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JULIA KRISTEVA'S SEMANALYSIS AND THE LEGACY OF ÉMILE BENVENISTE

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Abstract

This essay describes the legacy of Émile Benveniste in the semanalysis of Julia Kristeva and their *Wahlverwantschaft*, also on a more personal level. They shared her criticism on semiotics, she followed his footsteps in looking for support in psychoanalytic theory in order to understand the genealogy of the signifying process better, as well as the heterogeneity of “texts” and the nature of the speaking subject. His influence becomes abundantly clear in her “L'engendrement de la formule” of 1969 in which she introduces her concept of semanalysis. While making Benveniste's concept of *signifiante* central to her vocabulary, she, at the same time and more so in later years, re-worked this and other notions of Benveniste, such as *histoire* in relation to *discours*.

1. The roots of semanalysis

Two years ago, Seuil and Gallimard published Émile Benveniste's final lectures at the Collège de France, from the years 1968 and 1969 (Benveniste 2012). Thirty eight years after his death on October 3, 1976, and forty five years after his career was cut short by an irreversible cardiovascular accident in late 1969 (Sebeok 1981: v). The publishers asked Julia Kristeva to write the preface to this collection of his final lectures. In it, she is able to summarize Émile Benveniste's general significance and what became so crucial to her own thinking: the speaking subject.

It was not the first time she paid tribute to Benveniste. An earlier account was *Langue, Discours et Société* (Kristeva, Milner & Ruwet 1975), a collection of articles intended as an homage to Benveniste. But the significance of Benveniste's thoughts for the development of Kristeva's semanalysis began with her reading of Benveniste's best-known articles, published in the two volumes of *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966 and 1974), some of which date from the mid-fifties.

In her first publications on semiotics, Kristeva already finds support in Benveniste for her criticism on semiotics. Her criticism brings two points into sharp focus. Firstly, the static character of semiotics and secondly, its a-historical character (Mechelen 2005). The first is directly related to the notions central to semiotics, namely “sign” and “signification”. The second relates to two different practices: how semioticians deal with the history of their own field of study and secondly, how they basically conduct their research. Kristeva reproaches semiotics both for its lack of (historical) reflection and the a-historical manner in which the signifying practices undertaken by semioticians are researched. Her criticism acquires its first programmatic form in 1966 when she introduces the notion of the *paragram* (Kristeva 1966). It refers to De Saussure’s study of the “anagrams”, which he started in 1906, but left unfinished a few years later (Starobinski 1971).¹ While De Saussure was searching for codes to decipher the intentional hidden “text”, Kristeva was more interested in the symptoms of unconscious contents in the articulated text, be it literary texts or other forms of expression. Three years later, in 1969, Kristeva introduces the term for which she is better known, namely *la sémanalyse*. In “L’engendrement de la formule” (Kristeva 1969) she describes semanalysis as the signifying theory that investigates *from within* the origin and development of texts.² Within the sign system, semanalysis opens another, hidden “scene” that is the genesis of the system. Incidentally, “hidden” is used here in a completely different sense than De Saussure used it. “L’engendrement de la formule”, which might be considered key to her thinking, introduces not only the concept of semanalysis, but also the concepts of *phenotext* and *genotext*. The phenotext is an imprinted text, but an articulation that can only be read, heard or seen by going back, vertically she says, to its origin, therefore through its engenderment (Kristeva [1969] 1978: 218). This origin might be translated as the genotext.³ Clearly her understanding of a hidden text in this article is directly related to what she wrote previously about paragrams and through this she adopts a critical position regarding the history of modern semiotics. The phenotext is considered a formula, a reduction and a sacrifice compared to the genotext, which is described as a gift and a *jouissance*.⁴ It is no surprise that Kristeva, who values the hidden text in such a way, is critical not only of semiotics, but of linguistics in general, especially of established scholars such as Noam Chomsky. To establish her theory more profoundly, she decided to re-read not only Freud’s *Traumdeutung* but also Lacan, and how he re-reads Freud and De Saussure. This was not an obvious choice for someone who at that time just had left a communist country. The component of “analysis” in semanalysis is often understood as a reference to psychoanalysis, though she defines it herself in “L’engendrement” as the theory that investigates *from within* the genesis of texts; the word “text”, of course, used in a broader sense. She calls the process of this genesis or genealogy of the signifying system *le procès de la signifiance*, translated by me and others as signifying process. Every practice contains such a process, though the degree to which it is expressed differs. She makes a distinction between a stronger and a weaker expression. The first, more powerful category is also known by a concept that she again derives from the Russian formalists, namely *poetic language*. In this, the material aspect, both the phonetic and the graphic signifiers, are emphatically present. It is clear that in her criticism of semiotics, Kristeva found support in psychoanalytic theory. But in order

¹ According to Starobinski in his *Les mots sous les mots. Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* the studies about the anagrams were written between 1906 and 1909.

