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ABSTRACT

Henri Meschonnic criticised structuralist linguistics for assuming that progress lay with ever-increasing specialisation, and for narrowing its scope to exclude the literary. For Meschonnic, a linguistics that does not take account of the poetic – particularly of rhythm – is closing its ears to the very heartbeat of language. Rhythm is at the core of a language-body continuity which structuralists ignored because they considered it unconnected to meaning. That, for Meschonnic, was their primordial error, and he argued tirelessly for 'the continuous' in language and linguistics. The programme he devised has certain problems. He never makes clear where the structuralism which he rejects starts and ends; indeed, he himself can be seen as a structuralist along the lines described by Cassirer. Both Saussure and Benveniste occupy a curious position in Meschonnic's structuralism. Also problematic is Meschonnic's tendency to idealise the Hebrew language and Biblical texts, contrasting them with Greek language and thought in a way that borders on, and sometimes crosses into, Orientalism. A comparison with Havelock's treatment of the evolution of Greek from Homer to Plato suggests however that the Romantic and Orientalising aspects of Meschonnic's treatment are merely contingent, not essential, to the position he is taking.

For Henri Meschonnic (1932-2000), the tragedy of structuralism lay in what he called its 'triomphalisme d'un scientisme du discontinu' (triumphalism of scientising the discontinuous).[1] It is true: ask a linguist what linguistics is, and the answer you are likely to get is, first, something about the scientific study of language, and then a litany of the sub-specialisations, phonology, syntax, semantics, historical linguistics, sociolinguistics etc.

(where *cetera* will not include poetics) and what they are concerned with.[2] The existence of those sub-fields, with their division of the labour of analysing sound, order, meaning and the rest each allotted to specialists, is taken to signify the field's progress to a mature state. Specialists tend to avoid treading onto each other's territory; yet common sense would point to an understanding of language *as a whole*, rather than the institutionalising of discontinuity, as the ultimate goal.

Taking inspiration from Émile Benveniste's (1902-1976) conception of 'énonciation' ('utterance', a perspective that starts from the speaker or writer rather than from the linguistic system),[3] Meschonnic devoted his mature career to exposing the structuralist fetishisation of the discontinous and shifting the focus to the *continu* ('continuous') in language. It is not always clear who did and did not count as a structuralist for him, though Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) definitely did not. In fact, when he reads out the charge sheet against structuralism, each crime, of which the following are samples, is described in its opposition to Saussure:

1. quand Saussure dit *système*, notion dynamique, le structuralisme dit *structure*, notion formelle et ahistorique;

2. quand Saussure pose que sur le langage on n'a que des points de vue, notion capitale: des représentations, le structuralisme avec le signe se présente comme décrivant la nature du langage;

3. et Saussure construit la notion de point de vue selon une systématicité interne toute déductive, mais le structuralisme a fait des sciences du langage descriptives […].

(1. where Saussure says *system*, a dynamic notion, structuralism says *structure*, a formal and ahistorical notion; 2. where Saussure posits that with language all we have are points of view – a key notion: representations – structuralism with the sign presents

itself as describing the nature of language; 3. and Saussure constructs the notion of point of view according to an entirely deductive internal systematicity, but structuralism has created descriptive sciences of language [...].)[4]

Again, he is right about the discontinuous – though it is complicated. Starting in the 1920s, those who got called structuralists, or more rarely, called themselves that, were torn between two urges. One was to reject the methods of an earlier generation that wanted to decompose phenomena into elements. That can be construed as a desire for continuousness. The other was to seek out what connects phenomena to each other, and doing that demanded the decomposition into discontinuous elements that their first urge was to reject.

Early structuralists invoked Gestalt psychology as continuous with what they were trying to achieve. By 1945, the first volume of *Word*, the journal co-founded by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and André Martinet (1908-1999), contains two articles laying out visions of structuralism that superficially overlap, but in fact embody these complexly opposed urges. For the older writer, Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), systems such as language need to be approached holistically.[5] Language for Cassirer is organic, 'in the sense that it does not consist of detached, isolated, segregated facts. It forms a coherent whole in which all parts are interdependent upon each other'.[6] The younger Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) seems at first to be singing from the same hymn sheet when he rejects the analysis of kinship by W. H. R. Rivers (1864-1922) on the grounds that it is concerned merely with an atomistic charting of the details of relationships in some particular society:

> Chaque détail de terminologie, chaque règle spéciale du mariage, est rattachée à une coutume différente, comme une conséquence ou comme un vestige: on tombe dans une débauche de discontinuité.

