

INDIVIDUALIST TENDENCIES IN LINGUISTICS

We speak because we live in society: this might seem a truism, the statement of which scarcely needs any lengthy justification; all those involved in the study of social groups, under whatever aspect, know that the knowledge of language is one of the conditions at the basis of their research and one of the essential means at their disposal for successfully carrying out their task, delving more deeply into the facts, and verifying their results. It would seem that those linguists who do not conceive of language as an interpretation, but rather as the pure subject material of their science, also have to express their agreement with regard to the evidence of the proposition; in fact, if the sociological character of the linguistic fact has never been denied, the attention which has been devoted to it has varied considerably.

Modern linguistic science¹ was born at the beginning of the

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

¹ With regard to the various changes which this discipline manifested in the 19th and 20th centuries, may we refer to our book: *Les grands courants de la linguistique moderne* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) wherein,

19th century, at the time when scholars became aware of the linkages of relationship which united the so-called Indo-European languages, but it was based in part on a misunderstanding. The secret hope of first researchers was that by reconstructing Indo-European they would succeed in finding once again the "primitive language" of humanity; as Meillet put it, Franz Bopp (the father of comparative studies) "discovered comparative grammar while seeking to explain Indo-European, just as Christopher Columbus discovered America while searching for the route to the Indies."

These romantic illusions having been set aside, linguistics had to yield, in the middle of the last century, to the rising prestige of the natural sciences and become involved in problems which deflected it further from its true subject. Language was considered as a natural organism which, quite outside the bounds of human will, is born, grows, develops according to predetermined rules, then grows old and dies, thereby manifesting that series of phenomena which are understood under the name of life. Did not Victor Hugo proclaim: "For the word, when one knows it, is a living being," and the habit of speaking of the "birth" and "life" and "death" of words—even if today the practice is still being followed no matter how fundamentally incorrect—arose during that period.

The neo-grammarians—a school which was particularly vigorous during the last quarter of the nineteenth century—successfully opposed this conception of languages as a natural organism, considering language rather as the collective product of human groups. Their principal merit—illustrated by the promulgation of phonetic laws and their infallibility—was to create a rigorous method for studying the history of languages based on the minute scrutiny of a great number of facts and on tables of correspondences established with a precision and sharpness unknown up to that time. But these scholars, motivated by too much concern not to propose anything which was not immediately and materially controllable, were attached to detail above all and deliberately refused to set out on the road which would lead to

furthermore, in developing certain points, we borrowed the substance of the present article; the book also contains references which would be excessive in this essay.

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the promulgation of a general theory of language, because they considered this road insufficiently prepared and therefore perilous.

However, among a number of investigators, particularly in France, a theory had been set forth which was based upon the authentication of good sense which constitutes the social character of the linguistic fact; a rather hazy theory in truth and completely undogmatic but, since it was based on the study of sociological relationships—which form the essence of linguistic communities—it took new life and became up-to-date in contact with social realities. Undoubtedly, since Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his pre-socializing view of the “general will,” the appeal to a “social conscience” was no longer a novelty in scientific thought, but with regard to the postulate, “Language is eminently a social fact,” French linguists deserved the credit for setting up orderly principles which they felt took account of linguistic facts. On the historical plane especially, they sought to elucidate the evolution of a given language by considering these developments as reflections of the changes within the human society which they serve to express. From the first years of our century which also marked the beginning of its period of fame and prestige, the French school of linguistics incontestably bore the imprint of the sociological spirit and its promulgators did not fail to pay homage more than once to Durkheim’s teachings. “The social sciences,” said Meillet in 1906, “are now being organized, and among them linguistics must take the place which its nature assigns to it.”

A decisive step for the history of modern linguistics was surmounted in 1916 with the posthumous publication based on students’ notes, of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, the main ideas of which Ferdinand de Saussure had set forth during the course of his teaching at Geneva during the years 1907 to 1911. This great scholar, assuredly one of the most astonishing and illustrious figures in the field of the social sciences during the past hundred years, this man of whom Meillet said that he viewed scientific matters which the blue eyes of a poet and seer, possessed the gift of expressing his ideas with exceptional clarity, presenting them in sharply-coined formulations and, above all, of integrating them into a coherent system.