² “L’engendrement de la formule” was published in *Semiotikè. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, in 1969. She gave Benveniste this volume a couple of weeks before his stroke.

³ Before Kristeva, the Russian linguists S.K. Saumjan [Shaumyan] and P.A. Sobolevau used these concepts of genotext and phenotext. See Coquet 1972: 345 and Kristeva 1969: 223.

⁴ Mauss, Lévi-Strauss nor Bataille are mentioned in this text but without doubt this notion of *gift* should be read in an anthropological sense and context. *Jouissance* is not yet the central notion it will be in her writings a couple of years later. Interpreted as *j’ouïs sens* it fits well with her idea that within the visible text a non-intentional meaning resonates.

to make this move, she needed the support of someone who took this step before. Undoubtedly, that person was Émile Benveniste.

2. *Wahlverwant*: Julia Kristeva and Émile Benveniste

Julia Kristeva accompanied Benveniste to an international semiotic conference in Warsaw, in 1968, the third important international meeting of semioticians in Eastern Europe, which paved the way for the AIS/IASS. Benveniste was raised in Syria, Aleppo, while Kristeva was born in Bulgaria. Both came from a polyglot environment, though Benveniste much more so than Kristeva.⁵ When Kristeva met Benveniste for the first time, she was very young and shy, so she says in the preface of *Dernières leçons* (Benveniste 2012). She had just arrived in France to study there and was eager to nestle in the heart of the French intelligentsia, as Benveniste did before. And of course the rest is history: both became prestigious lecturers at the French colleges and international universities.

In her enumeration of the facts of his personal life in the preface of the collection of his lectures, we notice a few other things they had in common, such as their left-wing political orientation. In the case of Benveniste, his sympathies, at least, towards rebellious young communists in the interbellum and his devotion to art and artists, especially the surrealists, and half a century later, the *Tel Quel* group. Kristeva had close contact with this group that founded its magazine in 1960. During their first conversations, they appeared to share an interest in Michael Bakhtin and his notion of *dialogue* as well. But still, from the record of their growing friendship, I draw the conclusion that besides their mutual intellectual interests, the fact that they both were “strangers”, to quote Roland Barthes (Barthes 1970), was the deeper ground of their *Wahlverwantschaft*. When “Paragram’s” was published, Benveniste was cited only once in a footnote, but when the article “L’engendrement” appeared three years later, he already plays a larger role. Six years later, a year before his death, Kristeva writes her first article dedicated to Benveniste, called “La fonction predicative et le sujet parlant” (Kristeva 1975), reprinted in *Polylogue* (1977). She talks about the revolution that his work brought forward in linguistics, though (at that time) still not visible enough.⁶

3. Under the banner of Benveniste’s concepts

In both her 2012 tribute, and that of 1975, Kristeva likes to underscore what distinguishes Benveniste from other linguists, also within semiotics. Even when those linguists and semioticians tried to connect language or semiotic systems to social practices, this was not done in a way that satisfied Benveniste, as she states in one of her better-known earlier articles, “The System and the Speaking Subject”, published in *Times Literary Supplement* (Kristeva [1973] 1975). In this article, she argues that the analysis of artistic practices ought to be the measure and criterion for semiotics and linguistics. And though she probably didn’t take this from Benveniste, she did recognize this mutual idea in his work. He at least gave her a better understanding of the heterogeneity of language itself. It is clear that she criticizes semiotics when it follows the linguistic model, placing it blindly at the service of the demand for social communication. Though signifying practices are supportive to social communication, the specific meaning of artistic practices is that they reject a utilitarian interpretation of social communication. In Kristeva’s

⁵ Benveniste’s mother taught Russian, Hebrew and French in Samokov, Bulgaria. Kristeva was unaware of this in the first years after she met him.