(Each terminological detail, each special marriage rule, is attached to a different custom, like a consequence or a vestige: we descend into an orgy of discontinuity.)[7]

But a careful reading shows how Lévi-Strauss sings in a different key from Cassirer's. His concern is not with organicity, but with the failure to take a *universalist* point of view, one that looks past superficial differences to find how kinship systems are fundamentally the same from culture to culture. They must be so, Lévi-Strauss assumes, because the human relationships they encode are the same. Taking maternal uncles as an example, he writes:

> Nous voyons donc que l'avunculat, pour être compris, doit être traité comme une relation intérieure à un système, et que c'est le système lui-même qui doit être considéré dans son ensemble, pour en apercevoir la structure.
> (We see that the avunculate, to be understood, must be treated as a relationship interior to a system, and that it is the system itself which must be considered in its totality, in order to perceive its structure.)[8]

If this sounds like Cassirer's holism, the resemblance is deceptive because of what Lévi-Strauss understands by *system*. It is not like Saussure's language system, which is specific to each particular language. Lévi-Strauss is not talking about the Yoruba kinship system, as distinct from the Inuit one. He means the *human* kinship system, regarded as a product of evolutionary forces.

There is a double continuity-discontinuity tension at work in this defining structuralist moment: on the one hand, atomism versus holism, Cassirer's tension; on the other hand, the language-culture-particular versus the universal, Lévi-Strauss's tension. Meschonnic's discontent with the discontinuous falls within the first type, and when, as we shall see, he

takes up arms against the structuralist dissociation of language from the body, he cites language-culture-particular examples (notably from the Hebrew of the Old Testament, but also from modern languages) as evidence for a universal language-body continuity. Any language-culture-particular versus universal tension is left aside, or at least pushed into the background. The tensions we repress can come back to haunt us, and that, I shall argue, is potentially the case with Meschonnic's approach to the Hebrew-language body.

Lévi-Strauss sees the development of phonology, as opposed to the merely physical, empirical study of phonetics, as playing, 'vis-à-vis des sciences sociales, le même rôle rénovateur que la physique nucléaire, par exemple, a joué pour l'ensemble des sciences exactes' ('playing for the social sciences the same renewing role as nuclear physics, for example, has played for the exact sciences').[9] He locates the renewal in four fundamental points of method identified by Nicolai S. Trubetzkoy (1890-1938):[10]

[E]n premier lieu, la phonologie passe de l'étude des phénomènes linguistiques *conscients* à celle de leur infrastructure *inconsciente*; elle refuse de traiter les *termes* comme des entités indépendantes, prenant au contraire comme base de son analyse les *relations* entres les termes; elle introduit la notion de *système* [...]; enfin elle vise à la découverte de *lois générales* soit trouvées par induction, soit déduites logiquement, [...] ce qui leur donne un caractère absolu.

([F]irst, phonology passes from the study of *conscious* linguistic phenomena to the study of their *unconscious* linguistic infrastructure; it refuses to treat *terms* as independent entities, instead taking as the basis of its analysis the *relations* between terms; it introduces the notion of *system* [...]; and finally it aims at discovering *general laws* either by induction or by logical deduction, [...] which gives them an absolute character.)[11]

The second and third points, concerning relations and system, are ones Cassirer would have endorsed. But the unconscious is not a concept Cassirer deals with. Although he recognizes that consciousness 'grows' in the child, the dyad suggested by Lévi-Strauss would have been too simplistic for his liking.

When Cassirer talks about atomism and holism, it is on the level of a particular system. Lévi-Strauss talks about atomism and totality of the general system, for example the avunculate, considered universally. The two approaches are not always at cross purposes, only sometimes, but enough to generate an enduring tension within structuralism. A defining moment came in 1955, when the *succès fou* of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* defined structuralism for the public at large and for the next generation of scholars.[12] Cassirer's worries about internal discontinuity were shunted aside, not to vanish but to fester.

For Meschonnic and his contemporaries who took up academic posts with the expansion of the Parisian university system after May 1968, structuralism stood for discontinuity. In linguistics, that meant treating phonology, prosody, morphology, syntax, semantics, semiology and so on as separate levels of language and distinct areas of specialisation; and divorcing linguistics from poetics or applied areas such as translation, and ultimately even semiology, though linguistics continued to focus on the sign and combinations of signs as the essence of language. This never sat well with Meschonnic, but since he was teaching linguistics, he could only go so far in opposing it in these early years.

Nor could he fail to note that, despite their doctrine of how only spoken language is real language, when it came to analysing them, linguists implicitly treated languages in terms of the written. Amongst the aspects of language that writing does not normally capture is rhythm. Linguistics reserves a tiny corner of prosodic analysis for rhythm: students learn for example that French is a syllable-timed language, whereas English is stress-timed. But since

this is not considered to affect meaning, it is devoid of semiological significance, and treated as marginal. It matters in poetics, where rhythm is a central aspect of language – as a result of which structuralists separated out 'poetic language' as something apart, only tangentially connected to the 'real' language that they dealt with. Indeed they regarded this separation as part of the maturing of linguistics as a science, distinct from the 'philology' out of which it had developed in the previous century.[13]

Meschonnic could see how self-defeating this was. Linguistics was setting itself up to be overwhelmed by an 'informatics' which treats language as a conduit for transferring information; and while representation and communication have been the functions focussed on by philosophers and grammarians since ancient Greece, they are continuous with other functions which are not trivial – which indeed are arguably less trivial than the two traditionally recognised ones. Language is the medium of all our social relations, including with ourselves. It is *life*. That cardinal equation, continuous with but more radical than Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) *Lebensform* (form of life),[14] is expressed in one way or another in nearly everything Meschonnic writes.