Among the leading ideas which he put forward in this manner, may be found the distinction, which has already become

classic, between two aspects of human speech: language and word; language, he said, which is social in its essence and independent of the individual, is that system of signs which serves as the means of communication for the members of the same linguistic community, while the word is an individual act: it is the usage which each one makes of the system for the purpose of understanding and being understood, that is to say, the individual use of the language, the linguistic community to which he belongs.

This definition implies a certain predominance of the language vis-à-vis the word, the latter being considered as secondary with regard to the former: concerning this aspect, furthermore, Saussure declared that "in separating language from word, one is separating with the same stroke: 1) that which is social from that which is individual; 2) that which is essential from that which is subordinate and more or less accidental; and finally "the study of human speech therefore involves two aspects: the essential part focuses on language as its subject, ... the other, secondary, focuses on the individual aspect of language, that is to say, the word."

One might therefore complain that theories of sociological origin, like Saussure's concepts and those schools which drew their inspiration from him, have a tendency to express something of a disdain for the speaking subject insofar as it represents only as an individual instance; thus sociological theories neglect the word, that part of speech whose importance, nevertheless, Saussure himself recognized. Besides, he stated that the word is necessary in order that a language might be established. By hoisting the banner of language (to the detriment of the word), does one not risk setting up as a linguistic dogma the criteria of "social restraint" which Durkheim had set forth in sociology; does one not, above all, risk underestimating the creative force and influence of the individual?

In truth, a reaction has not failed to reveal itself: more precisely, even before the conceptions of the sociological school took shape, an individualistic type of linguistics began to appear—what we have in mind here is a conscious and reasoned set of ideas and not emotional individualism in the Romantic style or explications of a fragmentary character. For, in 1900, the

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Italian thinker, Benedetto Croce, published the first sketch of his *Estetica* whose exact title is—the volume appeared in 1902—*Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale*. In the extraordinarily rich production of the great Italian philosopher, the *Estetica* (which was to form Volume I of his *Filosofia dello spirito*, whose other volumes are *Logica*; *Filosofia della pratica*, that is to say, ethics; and *Teoria e storia della storiografia*) remains a key work; an “arid and arduous task” as he himself has described it, telling us how much pain it cost him, how much remorse, how much re-drafting. Croce considered this work as a program, the outline of a project which remained to be accomplished, for “I recognized,” he adds, “that this work, in which I thought I had placed all the philosophy accumulated in my brain, was on the contrary filled with a new philosophy.”

“General linguistics:” the term appears in the complete title of the volume devoted to esthetics; the ingenuous student who opens Croce’s book, anxious to perfect his knowledge of linguistics or deepen his ideas derived from courses, would, without the slightest doubt, be deceived, or at any rate, discountenanced, for there he will find none of the traditional categories within which outlines of general linguistics are fitted, nothing which will even make him think of that particular discipline except perhaps the ferocious criticism of texts in use since the dawn of the century—that is, the neo-grammarians’ treatises—these texts in which, Croce tells us, “one finds a little bit of everything: from a description of phonetic apparatus and artificial imitating machines up to a summary of the most important results of Indo-European, Semitic, Coptic, Chinese or any other philology; from philosophical generalizations regarding the origin or nature of language up to wisdom on the subject of printing, calligraphy and the classification of memos on philological remains.” The tone is unmistakable, and one may therefore judge the impertinence of this criticism at its just price if one remembers that it was irreverently addressed to a school—that of the neo-grammarians—whose investigations were considered one of the triumphs of 19th century positivistic method, so much so that a great many good people thought, at that time, that among the social sciences, linguistics, was about to achieve a state of perfection and were

convinced that the future had no more to offer other than improvements or slight changes of detail.

However, after having expressed his views on languages in his *Estetica*, Benedetto Croce returned only rarely to this subject, and then only to cling to the same conceptions, and specify certain points, or correct certain interpretations that had been made about his ideas and which seemed somewhat less than correct to him; on the other hand, he never interested himself in the technical aspect of linguistic research. However, the ideas that he expressed at that time have had a profound repercussion on the nature and orientation of the studies pursued by two schools of linguistics, who are especially active and original: those belonging to the idealistic school and those linguists grouped under the flag of *neolinguistica*.