⁶ Around 1975, I was studying philosophy of language (besides my major in Art History). My professor was an adept of the Anglo-Saxon generative semantics and not very predisposed to French linguistics, with the exception of Benveniste, who I was allowed to choose for my reading list and who I indeed selected. At that time I already noticed that Benveniste was a generally respected linguist.

opinion, artistic practices are basically practices of transgression and, again, *jouissance*. She is informed in this conviction by her own experience with these practices, literature and poetry, as well as the visual arts.⁷

It is surprising that the influence of Benveniste on Kristeva's intellectual history has hardly been researched.⁸ Nonetheless it is important to consider this relation and the legacy of Benveniste in Kristeva's work for more than one reason. First, to follow the path from Benveniste's position to her own semanalysis. Second, to get a clue, in a more traditional sense, of what his influence entailed. We will continue with this point. Third, to gain a better understanding of how Kristeva interpreted Benveniste. And lastly, to gain deeper insight into the difference between semiotics and semanalysis. Let us first concentrate on a few concepts.

3.1. Signifiante

It is clear that Benveniste supported Kristeva in a certain direction through his writings and their conversations in the late eighties. Not forgetting their affinity on a deeper level, as mentioned already. But there are a few concrete facts that concerns concepts, which should not be omitted, because they reveal more clearly Kristeva's indebtedness to Benveniste. In an interview that Jean Claude Coquet (Coquet 1972) had with her in 1972, she explained that the concept of *signifiante* that she already used at that time, had its origins in the writings of Benveniste. We know how central it would become to her own writings in general. He introduces this concept of *signifiante* in one of his better known articles: "Sémiologie de la langue" (Benveniste [1969] 1974). Here he compares the semiology of De Saussure with the semiotics of Peirce, who according to Benveniste was not interested in how the "langue" operates.⁹ Though the status of the "langue" was the most important status to De Saussure, indeed when compared to other sign systems, Benveniste argues that it was never clearly defined by De Saussure. Benveniste emphasizes that this is necessary, but instead of giving his argument, he starts discussing concrete practices, like music and the visual arts. His main question is: "what is the value of the sign in-between those practices?" The reason why he is not able to give a satisfactory answer, so he says, is that the notions of the sign and langue appear to be an obstacle. His conclusion is that it is better to start from the individuality and particularity of these practices than from a general theory, and subsequently to investigate their relations and correspondences. It is not within the scope of this article to explain his argument in more detail, but his conclusion is interesting, mainly because it is interpreted in different ways. It seems contrary to what he said earlier when he returns halfway to the langue as the only possible system that in its structure and its functioning is truly semiotic. And therefore is needed as an interpreting system. Some semioticians stopped here and saw this as a confirmation of former positions. However, these were not his last words and it is Kristeva who listens especially to what he says next. When he distinguishes a semiotic and a semantic *signifiante*, she sees this as a way to delete the concept of sign altogether, because it blocked the access to all that exceeds the "langue". In Coquet's interview she makes an important remark when she states that her concept of semanalysis is identical to and encompassing what Benveniste calls "une sémantique ét une translinguistique" (Coquet 1972: 345).

⁷ Kristeva wrote two articles in the early seventies that were published in the visual art journal *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, edited by four painters. The first one was about Giotto, called "L'espace de Giotto", later reprinted under a different title, "La joie de Giotto" (*Polylogue* 1977) and the second was about Giovanni Bellini ("Maternité selon Giovanni Bellini"), also reprinted in *Polylogue*.

⁸ In my book *Vorm en Betekening* (1993), a title that could be translated as *Form and Signifying process*, the relation between Benveniste and Kristeva plays a crucial role, though this relation was rarely discussed in secondary sources, neither at the time of publication, nor later on; at least that is the outcome of my recent research.

⁹ His criticism of De Saussure and Peirce is one of the most remarkable things in his final lectures, but of course we can also find it in his earlier writings.