The error of linguistics, for Meschonnic, is to have treated language in ways that range it on the side of the dead, in part by basing itself on a dichotomy between form and content, sound and sense, that amounts to fatal vivisection; and by accepting rather than challenging the notion of poetry as being something distinct from ordinary language – something more organised, less chaotic. These are exactly the qualities that linguistics itself wants to bring about in the understanding of language, even as it excludes the poetic from the ordinary language which it takes as its subject matter. A perverse exclusion, because

La poésie fait vie de tout. Elle est cette forme de vie qui fait langage de tout. Elle ne nous arrive que si le langage même est devenu une forme de vie.

(Poetry makes life out of everything. It's that form of life that makes language out of everything. It happens to us only if language itself has become a form of life.)[15]

As the song says, the rhythm of life is a powerful beat, puts a tingle in your fingers and a tingle in your feet. It is bodily, as well as mental, or rather it overrides the division between the two. In one of his last articles, Meschonnic wrote:

Le continue corps-langage, c'est alors l'enchaînement des rythmes de position, d'attaque et de finale, d'inclusion, de conjonction, de rupture, de répétition lexicale, de répétition syntaxique, de série prosodique. C'est une sémantique sérielle. (Language-body continuity is then the linking of the rhythms of position, onset and coda, inclusion, conjunction, break, lexical repetition, syntactic repetition, prosodic series. It is a serial semantics.)[16]

These two sentences carry out a revolution in how to conceive of language. Not as something 'cognitive', to use the most vacuous of modern linguistic terms, but as continuous with the body; and understood first of all as a sequence, not of phonemes, but of rhythms, of which he here lists nine types. The types ignore the canonical discontinuities of phonology, morphology and syntax, treating them all as part of the repertoire of rhythmic devices. In the most revolutionary move of all, he refuses the fundamental doctrine that rhythm is separate from meaning, instead declaring language-body continuity to be a serial *semantics*.

A linguistics that shunts rhythm to its margins will not grasp language, not even on the page – least of all the scriptural page. If the Bible is the word of God, the rhythms of the Hebrew Old Testament are sacred. And where, Meschonnic wondered, have those rhythms gone to in the New Testament? Many passages of it are translations of Old Testament verses,

but without the music. And what about later translations? Can language-body continuity be restored in contemporary translational practice? To address such questions, we must abandon our conventional disciplinary boundaries and embrace a unified linguistics-semiology-poetics-traductology. The obstacles to doing so lie partly in the institutionalised separation of disciplines, and partly in the incommensurable ways of talking about these problems and issues that the disciplines have spawned.

Both the agony and the ecstasy of reading Meschonnic stem from his determined struggle to avoid *clichés* and *idées fixes*. The ecstasy of his revelations is something we pay for through the agony of disruptive reading. Anyone who does not find Meschonnic's texts discomfiting is not paying attention. It is funny that English uses French borrowings for both *cliché* and *idée fixe*. It makes you wonder: is there something particularly French about *clichés* or *idées fixes*, such that the English-speaking mind would never have conceived of them unaided?

But there go I falling into an *idée fixe*, the one that claims we can map features of language onto culture, such that every speaker of a language is assumed to share all the aspects of the culture with which it is associated. It is an irresistible draw that Meschonnic constantly enjoins us to resist and to (re)think. *Penser le langage, penser la poétique* – the Meschonnic *cliché par excellence*.

Great thinkers and writers violate their own key ideas. By definition: without that complexity, that deconstructive tension, their work would lack richness. It would be an instruction manual. So it is no slight to Meschonnic to note that he himself did not always resist the pull of the *idée fixe* that links facts about language to the culture of its speakers, indeed to their whole mode of thinking. *Au contraire*: this is part of what makes him great.

The idea of language-body continuity has a venerable heritage.[17] A third term disturbs the continuity: mind, most often conceived in a binary opposition to body. But it has not

always been so conceived. The 'mind-body problem' has taken various forms in the context of language across the centuries, and over the last twenty years a pendulum swing took place within philosophy and cognitive science in the English-speaking world. Previously these fields had been concerned with the mind as traditionally conceived by analytic philosophers and Chomskyan linguists, and in various ways by different schools of psychologists. The 1990s saw a reaction against the so-called 'Cartesian' conception of consciousness as contained within an individual mind, defining what it is to be a Subject, indeed to be human.[18] This mind was conceived of as intracranial, that is, contained within the brain, with the body as its instrument. The philosophers pushing against this conception argued that the mind is *embodied* in a more extensive sense than just being embrained.[19] The extended mind includes the whole nervous system, out to the skin and the sensory organs, and possibly beyond to certain tools such as the blind person's walking stick. It might also involve other people, in a 'distributed' cognition. But on each of these extensions, philosophers differ.