Before summarizing these, it is necessary to recall that they took their origin in the provocative analysis and penetrating criticism to which Croce had submitted the work of one of his illustrious predecessors, the Neapolitan, Giambattista Vico, whose *Scienza Nuova*, which appeared in 1725, had also generally remained ignored before Croce. Vico proposed a definition of a *storia ideal eterna* conceived as the cyclic history of mankind in three stages: theocratic (religious fear in the face of natural phenomena from which is derived belief in a supernatural powerful being); heroic (aristocratic society of the feudal type); and finally democratic (rational stage in which there is the maximum flowering of justice and civilization). But having thus arrived at its apogee, humanity becomes corrupt and returns to barbarism, to run through the same cycle again, for its evolution takes place according to a continuous flux and reflux.

Vico drew the consequences of this concept of history with regard to language. During the first age, language was mute, men communicated with each other by means of signs, then came the first articulated language which was symbolic, that is to say, poetic; men expressed themselves naturally and spontaneously in verse (which indicates that Vico also remained unrecognized from this point of view, since he was in reality the first to believe that numerous bards were cloaked under the name of Homer). Finally, the third stage of language is human language composed of vocables whose meaning the people can determine as they

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wish. It follows from this that the interpretation of primitive legends and fables is of capital importance for our understanding of ancient societies, just as the study of linguistic symbolism (like figures of speech, imagery, metaphors) is essential to understand the history of languages; once the latter have achieved their peak, they are affected, in the same way as human societies, by the process of decadence, which our Middle Ages bears witness to, where one sees poetry triumph over prose and the "vulgar" tongues, not written, replace the beautiful order of Ciceronian Latin.

Croce turned this fundamental idea which is at the base of the *Scienza Nuova* to account, placing the problem of expression at the center of his esthetic and linguistic preoccupations. In effect, he identifies intuition and expression; intuitive knowledge is expressive knowledge and all intuition is at the same time expression. Thought cannot exist independently of expression; it is false to believe that language is an instrument which man has forged to communicate with his fellows; language, which is entirely of an intuitive nature, is born spontaneously with the representation that it expresses, for if man does not speak, he does not think (let us observe in passing that on the question of the origin of language Croce rejoins Vico since he declares that, born as poetry, language subsequently is modified to serve as a sign).

Thus, Croce's philosophy removed the study of concrete linguistic facts from the description of normative grammars as well as from the elaborations of the comparative school, and carried it into the realm of esthetics. In fact, grammar appeared to him solely a formal discipline or, one might say, a pedagogical expedient, a mnemo-technical device useful and necessary in practice but not a science in any way. As for comparative and evolutionary study, Croce considers that as part of the history of languages in their living reality; the latter being considered essentially as the history of literary productions, by virtue of the confusion that it wilfully establishes between linguistic studies and literary criticism.

On the other hand, linguistic signs have meaning only if we consider them inseparably joined with the expressive movement, which lives an instant, dies and never more repeats itself in the

identical fashion. A series of sounds expressing nothing is not language: language is the sound which has been articulated and delimited with a view toward expression. And Croce concludes that esthetics and linguistics are not at all two distinct sciences, but one and the same science; and he adds that languages have no existence outside of the propositions really pronounced or written among certain peoples in particular periods; for him, it is essentially a question of works of art in which languages exist in a concrete fashion.

In the camp of the linguists, or at least the great majority of them, this theory remained for many years without any repercussion either because of disdain or ignorance; it is true that it came at that time when, as we have said, the rigid principles of the neo-grammarians were accepted almost without any challenge. However, in contrast with this almost unanimous incomprehension, from the very beginning there existed a linguist who became a partisan of the Crocian concepts and enthusiastically tried to apply them to the practical and concrete study of the facts of languages. This was the scholar of Romance languages, Carl Vossler, of Munich, whose friendship for Croce did not lessen over the course of fifty years of shared intellectual ideals and despite diverse and divergent political fortunes: the correspondence which they exchanged between 1899-1948 and which was published in 1951 (*Carteggio Croce-Vossler*) is touching testimony to this.