3.2. Discours, énonciation and énoncé

In the first volume of the *Problèmes de linguistique générale* we find a reprint of a controversial article by Benveniste, published in 1956 in *La Psychanalyse* under the unpretentious title “Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne” (Benveniste 1966). This article, however, did not remain unmarked. More than the elaboration of his thoughts, it concerns, as the title says, only remarks. But his engagement to the Freudian discovery becomes clearly apparent. Kristeva discusses, in relation to this text of the mid-fifties, two concepts for which Benveniste is probably best known, namely *discours* and *énonciation*. Not all interpreters of Benveniste follow her in this direction, though they will agree that with his concept of *énonciation* he draws the attention to the speaking subject. The subject that speaks and makes of the langue his own langue while giving indices of his specific position. The act is called *énonciation* and expresses the relation to the articulated text (the *énoncé*). Obviously Benveniste wants to create bridges, between the langue, the *énonciation* and the *énoncé*, but also between, on the one hand, a social conception of the langue and on the other, the individual character of the parole or what he calls the *discours*. So Benveniste tries to reveal the dialogue between the two and consequently their continuous exchange. These dynamics are not possible without an *énonciateur*, i.e. an intermediary instance that, in the case of Benveniste, is maybe still understood in a more traditional semiotic manner, more so than with Kristeva. She brings his theory back into its Freudian context and more strongly confirms Benveniste’s idea of the continuous intervention of psychoanalytical processes in trans-linguistic messages. It is the acceptance of Freud’s theory of the unconscious and the splitting of the subject that should definitely lead to another approach to conscious communication.

3.3. Pronouns and the deictic pronomina

Two years after “Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne” (Benveniste 1966 [1956]), Benveniste published another article in a psychology magazine, *Journal de Psychologie*, in which he takes a next step by talking about the subjectivity of language in relation to personal pronouns. The title of the article is “De la subjectivité dans le langage” (Benveniste 1966 [1958]). Here he deals with the pronouns “I” and “you” which are signifiers that only make sense in concrete discursive situations. He continues by arguing that the same can be said about the deictic pronomina, such as “here” and “there”: “Ils ont en commun ce trait de se définir seulement par rapport à l’instance de discours où ils sont produits, c’est-à-dire sous la dépendance du je qui s’y énonce” (Benveniste 1966 : 262). There are a few other interesting examples, like how in utterances, in particular, the meaning of the verb changes considerably when only the personal pronoun has been altered. Let’s compare: “I assume that he left” and “you assume that he left”. The second sentence implies and confirms the utterance of an imagined former speaker; the first sentence does not. Another example is the difference between “je jure” and “il jure”. With Austen we could say that the first utterance is a performative one that has consequences for a real situation, socially and juridical. To use Benveniste’s word, it is an *engagement*, while “il jure” is nothing but a description. Kristeva sees these pronouns with an indexical status as *traces* in the Freudian sense. One could call them *indices* as well, referring to real persons and live communication. So the subject of enunciation leaves traces of the linguistic deed in the articulated text (the *énoncé*), a text that also has a history and that is part of a heterogeneous, semi-unconscious process.

4. Going her own way

After we have looked at the path that leads from Benveniste to Kristeva and the influence he had on her semanalysis, it’s time to raise the question where she went her own way. I think

it is quite clear that she already concentrated in her earlier texts on the “hidden scenes” and on the heterogeneity of signifying processes, much more than Benveniste ever did. On the other hand, she was convinced that with her concept of semanalysis she was taking Benveniste’s aim to bridge the distance between semantics and the trans-linguistique a step further. For that reason she proposed just one single concept, semanalysis, for the two, in order to show that it concerns only one process. “Nous appelons sémanalyse ce qu’il [Benveniste MvM] désigne comme une sémantique et une translinguistique” (Coquet 1972 : 345). She comes with yet another proposal to solve the confusion about what Benveniste understands by *signifiance*. Benveniste uses it both as what we might consider to be an umbrella notion, and as connected to a certain system. Therefore, a better and more unambiguous definition is needed, according to Kristeva, and hence she defines *signifiance* as the total of phenotext and genotext.

