

## Introduction

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# Introduction

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Today, Ricœur's philosophy of language is the subject of precise understanding, which facilitates a better appreciation of its importance in the overall economy of his work. New publications, scientific developments and re-evaluations of his comments of classical authors have made it possible to correct certain readings of Ricœur's concepts and theses. Some adjustments are minor; others are more serious, allowing us to assess the approximations, even the errors, in Ricœur's work. A "note" at the beginning of this thematic issue attempts to make a critical synthesis of recent secondary literature on the subject. The fact remains that the Ricœurian theory of language retains its share of fascination, because it is far from having revealed all of its secrets: the relationship of language to other systems of signs, Ricœur's relations with his contemporaries in his effort to constitute a theory of discourse, the role of language in philosophical anthropology, etc.

The contributions in this journal edition do not purport to solve all these issues but resolutely wanted to address some of the blind spots of this ambitious philosophy of "language" through which Ricœur wished to study the multiple ways of human meaning, while seeking (in order to avoid dispersion) "the unity of language and the interrelationship of its multiple functions within a single empire of discourse."<sup>1</sup> Some of the papers focus on certain dimensions of language, for example translation and interpretation (Marc de Launay), or structural semantics (Anne Hénault); others concentrate on the intimate relationship of language to culture (Cristina Vendra), and still others consider language's strategic function in the whole of Ricœur's philosophy (Rafael Barros, Philippe Lacour).

In his paper, Marc de Launay questions the philosophical presuppositions of the sources of meaning, insofar as they determine what a text is. According to de Launay, these presuppositions derive not only from a theory of language but also from discursive practices, in particular interpretation and translation. The author bases his assertion on a difference between "wanting-to-say" and "wanting-to-express." Starting from an example borrowed from the Bible, and from the conception that Ricœur develops of what he understands by "text," de Launay intends to show what impasses can lead to interpretations and, therefore, to translations that refuse to situate the sources of meaning in the texts – whether these be external to the text (original), or as the result of a transitory encounter between the author and the (present) text. Only a conception that places the source of meaning in the text itself facilitates an understanding of the event of meaning as a kind of anticipation of the future which contrasts with a tradition, at the same time as it implies a "material" hermeneutic capable of capturing the singularity of the text.

In an unpublished French version of an article previously published in English,<sup>2</sup> Anne Hénault recalls that Ricœur's address of Greimas' structuralism must be subject to a nuanced assessment, as its evolution is striking. Instigated by his disappointment in a failed dialogue with

Lévi-Strauss, Ricœur initially has a radical distrust of structuralism, evident in the numerous texts compiled in the 1960s in *The Conflict of Interpretations*. His first study of Greimas' work dates from 1980. An abridged and slightly reworked version of this work appears in *Time and Narrative 2*, with a more positive tone. But Ricœur's last texts on the semiotician are astonishing: Ricœur seems to ask Greimas to be more radical, at the very moment when his work evolves in the direction of a semiotics of passions, which he only drafted. For Ricœur, the aim is to move from a hermeneutic posture of defense to a more serene articulation (a "synergy")<sup>3</sup> between explanation and understanding.

Cristina Vendra discusses the intellectual encounter between Ricœur and Geertz, to highlight their rich encounters with one another. Geertz is inspired by the Ricœurian analogy of action as text, with its holistic complexity and its distancing effects, factors of polysemia. Conversely, due to Geertz's work, Ricœur adopts the idea of a "symbolically mediated" action, relying in particular on the idea of "dense description." This allows him to emphasize the semiotic, and in particular the linguistic, impregnation of all human interaction within a given culture. The author shows that it is thanks to this symbolic material of action that Ricœur, relying on the Geertzian thesis of ideology as a cultural system, manages to construct a non-pejorative conception of utopia as a positive expression of the social imagination.

In his paper, Rafael Barros tests the hypothesis that the philosophy of language is not simply an aspect of Ricœur's thinking but its central and organizing element. Showing that Ricœur's reflections on the issue appears early in his writing, Barros bases his argument on an analysis of the article "Philosophy and language" where Ricœur emphasizes the specific responsibility of thought in relation to discourse. This responsibility concerns both respect for the diversity of discourse and the maintenance of the ontological vocation of language, and therefore, ultimately, the guarantee of a common world.

Philippe Lacour investigates the Ricœurian definition of philosophy by addressing two of its most fundamental conditions: meaning, which constitutes its inner material, and reflexivity, which is the principle of its dynamic articulation. Lacour asserts the existence of five different levels of philosophical discourse, emphasizing the originality of each of them: descriptive, transphrastic, self-comprehensive, anthropological, and metaphysical. He then shows the role that reflexivity plays, in its intra- and inter-semiotic dimension, in order to both delineate these different levels and to facilitate the transition between them. He concludes by showing that the whole of Ricœur's philosophy is characterized by a confidence in language: in both its obstinate and cautious efforts to "enlighten existence" by pushing the limits of its borders.

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: Essays on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 11.
- <sup>2</sup> Anne Hénault, "Ricœur, a Disciple of Greimas? A Case of Paradoxical Maieutic," in K. Bankov & P. Copley, eds, *Semiotics and its Masters* (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2017), 373-6.
- <sup>3</sup> The expression "synergy" is found in a text from the same period: "Herméneutique et sémiotique," *Lectures 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).