Not without disappointments did Vossler try to bring the philosophical element—the only one which concerned Croce—into the realm of pure linguistics. Undoubtedly, he also declared that true linguistics is esthetics—a study of means of expression—which must be set at the very center of linguistics, but from his very first works (see his volume, with a characteristic title, *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft*, dating from 1904), he finds himself forced, at least “provisionally” and in an empirical fashion, to preserve the traditional divisions of the equation: linguistics = esthetics, by passing from the study of stylistics and syntax to that of morphology and phonetics. He declares that all linguistic evolution is, in the last analysis, a matter of taste, that is to say, of the esthetic feeling of the subjects

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speaking, and that all linguistic expression is an individual creation. But to explain the fact that innumerable individual initiatives do not end up in anarchy, he is forced to have recourse to a certain passivity of the linguistic system which limits the possibilities of creative invention. As for linguistic innovations, it would be useful, says Vossler, to conceive of them under two different aspects: when an innovation occurs within a language, there is an "absolute progress" the study of which arises out of esthetics; when it spreads, there is a "relative progress" for it is no longer a question of a creation but an extension which must be studied both from the esthetic point of view and that of traditional grammar. On the other hand, Vossler and the idealistic school of which he was the moving spirit (Leo Spitzer was an eminent member of it) rose up forcefully—and this is perhaps the most fruitful aspect of their work—against the affirmation (actually apocryphal but which nonetheless exercised a considerable influence) at the end of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* namely: "The only true subject of linguistics is language envisioned in itself and for itself." No, replies Vossler, the study of a language is inseparable from the civilization of which it is an expression; the history of grammar itself, despite all of its technical apparatus, is part of *Kulturgeschichte*: in effect, it is one of the criteria which can serve to make known and appreciated the civilization of a people, for one might say that the history of language in reality embraces the entire life of the spirit. And that is why those upholding the idealistic school have been led to bring their attention to bear upon literary languages with more predilection than on popular speech.

Here it is necessary to quote the name, often associated with Vossler—although the latter more than once disapproved of him—of the Italian, G. Bertoni, who also follows Croce in stating that the only linguistic reality is the individual language, and that thought without expression does not exist (expression, he says is not the "vestment" but the "very body" of thought). However, Bertoni's efforts to combine the spirit (esthetic expression) and nature (the fact), in other words, to conciliate the theses of the idealistic school and the methods of positivistic naturalism, have resulted in a synthesis which he intended to be eclectic, but which appears, above all, as confused, so much so

that Devoto could say of Bertoni that in the field of research inspired by Crocian esthetics he had been the very image of a good fighter on whom fortune had not smiled.

But let us come to *neolinguistica*, that enthusiastic and fruitful Italian school which derives from Croce and whose promoter and leading spirit was Matteo Bartoli. Already in 1902, with his reading of the *Estetica*, the first seeds had been sown in this spirit; it is told that arriving at his chair at the University of Turin and showing his students the volume which had just been published, he declared to them in a dejected tone of voice: "My friends, we were wrong, everything must be begun again; this book proves it!" Subsequently he devoted himself to defining the principles which were to serve as a guide in his research, and in 1925 published his famous *Introduzione alla neolinguistica* which is the manifesto of the new school.

Indeed, Bartoli who had become known as a result of his solid and well-documented works dealing with Latin vulgate and Roman dialects, went on to follow suggestions found in Croce much less blindly than Vossler, whom he did not fail to criticise for not having seized the meaning of linguistic reality. What he has fundamentally retained from Croce is a total independence vis-à-vis the schematic doctrinarianism of the neo-grammarians and a reasoned rejection of the materialist explanations of the evolutionary process. He rose up against the idea that "phonetic laws"—the battle cry of the *Junggrammatiker*—act blindly like an ineluctable physiological force (one recalls Osthoff's celebrated phrase: *Die Lautgesetze wirken blind, mit blinder Notwendigkeit*: "Phonetics act blindly out of blind necessity"); he refuses to allot to the traditional division between "grammar" and "vocabulary" anything other than a practical interest, and considers that it does not give rise to two different methods of interpretation. He is convinced that the spread of linguistic innovations, whether the latter be of a lexicographical or grammatical nature (phonetics, morphology, syntax...), works in the same fashion and that to take account of it, one must take account of imitation, of the prestige of models such as creative "imagination", of the nature, more or less esthetic of the speaking subjects. Here again one finds these equations so dear to Croce: "Imagination = poetry, poetry = language, therefore language = imagination." Briefly,

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Bartoli declares that linguistics must be a social science, a science embracing language in its entirety, connecting it again with other creations of the spirit (like literature, the arts, etc.); thus, he envisages it as one of the aspects of the history of man.