One of the big obstacles to reconstructing this history is terminological, both across and within languages. A word like *spiritus*, the etymon of French *esprit* 'mind', does not mean the same thing from one century to the next, nor indeed to everyone at any given time. Like Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma* and archaic Greek *psykhē*, *spiritus* covers the semantic space of English *wind*, *breath*, *spirit* in various senses, and at some point something like *mind*.[20] In its sense of breath, *spiritus* links the mind directly to the body: the lungs and the muscles and nerves that control them, and the exhaled breath in which we expel, express, our thought in language. Animals appear to us to do something similar, though we imagine their 'thought' as much less complex. The continuity between animal and human expression was at the forefront of Aristotle's concerns; as for humans, he believed that the παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς (the passions of the mind/soul), which our voices express, are ταὐτὰ πᾶσι (the same for all

people).[21] A generation later, Epicurus, in a letter to Herodotus, made breath the cornerstone of a significantly different account of language from Aristotle's:

ὅθεν καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὴ θέσει γενέσθαι, ἀλλ᾽ αὐτὰς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἀνθρώπων καθ᾽ ἕκαστα ἔθνη ἴδια πασχούσας πάθη καὶ ἴδια λαμβανούσας φαντάσματα ἰδίως τὸν ἀέρα ἐκπέμπειν στελλόμενον ὑφ᾽ ἑκάστων τῶν παθῶν καὶ τῶν φαντασμάτων, ὡς ἄν ποτε καὶ ἡ παρὰ τοὺς τόπους τῶν ἐθνῶν διαφορὰ εἴη·

(And so names too were not at first deliberately given to things, but men's natures according to their different nationalities had their own peculiar feelings and received their peculiar impressions, and so each in their own way emitted air formed into shape by each of these feelings and impressions, according to the differences made in the different nations by the places of their abode as well.)[22]

Emitting air – breath – *pneuma* – differing by the feelings and sensory impressions peculiar to each *ethnos*. This answers a big question Aristotle left tacit: why do different languages exist? The one point on which Epicurus directly contradicts Aristotle is when he says that passions and impressions differ ethnically. This cannot be reconciled with Aristotle's belief that the passions of the mind/soul are the same for all. Epicurus offers a dramatic increase in explanatory power, a framework for understanding languages as direct expressions of the national or racial soul, rather than merely different ways of encoding thoughts that are universally human. It seems like a lot of benefit at little cost, but what in fact is at stake is the conception of a common humanity. The passage from Epicurus lays out what will be enduring themes in the bodily approach to language outside the medical context: the central place of breath and the organs that produce it; the effect of racial difference, temperament and complexion; the roles of innate nature and environmental experience. At some level, each

particular language has been shaped by its use in mitigating between each of those who speak it and their physical and social world, which, at the same time, the language shapes. Benveniste showed how this was so for the vocabulary of the Indo-European languages,[23] and to some extent for their syntax and morphology as well, though his attention was on *where* the body was, relative to other bodies and to society and its institutions (buying and selling, for example, which overlapped with gifts, sacrifice, marriage, slavery), not on *what* the body was, except in terms of gender. The language-body nexus is not configured in ethnic-racial terms for Benveniste.

Meschonnic often writes about language-body continuity in the context of the Hebrew Bible, which he contrasts with the 'Greco-Christian' model of thought and language represented by the New Testament. He traces this later model to Plato, and enjoins us to de-Platonise our thinking about rhythm.[24] He is not the first to draw a line between a cerebral Platonic rationality and another form of rationality that involves the whole body, its movement and rhythms. In his 1963 book *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock (1903-1988) argued for just such a historical divide between Homeric epic and Platonic dialogue.[25] I shall return to Havelock, who offers a helping hand with a problem in Meschonnic that I think we need to confront.

We can let Meschonnic use Plato as his whipping boy for critiquing a model of thought and language in which the body has only a trivial, mechanical role to play. For Plato, the reality of language – in fact, of everything – is after all in a heaven of the ideal. But it was his pupil, Aristotle, who produced the first enduring account of language as a bodily production, and Epicurus, a generation later, who provided the second. So we should be wary of Meschonnic's tendency to accept the essentialising of a 'Greek' way of thinking language that is the reverse mirror image of the Hebrew one. This too has a long heritage, which is bound up with Orientalism, but which is really so pervasive in modern thought that we all

buy into it in some degree – think of the very different status accorded in most universities to the philosophy departments in which Greek thought supplies the foundation, and the theology departments in which the Hebrew Bible is studied. The essentialism is hard to see, and harder to resist.

Language-body continuity is a potentially dangerous idea. I am not rejecting Meschonnic's or Havelock's approaches, but trying to encourage their acceptance by facing up to their key weakness, this idealising Romanticism and Orientalism, and showing that it is not in fact crucial to what they are saying, however much their writing may make it appear so. My stance here is the same as I have long taken with Wilhelm von Humboldt:[26] if we can distance ourselves from the cultural idealisations that have made him the target of charges of racism – unfair charges in historical terms, but devastating – we can rescue the essence of his genius. It demands what I call a resistant embrace.

