar political, historical, and cultural aspects connected to the changes and transitions of the language. Lastly, moving from the whole languages to their fragments (words and phrases), Françoise Waquet discusses the common use of Latin language for tattoos in France, a spreading phenomenon in size and relevance. By analysing a vast number of different sources, Waquet focuses on understanding their communicative functions, linking the language to the writing form in the practice of tattooing. Moving from the denotative meaning to the complex attributions of values connected to their use, the author reflects on the suggestions and motives to choose a dead language, long ignored and readable by few, as a core inscription in people's bodies and identity.

The studies collected in this volume lead us to two general and related considerations, which more than concluding our discourse wish to trigger further research. Firstly, unknown, lost, or dead languages – as well as new, invented ones – do not lose meaning because of the lack of speakers. On the contrary, their very opacity confers on them a rich set of semiotic connotations, including a flavour of mystery, magical powers, issues of social, political, and cultural identity, initiation, and belonging, together with a singular aesthetic character. The complex dynamics between these features deserve serious attention and the development of a dedicated interdisciplinary methodology. Secondly, the study of the uses of ancient and artificial languages across cultures is a fertile ground for enquiring the attraction for

mystery and otherness as well as the longing for perfection characterizing the human being. Particularly fascinating, especially from a semiotic perspective, is that this subject of study entails taking into consideration all the forms and media of human communication, from oral to written language, from literature to music, from cinema to Internet, from papyri to skin, from clothes to ornaments.

## Bibliographical references

Caillois R. (1958), *Les jeux et les hommes. Le masque et le vertige*, Gallimard, Paris.

Eco U. (1962), *Opera aperta*, Bompiani, Milan.

——— (1988), *Il pendolo di Foucault*, Bompiani, Milan.

——— (1993), *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, Laterza, Roma–Bari.

James W. (1902), *The varieties of religious experience. A study in human nature*, Longmans, London.

Keane W. (2003), *Semiotics and the social analysis of material things*, Language and Communication, 23, pp. 409–425.

Turner V. (1967), *The forest of symbols. Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and New York.