Here one must emphasize that another preponderant influence, parallel to Croce's (which Bartoli and the school of *neolinguistica* have always been pleased to recognize) has marked the development of the principles and method of their school: that is, the linguistic geography which Jules Gilliéron had set up as an independent discipline as a result of the works which he published about the year 1900. These works had to some degree precluded the researches of Ascoli in Italy and Schuhardt in Germany and Austria. Based on a precise knowledge of living dialects, linguistic geography tries to explain the distribution of linguistic phenomena, by considering words in strict relationship with the ideas which they represent and rejecting the too simplistic concept of analogy, often invoked by neo-grammarians as the supreme recourse to explain troubling anomalies.

The actions and reactions of neighboring dialects have been studied with growing attention and the ideas of borrowing, of substrata and superstrata have been more clearly defined: thus, in the case of French one might take into account Celtic substrata and a Teutonic superstrata, while the English, German, Italian and other words which have penetrated into the language at various epochs constitute loan-words. On the other hand, by comparing materials investigated and checked in terms of living languages, with ancient Indo-European tongues, it is possible to characterize these dialects and determine their linkages. Such is the role of Indo-European dialectology which was stimulated into birth as a new science by the great French linguist, Antoine Meillet (who had already, in 1908 published a volume entitled *Les Dialectes indo-européens*). This field has developed with remarkable fecundity, thanks to the work of Bartoli and other Italian linguists, but the examination of this aspect of our science would lead us beyond the framework of our present discussion.

Leaving aside technical specifications, let us rather attempt to characterize *neolinguistica* in the broad sense and determine how much influence the ideas sown by Croce have been able to exercise on the development and progress of languages. In fact,

today there are a certain number of conceptions and ways of conceiving of our discipline which are a part of the common patrimony of all students of linguistics. The school of neo-linguistics has contributed considerably to the establishment of this common patrimony parallel with the efforts of researchers working from other points of view.

It is, above all, with regard to the neo-grammarians and in opposition to them that the school of neo-linguistics has, from its very beginning, tried to make their position clear and affirm their personality. It would be foolish to deny or minimize the work of those first-named, to refuse them any credit in the elaboration of our discipline, or to denigrate the masterful fashion whereby they created a stable and solid science of comparative grammar. Even today, it is their teaching, their doctrines which form the indispensable foundation of our research; furthermore, after the romantic preoccupations of Bopp and the first investigators who were not far from believing that they were going to find once more the primitive language of humanity, after the genealogical reveries of Schleicher who proved to be very involved with the "decadence" which he thought he discerned in the history of languages, the neo-grammarians have put their house in order again; they have gone back to the sources, they have analyzed the data with care, they have built a body of coherent ideas; in short, they have elaborated what was only a collection of poorly defined and more or less scattered considerations, to the level of a rigorous and rigid science. Indeed, through an excess of method, they even wanted to place it on the level of the so-called "exact sciences": an unfortunate confusion of linguistics and the natural sciences, typical of the times.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that this concern with meticulous erudition, this desire to catalogue the data, this need to mechanically explain developments, are often desperately dry. One comes to ask oneself whether these austere scholars—at least as they appear to us through their work—have ever considered the dead languages which they study with such care as anything other than dusty exhibits in a museum over which they lean with the cold and calculated pleasure of a knowledgeable conducted dissection, but without thinking that these were means

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of expression of men who, like us, lived and experienced all human vicissitudes.

Against this dogmatism, fortunately, the school of neo-linguistics has reacted. Their declared intention and outstanding merit have been to restore linguistics once again to its dignity as a social science. The moment has passed when a course in comparative grammar can be reduced to an arid demonstration of correspondences forcefully presented with asterisks. Instead of this rigid schematization—which, furthermore, was very easy from a didactic point of view—a more subtle picture must be presented, more flexible but also more complex, more clearly indicative of the human sympathy with which it is suitable to examine problems of language.