I embrace Meschonnic when he is pulling me in a direction I was not previously inclined to go in. I resist him when I feel him pulling me in an *idée fixe* direction that is familiar to me because I too already feel that pull, the power of that idealisation of cultures isomorphic with languages, and religions, and peoples. The Greeks. The Hebrews. These are overly powerful concepts, seemingly innocuous when we are talking about poetry, but always a step or two away from getting turned into something ugly. Hence the need to ask whether and how we can avoid reading Meschonnic in an ethnic-essentialist way.

Meschonnic is fond of a widespread, classic Orientalist trope to the effect that the Semitic languages are 'body languages'. For example:

De plus, le terme qui désigne l'accent rythmique, constitutif du verset (la notion du verset étant attestée dès le IIᵉ siècle) est à lui seul une parabole du corps-langage: c'est le mot *ta am*, au pluriel *ta amim*, qui signifie le goût de ce qu'on a dans la bouche, la

saveur, cette saveur faisant la raison du dire, et c'est le sens même, et premier, de

l'oralité. Ce qui vient de la bouche.

(The term that designates the rhythmic accent, constitutive of the Biblical verse (the

verset, a notion attested starting in the 2nd century) is itself a parable of the language-

body: it is the word *ta am*, plural *ta amim*, which signifies the taste of what is in the

mouth, the flavour, this flavour being the reason for the saying, and this is the very

meaning, and the first meaning, of orality. What comes from the mouth.)[27]

Such passages abound in Meschonnic. They sound insightful, evocative and harmless. When

Herder said comparable things in 1782, it was as part of his argument that Hebrew poetry was

superior to its Indo-European counterparts:

Alles in ihr ruft: 'ich lebe, bewege mich, wirke. Mich erschufen Sinne und

Leidenschaften, nicht abstrakte Denker und Philosophen' […D]ie Sprache ist mit voller

Brust, mit noch unausgebrauchten starken Organen, aber unter einem reinen und

leichten Himmel, mit scharfem Blick, immer gleichsam die Sache selbst erfassend und

fast nie ohne Spur der Leidenschaft gebildet worden.

(Everything in it [the Hebrew language] proclaims: I live, and move, and act. The

senses and the passions, not abstract reasoners and philosophers were my creators

[...T]he language was moulded and uttered with a fuller expiration from the lungs, with

organs yet pliable and vigorous, but at the same time under a clear and luminous

heaven, with powers of vision acute, and seizing as it were upon the very objects

themselves, and almost always with some mark of emotion and passion.)[28]

Three-quarters of a century later, Renan's Orientalist discourse continues to make Hebrew out to be the Other:

> La race religieuse et sensitive des peuples sémitiques ne se peint-elle pas trait pour trait dans ces langues toutes physiques, auxquelles l'abstraction est inconnue et la métaphysique impossible?
>
> (Is not the religious and sensitive race of the Semitic peoples painted stroke by stroke in these totally physical languages, in which abstraction is unknown and metaphysics impossible?)[29]

Still today we hear examples cited for this supposed 'total physicality', such as the use of the same Hebrew word אַף (ʔaf) for *nose* and *anger*. But English uses *heart* to mean *courage*, and *courage* itself derives from a word for heart. Meschonnic's example of the word for taste also being the word for the rhythmic accent is glossed as showing a language-mouth connection in Hebrew. But in Greek, isn't the word for language γλώσσα, the tongue? And doesn't *tongue* also mean *language* in English?

The pull of this cherry-picking essentialism is strong. When drawn to something potentially dangerous, we should either avoid it or *choose* to be drawn to it with our eyes open to the risks of slipping from language to ethnic to racial essentialism, and ready with our arguments to forestall the slippage.

Unlike many people, I can forgive Herder, Renan and Humboldt for not having foreseen where their racial essentialism might lead in the twentieth century. And I do not blame Meschonnic for assuming that his readers knew where it did lead, and that they would never be tempted down the language-race path. Although aware of the enduring presence of anti-Semitism in France, the thought of it again becoming a serious threat seemed unimaginable

until recently, even to him, the son of Jewish immigrants who as a boy escaped deportation during the German occupation. He speaks of the period in vague allusions. Yet that path of racial essentialism has been so intellectually tempting for so many centuries that, the farther we get from the Nazi period, the more we need to worry on Meschonnic's behalf about how his treatment of Hebrew language-thought might come to be interpreted and used.

I have brought up Havelock because with him we get a historical picture very like Meschonnic's, but where the risk of being labelled Romantic does not carry the much more disturbing taint of ethnic essentialism, because it is the 'same' Greek language and culture he is talking about. Well, not really: Havelock ties Old Greek and New Greek to two cultural stages so distinct that they are not the 'same culture'; but ethnically they are the same. Havelock agreed with his Toronto School contemporaries, including Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), that the development of writing brought about a sea change by making 'abstract' thinking possible. He was equally concerned with how it was possible for epic poetry to develop before writing.[30] Havelock contends that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were far more than entertaining stories and historical records. They were the encyclopaedia of everything the Greeks deemed worthy of knowing and passing on to the populace at large, now and in the future. How, he asks, was this possible before the invention of writing?