4.1. A psycho-semiotic approach of *histoire*

There are two other concepts of Benveniste to be mentioned, both are central to his enunciation theory, namely *discours* and *histoire*. The first is already mentioned. The second concept, *histoire*, describes a story that tells itself without a narrator. Both have been quite important, not only to Kristeva but to Greimasian semiotics as well. If we compare her interpretation to those of Greimasian semioticians, we see hardly any difference in the way they designate the central notions of this theory.¹⁰ However, the way they look at the function of these concepts in relation to the history and development of semiotics is quite the opposite. While in Greimasian semiotics they are instrumental for bridging the gap between De Saussure’s concepts of *parole* and *langue*, in order to create an escape from the chaotic and individual idea of the *parole*, Kristeva, following Benveniste, rather accepts these characteristics of any given language. She is confirming this more and more so in her writings after 1975. We recognize these differences in the use of the notion of *trace*. With Kristeva it brings us to the domain of the unconscious, to slips of the tongue, ambiguities and metaphors. They tell us something about the speaker, the speaking subject, and their impact on the effects of the utterance. In Kristeva’s view, based on Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, it makes no sense to distinguish between *discourse* and *histoire*. When someone tells about his dream, it does not matter *how* it is told. From a psycho-semiotic perspective, more important is how the supposed dream thoughts can be brought in connection with the manifest dream content. It is interesting to see that though she is focused on operations that exceed the normal formation of sentences, Kristeva is eager to show how heterogeneity functions on a micro level as well. Here again we see Benveniste’s influence. As, for example, on the level of the predicative function. While the subject of a sentence has an individual character, the predicate is more general and not so much connected to the immediate perception. The subject represents a state of being and the finite; the predicate, on the other hand, changes endlessly. So when first we speak about a “predication altérante”, in the end we must speak about a “predication infinitisante”, so she concludes (Kristeva 1975: 56).

5. Conclusion: semanalysis as the road “that never says, nor hides, but signifies”

Though other theorists, like Melanie Klein, became more important to Kristeva after 1975, her indebtedness to Benveniste remains to this day; this becomes abundantly clear in the preface to the collection of Benveniste’s lectures. Her semanalysis is a “science critique” and a “critique de la science”, but, following Benveniste, also an expression of the ideal to reform, to renew and

¹⁰ I have the interpretations of Emil Poppe and Eric de Kuyper in mind. See my *Vorm en Betekening. Kunstgeschiedenis, semiotiek, semanalse* (1993: 192-194), in which Felix Thürlemann is discussed more extensively as well (Mechelen 1993:142-185).

transform. Therefore, in her preface she emphasises and praises his ability to encompass the long tradition of linguistics, philology and semiotics, not only of the nineteenth and twentieth century, but also of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in particular Lancelot and Arnauld's *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, dated 1660, which, as she mentions, brought the notion of the sign to the fore for the very first time. A sign, as it were, of the inclusion of the Cartesian subject into the syntax of the "langue". All later rifts – she mentions quite a few, are less important than the value of the legacies themselves. This attitude against histories is what they apparently have in common.

There was still another personal trait she shared with him that qualifies both their positions in linguistics and semiotics. Kristeva calls it Benveniste's style of thought, which is explained as an attempt to re-join morpho-syntactic details with the overarching linguistic and philosophical categories. He was able to signify, to "tell", to investigate in detail, hiding nothing behind aesthetic screens, while at the same time ensuring that messages never became closed messages or messages that obey just one system of thought or a single current in linguistics or semiotics. They both accept the inherent chaos of the twentieth-century developments in thinking, which left its marks on language itself. The experience of the living language, of speech, is what should ultimately determine the scientific approach. It's what makes us human beings, one could say. An act that never has a fixed meaning, but is always in a definitely unfinished state of becoming.

Speaking about Benveniste's approach, 43 years later, Kristeva feels the need to clarify why this approach was so extraordinary at that time. Contrary to linguists such as Bloomfield and Harris, for Benveniste linguistics meant to be engaged not only with the non-subjective formal elements of language, but also with the power of language that far surpasses the ability "to name". As Kristeva says: they were the days when semiology became synonymous with freedom of expression and thought. Hence it was understood internationally, not only in the West, but also in the East. Semiology was the alliance between both worlds; a prefiguration of the situation after 1989. Benveniste referred to the capacity of language to generate other systems of signs too, yet still as the only system capable of interpretation. And here I think Roland Barthes speaks to us again.

Anno 2014, Kristeva has left semiotics far behind, so she said when she was invited to attend the IASS congress in Sofia, and yes, her current topics are of a different nature, though I think she still examines them with the intention and eye of a semiotician. Despite the fact that she was – thanks to Benveniste I would say – devoted to the AIS organization for many years, as a member of the board, the editorial committee of Mouton, we should also consider and accept her as a critic of semiotics.

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