The dogma of the infallibility of phonetic laws and of their *Ausnahmslosigkeit* is no more held as valid: we now speak of tendencies and no longer of laws and we no longer believe that they act blindly. In the same way, rather than devoting ourselves to the illusory task of determining the causes of phonetic evolution, we are satisfied to attempt to particularize the conditions in which it occurs and determine the part which certain individual elements might play in it.

Another aspect of Italian linguistics is the effort which its masters make to give it what Devoto calls a horizontal organization by developing in the examination of each problem a collaboration with parallel sciences, such as history, law, archeology. Instead of the Genevese idea of system, Devoto and Nencioni substitute the idea of *institution*, which takes account of the double aspect, social and individual, of the facts of language.

Let us add that on the level of the history of languages we have now conceived of an entirely different image of Indo-European, as well as of the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages. The latter is one of the most solidly established branches of linguistics, and since it bears on languages which have been most studied up to now, it is therefore still very rich with suggestions with regard to all linguistic types. Instead of seeing in Indo-European a unitary language out of which have come the languages known in historical times, we now represent it, at least as far as comparison permits us to go back, as a flexible

ensemble of rather loosely-linked dialects. The neo-grammarians had a tendency to project the various facts discovered in the diverse languages under examination into the common language: we rather see in it evidence of dialectical fragmentation which characterized the language before the great Indo-European migrations.

But what remains as an outstanding characteristic of the research of our Italian colleagues, is the care with which they have taken account of the esthetic factor and the attention which they accord individual values. One understands from this, the vigor with which the school of neo-linguistics has reacted against neo-grammarian dogmatism by stressing the human values of language and insisting on the fact that it is a continuous creation, or rather a re-creation, since it is an imitation. Now, imitation is never an exact mechanical reproduction: therefore, there is a constant elaboration of the data which gives rise to creations whose success depends on different factors such as the prestige of those which are being imitated or their creative force, but among which the esthetic value of the innovation plays an important role. In fact, the acceptance of a linguistic innovation often presupposes a choice, that is to say, a judgment which may be esthetic by nature. Contrary to the opinion which the neo-grammarians professed with regard to the ineluctibility of the evolutionary forces acting almost mechanically on language and as if above or beyond those who were speaking, the school of neo-linguistics consider the individual element to be primary and believe that the conscious action of artists, writers and poets play a considerable role in linguistic phenomena in general—which explains, as we have earlier emphasized, the importance which Croce and his disciples ascribed to literary languages.

In sum, the school of neo-linguistics have succeeded in achieving a happy synthesis by combining the most rigorous type of comparative grammar and classical methods of traditional linguistics with the respect evidenced for the creative spirit and esthetic sense of the human personality. Should the problem be that of innovations and their diffusion in language, then we have very much the situation in which the role of the word, the individual act, seems preponderant. Now, the linguists of the sociological school have attempted to interpret this individual intervention in

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a social sense and thereby have remained faithful to the teachings of Saussure: "Language," said the Genevese scholar, "is of all social institutions that which offers the least possibility to initiatives."

Thus, Joseph Vendryès, without failing to recognize the role of the individual, proclaimed in 1921, that "it could not be admitted without reservation," and he fought against the idea that an innovation could be understood as "an individual fact generalized by imitation." He continued: "it is certain that all linguistic change results solely from the usage which each individual makes of the language. But what, other than a social cause, introduces into a language the change created in a word. One may admit that a new usage always begins by a series of individual acts, on condition that one adds that these individual acts create a new usage only because they respond to a collective tendency. The facts which belong to the word are only the particular and occasional ways whereby individuals make use of an established system; but it results in something general and permanent only by virtue of a tacit agreement of all those who are speaking. It is therefore not necessary to speak of individual generalized innovations, but rather of general innovations which manifest themselves in isolated individuals." Again in 1937, in an important contribution, in which he emphasized the primarily social value of language, the same author, after having said that "the history of all languages is a succession of accidents, but collective accidents," was nevertheless led to attribute a certain influence to "individual accidents" provided that the latter are sanctioned by the community; and he added: "The coming of Victor Hugo or of Voltaire was only one of those innumerable accidents which appear in the life of a language and to which all those who speak contribute, each in his own way. The role of the great writers is certainly preponderant. The action of each one depends on his personal authority, on the prestige which he enjoys, and on the influence which he exercises on the milieu in which he lives."