The epic poems themselves seemed to exclude the answer that metre and other aspects of poetic form made memorisation possible. They do not use rhyme, their metrical patterns are not regular but complex and varying, and no tradition had come down of their musical settings, apart from pictorial and dramatic representations of bards reciting while plucking the lyre. Their sheer length had inclined some scholars to speculate that the Greeks had developed writing centuries before any of the surviving attestations. Havelock however had been more persuaded by a different line of research. The recordings that Milman Parry (1902-1935) and Albert Lord (1912-1991) made of a living tradition of oral poetry in the Balkans

opened a direct link to Homeric prehistory, or at least as direct a line as might be imagined possible.

Through Parry's work, Havelock came to believe that the Homeric tradition had not depended on writing at all, indeed that its spirit was wholly antithetical to everything that the written word represented.[31] The Balkan bards showed how poetic texts of vast length, far beyond what the average school-educated European could possibly commit to memory, were retainable, supposedly in unvarying form,[32] using all the resources of both mind and body, including music, dance, and the sort of embodied performance that inspired psychological identification of both bard and audience with the characters whose voices were being channelled.

Havelock maintained that the form was an integral part of how the encyclopaedia contained in the Homeric epics became embodied in both reciters and audience. Based again on modern oral traditions as observed by Parry, Havelock contends that 'the main onus of sheer repetition, which the memory needs as its prop, is transferred to the meaningless metrical pattern which is retained tenaciously in the memory', and the verbal content is 'then so expressed as to fit acoustically into the pattern'. Meschonnic certainly would have bristled at 'meaningless' metrical pattern: to my knowledge he never discusses Havelock, though he is deeply critical of Walter J. Ong (1912-2003),[33] who himself relied heavily on Havelock's work. Still, Meschonnic would likely have endorsed the role Havelock assigns to 'reflexes', all the movements of the organs such as tongue, lips, lungs and larynx by which speech is produced,[34] and on how still other bodily reflexes are brought into play to assist the educational work.

In contemporary oral recitation as observed by Parry, the bodies of the audience are pulled into the rhythm of the epic, as their legs and feet are brought into 'motions as organised in dancing'. The text becomes inscribed in their nervous system; it becomes part of

the body. The verbal content is 'then so expressed as to fit acoustically into the pattern'. This process restricts the possible combinations of sound and rhythmic elements, which would otherwise be practically limited, and so 'The requirements of memory are met in a fundamental fashion through practising a strict economy of possible combination of reflexes', where by reflexes Havelock means all the movements of the organs such as tongue, lips, lungs and larynx by which speech is produced.[35]

But still other bodily reflexes are brought into play to assist the educational work. The performer accompanies his recital with music played on the lyre. The music will

continually confirm his memory of the pattern which he is keeping. But the more obvious effect is directed not on himself but on his audience. Their ear drums are bombarded simultaneously by two disparate sets of sounds organised in concordant rhythm: the metrical speech and the instrumental melody. The latter must be repetitive; it […] exists only to make the words more recollectable […].[36]

Once again 'we confront here a pattern of organised actions, the function of which is mnemonic. It moves in a rhythm which parallels that of the spoken words, and spaces and punctuates them, so that the choric recitation becomes also a bodily performance'. Even if we do not know whether this audience participation also took place in ancient performances, we can be confident that the audience at least watched the performers' movements, 'in which case', Havelock says, 'the mnemonic assistance is mediated to them through their eyes'.

Havelock believed that the physiological patterns involved 'become automatic reflexes' in the voice organs, which are 'then strengthened by parallel behaviour in other parts of the body (ears and limbs)'.[37] The result is that 'The entire nervous system […] is geared to the task of memorisation', such that the unconscious mind is put at the service of the conscious,

in his terms – but in the context it is hard to see how the unconscious is anything other than 'the entire nervous system' conjoined with 'the body'. If Havelock was imagining some sort of psychoanalytic unconscious pulling the strings, he does not say so; no doubt some of his audience read that into what he wrote, but he cites no psychoanalytic or even psychological literature.

Although Meschonnic could be expected to reject the discontinuity that Havelock implies between words and music, along with Havelock's single-minded focus on the mnemonic function, the fact that Havelock goes as far as he does in Meschonnic's direction, *within* Greek culture as opposed to between Greek and Hebrew, suggests that no essential ethnic difference needs to be read into Meschonnic's treatment of Biblical language and its translation. Other problems remain, including the one with which this article opened: what to do about his lumping together of 'structuralists'. In his quest for continuities Meschonnic himself can arguably be seen as reverting to that holistic structuralism advocated by Cassirer. His reverence for Saussure, the founding figure of structuralism, is absolute, and if he consigns later structuralists to the lowest circle of Henri's Inferno, it is because they claimed to be carrying out Saussure's programme while in fact betraying its guiding spirit.