We have quoted these passages because they seem to us characteristic of the conscious effort which the author makes to explain linguistic facts as having been *a priori* social facts. The school of neo-linguistics, on the contrary, has not hesitated to

admit and recognize the individual's capacity for invention, or better, the capacity of certain individuals. For, when they compare the dissemination of linguistic innovations with the spread of literature or of the arts, or to take another example, the propagation of feminine styles, they insist on the fact that the personality of the innovator is preponderant and they attribute to the esthetic factor an importance which their predecessors were very far from granting; they substitute the reasoned influx of a conscious force for the mechanical and blind action of evolutionary forces responding to a "collective tendency". For those students of linguistics inspired by Croce, this was one reason more for their predilection to study literary works, which reflect the individual efforts of artists and writers; as Devoto puts it, literary languages are not *abnormalities* but are as natural as any others.

Must one add that Croce's proclamation and formulation of linguistic principles were well in line with Italy's intellectual and cultural tradition? And it is undoubtedly not by chance that these individualistic theses regarding language were developed and defended with most success in Italy and in Germany. For unlike what often happened—notably in the case of France where political unification preceded and to a great measure imposed linguistic unification (let us remember the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts and the centralization of the French State under all regimes from the seventeenth century on)—in these two countries it was, on the contrary, the unification of the language, or more exactly, the choice of one form of language among others as the prevalent form, which preceded, indeed, prepared the way for political unity. Go back to Dante and his prodigious *Divine Comedy*, thanks to which the Tuscan dialect provided the model of the Italian language, a literary idiom that much later became the administrative language of the entire peninsula; think of that complex norm of middle high-German which Luther adopted for his translation of the *Bible* and which subsequently was taken as a model in all countries where German was spoken.

In sum, in this sort of a debate which has been going on between those who support a sociological explanation of language and those who, on the contrary, lay stress on the individual factor, it is necessary to recognize once more that excessive positions have been taken by both sides when the solution of the

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just mean might reasonably be applied. Perhaps it would be fitting to appeal here to the notion of progress conceived not as the supreme explanation of linguistic evolution—such as the Danish linguist, Jespersen, has somewhat naively done (in the history of a language, the sum of “progressive” changes will show an excess over “retrogressive” or “unimportant” changes so that it will become clearer and more suitable for expressing our ideas and emotions)—but insofar as the notion of progress represents the aspirations of human beings toward a certain perfection. Is not this obsession with progress, in fact, a notable motive force in human activity, and should one not bow down before the efforts of the poet or prose writer to draw closer to the Beautiful through the intermediary of his language? Certainly, language is the common and continuous work of all members of a social group. Consciously or not, each one of us is led to introduce certain innovations into it, but these can become the rule only if they are accepted or adopted by all members of the linguistic community; to accomplish this, the innovator must not only have prestige, but also the change that he proposes must respond to the general sentiment of the persons speaking. That is to say that the chances of success of a transformation—accidental or voluntary—are very small. Furthermore, it is necessary to emphasize that in this labor of permanent creation which is language, certain individuals: artists, play a much greater role than others. The writer utilizes the common language (this condition is indispensable, for the poet who is understood only by himself is not, from the point of view of his artistic production, a social being), but he is aware of the resources of his common language better than the others: he succeeds in creating phonetic, morphological, semantic combinations which arouse an esthetic effect on the hearer (or the reader) and evoke the desired impression in his spirit. There is only one condition to be made: a literary work will be more or less successfully received according to the degree of comprehension and level of esthetic emotion which it necessitates, for the communion of a group of individuals with the same feeling for beauty requires of the latter a more or less profound knowledge of the means of attaining beauty.

However, the writer’s raw material is the language of his social group, but his genius is recognized in the way in which he

utilizes this common language and succeeds in deriving an esthetic effect from it; just as the painter or the sculptor has recourse to an arrangement of colors and forms in order to express his sentiment of the beautiful; just as Eupalinus, the architect, constructed at Megara a little temple with four columns, in a very simple style, the very mathematical image of a daughter of Corinth whom he had happily loved.