Meschonnic found in Saussure's 'Double essence' manuscripts, published in 2002,[38] a movement away from conceiving of the language system as a fact of nature, and instead as being itself a representation of what is ultimately a language-body continuum. Much has been made of Saussure's comment that with language, it is the point of view that creates the object of study – a comment that is in fact in the *Cours de linguistique générale*,[39] but that the 'Double essence' manuscripts develop more fully.[40] Meschonnic is perhaps unique in reading *point de vue* not only as referring to the linguist's own positioning vis-à-vis the object of study, but as taking *vue* literally, as one of the senses, requiring a bodily organ. This recalls a comment of Meschonnic's about 'theory' being the discourse of what it cannot see, and what

it nevertheless shows.[41] Saussure's *points de vue* make him the opposite of a theoretician, from the point of view of a Meschonnic who endured what he called the 'Structuralist Terror' of theory in 1970s Paris.[42]

And what about Benveniste, whose work on *énonciation*, and on the history of the concept of rhythm,[43] were cited by Meschonnic as core inspirations for his own approach? Benveniste is generally classified as a structuralist, and although we can characterise his attitude from 1939 onwards as a 'resistant embrace', he never directly renounced structuralist linguistics.[44] He presented *énonciation* as a research track parallel to it, not as a replacement for it. Meschonnic's condemnation of structuralists might have included an attenuating footnote for Benveniste, whose work on rhythm he elsewhere calls paradoxical:

Le paradoxe est que Benveniste n'a pas développé ce travail, tout en étant le premier et le seul à l'avoir rendu possible. C'est qu'il faisait une linguistique du discours, et que, peut-être, il y fallait une poétique du discours: qui analyse le poème comme révélateur du fonctionnement du rhythme dans le discours. Et Benveniste permet cette poétique, mais ne la constitue pas lui-même.

(The paradox is that Benveniste did not develop this work, despite being the first and only one to have made it possible. It is because he practised a linguistics of discourse, when perhaps what was needed was a poetics of discourse, one which analyses the poem as revelatory of the functioning of rhythm in discourse. And Benveniste permits this poetics, but does not himself constitute it.)[45]

Still, any unfairness in Meschonnic's treatment of Benveniste is relatively trivial next to 'the Hebrew question' discussed earlier – a phrase I use not despite but because of the disturbing historical-rhythmic echoes it sets off.

By drawing attention to the historical echoes, I have aimed to stave off potential misunderstanding of Meschonnic, my admiration and adoration of whose work are as visceral as the worries I have expressed. I shall close with a further reminder (to myself as well as to readers) that the prison-house of language from which Meschonnic struggled to break free had a number of interlocking chambers: the university system in which he was employed to teach structural linguistics; the orthodoxy imposed by colleagues in the field; the 'Structuralist Terror' emanating from adjoining fields; the tension felt by a poet constrained to follow the norms of academic writing; the Jewish heritage which meant that he would never be universally accepted as wholly French, not even by himself; the French poetic tradition with its effete pride in having counter-naturally (or so it felt to him) passed beyond mere rhythmic beats to a more refined form of verse based on syllable counting. Beats are what we feel in our chest, unlike the arbitrary dozen syllables of the alexandrine line. Metrics, originating in the formalisation of music, is projected onto the rhythms of language, regularising, suppressing, neutering them, In popular music, however, Meschonnic's contempories in France and elsewhere were feeling the beat, as rock-and-roll, the heir to swing and jazz, pushed more 'refined' French song out of the Top 40. Henri Meschonnic was determined to do the same – to 'beat' his way out of the prison, and to make us understand that structuralists were wrong to treat rhythm as meaningless. Duke Ellington and Irving Mills were right: it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. Doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah. That last line's sublime, ineffable eloquence, which owes at least as much to the composer Ellington as to the lyricist Mills, proves, if proof were needed, that meaning can inhere in rhythm alone.

AUTHOR

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NOTES

[1] Henri Meschonnic, 'Traduire, et la Bible, dans la théorie du langage et de la société', *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique* 3 (2009), 19-26 (p. 20). Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2] For an example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HOsQDD1Res>.

[3] Emile Benveniste, 'L'appareil formel de l'énonciation', *Langages* 17 (1970), 12-18, repr. in Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 79-88; English version, 'The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation', in *The Discourse Studies Reader: Main Currents in Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Wodak (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2014), 140-145.

[4] Meschonnic, 'Traduire, et la Bible', p. 20. Saussure's theory of language was famously laid out in the posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger (Lausanne and Paris: Payot; 2nd ed. 1922; further editions essentially unchanged; English version, *Course in General Linguistics*, by Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library, 1959 [preferable to the later retranslation by Roy Harris]).

[5] Ernst Cassirer, 'Structuralism in Modern Linguistics', *Word* 1 (1945), 97-120.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

[7] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'L'analyse structurale en linguistique et en anthropologie', *Word* 1 (1945), 33-53 (p. 37). This article would reach a vast audience through its republication as the opening chapter of the first volume of Lévi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958; English version, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, New York: Basic Books, 1963).

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[10] N. S. Trubetzkoy, 'La phonologie actuelle', *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 30 (1933), 227-246.

[11] Lévi-Strauss, 'L'analyse structurale', p. 35, italics in original.

[12] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955; English version, with same title, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman, London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

[13] On this development see James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 125-146.

[14] 'Und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen' ('And imagining a language means imagining a form of life': Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, §19).

[15] Henri Meschonnic, *La rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1990), p. 247.

[16] Meschonnic, 'Traduire, et la Bible', p. 21.

[17] See John E. Joseph, *Language, Mind and Body: A Conceptual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[18] I put 'Cartesian' in scare quotes because I agree with Gordon Baker's and Katherine J. Morris's *Descartes' Dualism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) that the concept of

disembodied mind attributed to Descartes does not accurately represent the view found in Descartes' writings. They attribute it instead to 'the Cartesian legend'.

[19] In so doing they recognised their own continuity with another, more recent development in France, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). For a sample of work in this vein see Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997);

Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', *Analysis* 58/1 (1998), 7-19; Guy Dove, 'On the Need for Embodied and Dis-embodied Cognition', *Frontiers in Psychology* 1 (2011): 242. doi: 10.3389//fpsyg.2010.00242

[20] Latin had an additional word for mind, *mens*, related etymologically to English *mind*, and to Greek *mnēmē* 'memory,' and Sanskrit *mánas* 'mind,' which also means the animating breath that leaves the body at death.

[21] Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 16a3-9.

[22] Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 75, trans. from Cyril Bailey (ed. and trans.), *Epicurus: The Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 75. At a later stage, 'by common consent in each nationality special names were deliberately given in order to make their meanings less ambiguous to one another and more briefly demonstrated' (*ibid.*, p. 76).

[23] Émile Benveniste, *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (2 vols., Paris: Minuit, 1969; English version, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, trans. by Elizabeth Palmer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016; trans. first published as *Indo-European Language and Society*, Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1973).

[24] Meschonnic, 'Traduire, et la Bible', p. 22.

[25] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

[26] See John E. Joseph, review of *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind,* by Wilhelm von Humboldt, trans.

by Peter Heath, with an intro. by Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), *Language* 67 (1991), 843-851; 'Small Universes and Big Individuals: Locating Humboldt in Evolving Conceptions of Language and *Individualität*', in *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Individualität und Universalität*, ed. by Ute Tintemann and Jürgen Trabant (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), pp. 95-111.

[27] Meschonnic, 'Traduire, et la Bible', p. 23:

[28] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie,* Erster Teil (Dessau: auf Kosten der Verlags-Kasse, 1782), pp. 9, 13 (English version, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. by James Marsh, 2 vols., Burlington, Vermont: Edward Smith, 1833, vol. 1, pp. 30, 33).

[29] Ernest Renan, *De l'origine du langage*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Michel Lévy, Frères, 1858. [1st ed., 1848]), p. 190.

[30] Joseph, *Language, Mind and Body*, pp. 209-215, discusses how Havelock's failure to define what he meant by 'abstract' put him in a long line of writers who use the terms *abstract* and *concrete* in shifting and contradictory ways.

[31] The writings of Parry, who died at 33, were not widely available before a posthumous collection, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. by Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). However, the editor of the collection, Parry's son Adam (1928-1971), was the Harvard colleague of Havelock and Lord and gave them access to his father's manuscripts and recordings.

[32] Though cf. Haun Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and its Technologies* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2016), pp. 63-73.

[33] Notably in Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris: Verdier, 1999).

[34] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, pp. 148-149.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[38] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Écrits de linguistique générale*, ed. by Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler, assisted by Antoinette Weil (Paris: Gallimard, 2002; English version, *Writings in general linguistics*, trans. by Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires, with the assistance of Peter Figueroa, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). The closest version to the manuscript can be found in Ferdinand de Saussure, *De l'essence double du langage*, transcription diplomatique établie par Rudolf Engler d'après le manuscrit déposé à la Bibliothèque de Genève, 1993), *Texto!* déc. 2004 - juin 2005, ≤http://www.revue-texto.net/Saussure/De_Saussure/Essence/Engler.html≥.

[39] 'c'est le point de vue qui crée l'objet': Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, p. 23.

[40] See especially sections IIc (Nature de l'objet en linguistique) and IIe (Les quatre points de vue).

[41] Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme: anthropologie critique du langage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982), p. 60.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[43] Émile Benveniste, 'La notion de "rythme" dans son expression linguistique', *Journal de Psychologie* 44 (1951), 401-410, repr. in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 327-335; English version, 'The Notion of "Rhythm" in its Linguistic Expression', in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), 281-288.

[44] See further my Introduction to Émile Benveniste, *Last Lectures: Collège de France, 1968 and 1969*, trans. by John E. Joseph (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

[45] Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme*, p. 70.