

DEFINING LANGUAGE. FROM CASSIRER TO LACAN**DEFININD LIMBAJUL. DE LA CASSIRER LA LACAN****DÉFINIR LE LANGAGE. DE CASSIRER À LACAN****Angelica CĂPRARU¹**

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Abstract

Noticing continuities and discontinuities between the various references made by Lacan and Cassirer regarding language, we have extracted within these pages a few sequences from the language definitions provided by the two scholars. Thus, we underline that, in spite of a perception based on different systems and having different goals, the two visions are joined by the purpose of establishing the role of the individual, of the myth, of the expressivity and sensitivity when producing language as a symbolic form, in the case of Cassirer and by the purpose of the individual being conditioned by the language, in the case of Lacan, respectively.

Rezumat

Constatând continuități și discontinuități între diversele referiri ale lui Lacan și ale lui Cassirer la limbaj, am detașat în aceste pagini secvențe din definițiile pe care aceștia le consacră limbajului. Evidențiem în acest fel că, în ciuda unei percepții ancorate în sisteme diferite și cu finalități diferite, cele două viziuni se întâlnesc în stabilirea poziției omului, a mitului, a expresivității și sensibilității în producerea limbajului ca formă simbolică, în cazul lui Cassirer, respectiv a condiționării individului de către limbaj, în cazul lui Lacan.

Résumé

En retrouvant des continuités et des discontinuités entre les références diverses de Lacan et de Cassirer concernant le langage, nous avons retenu dans ces pages quelques séquences utilisées par ceux-ci pour définir le langage. Nous mettrons ainsi en exergue le fait que, malgré une perception appartenant à des systèmes différents et ayant des finalités différentes, les deux visions se croisent lorsqu'il s'agit d'établir la position de l'homme, du mythe, de l'expressivité et de la sensibilité dans la production du langage en tant que forme symbolique, dans le cas de Cassirer, respectivement le conditionnement de l'individu par le langage, dans le cas de Lacan.

Key words: Cassirer, Lacan, language, myth, sign, arbitrary.

Mots-clés : Cassirer, Lacan, langage, mythe, signe, arbitraire.

Cuvinte cheie: Cassirer, Lacan, limbaj, mit, semn, arbitrar.

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Within our approach, we compare two ways of perceiving the language, the one suggested by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the one belonging to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Marie Émile Lacan. Let us justify first of all why Cassirer and why Lacan?

Among the philosophers, Ernst Cassirer is recognized and appreciated, according to Steve G. Lofts² for instance, for the highest interest in studying the symbolism within the diversity of his manifestations. Although he seems to be forgotten nowadays, in spite of his important contribution, the interpreter of the *symbolic forms* when searching the unconscious and the successive cultural deposits in the unconscious, considers, according to Lofts, that *each cultural form represents a unique manner of interpreting the world, enjoying an equal status and autonomy within the coherent overall constituted by these* (Lofts, 1992:524).

We keep analyzing the stage of noticing the continuities and discontinuities between the two forms of thinking, which begin from the vision regarding the language and we must underline that, seen as a symbolic form, the language features a limit, not being capable, for Cassirer, to provide ultimate and unique explanations that the conceptual functions have or request³. The question answered by the analyst of the symbolic forms, in a manner similar to that of Lacan, concerns the relation between the classes of objects, the characteristics according to which we put the objects into these classes and, as a consequence, the role of language. It is essential for Cassirer to know if the properties according to which we distribute each object to a certain class needed for the knowledge *are given to us before the language is formed, if the language is or not the one providing them to us respectively* (Cassirer, 1972:248).

From a completely different perspective, the work of the French psychoanalyst Lacan (1953) highlights a break as compared to the classic preoccupations that were centered on culture or language. His work, applicable in very different fields, from the social sciences, literary theory, cultural studies, is used as an essential theoretical support within the management as well. Therefore, the connection between the French psychoanalyst and the organizational culture, his being integrated in the range of approaches is natural and legitimate, in line with the variety of perspectives. On the contrary, Ernst Cassirer brings forward the systematic, cultural vision, which is a priority as compared to a historical point of view, although, agreeing with Emilio Brito, in Cassirer's model we don't find a presentation of a history, traditionally speaking, finding instead a recovering theoretical initiative, based on a material regarding the society's becoming, understood as history, can be provided for distinguishing the stages which, according to Cassirer, *have marked the emancipation of the modern thinking from any form of substantialism*⁴.

The structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the linguistics of F. de Saussure represent the starting point for J. Lacan's vision. The consistent reading of Kant's work is Cassirer's work foundation. According to Lacan, there is a structure identity between the unconscious and the language, seen as a network of significant that multiply and structure diachronically.

For Cassirer, the issue of the language origin and its essence is comparable to that of the *essence and origin of a being* (Cassirer, 1972:61). When relating to the others, according to Lacan, the psychic gets further from its own nature due to certain interiorized significant, which make its own truth identify with the utterance, mediated by the passing through anterior significant. Cassirer had established that the sensation's material upon which the psychic is exercised is in no way a given fact and prior to any information, that the sense domain respectively cannot be distinguished from the one of the sensitivity because even the most abstract productions of the language prove

² Steve G. Lofts, « Une nouvelle approche de la philosophie d'Ernst Cassirer », In: *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*. Quatrième série, tome 90, n°88, 1992. pp. 523-538. Consulted at http://www.persee.fr/doc/phlou_0035-3841_1992_num_90_88_6760. Accessed on [May 25, 2016].

³ Ernst Cassirer, *La Philosophie des formes symboliques. 1. Le langage*, traduit de l'allemand par Ole Hansen-Love et Jean Lacoste, Les Editions de Minuit, 1972, p. 247-248.

⁴ Brito Emilio. *Ernst Cassirer, Le problème de la connaissance dans la philosophie et la science des Temps modernes, I. De Nicolas de Cues à Bayle*. Traduit de l'allemand par René Fréreau. Préface par Massimo Ferrari (traduite de l'italien par Thomas Loisel). 2004. In: *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 38^e année, fasc. 3, 2007. pp. 416-417; http://www.persee.fr/doc/thlou_0080-2654_2007_num_38_3_3603_t1_0416_0000_2. Accessed on [March 17, 2016]

another connection to a primary intuitive support (Cassirer, 1972:151). Dedicating a chapter to the moment of evolution that connects the linguistic expression and the sensitivity, Cassirer accepts though that there is, at a certain moment, a separation between the intuitive sensitive roof, the form under which language presents itself at the beginning and the universal look of the meaning (Cassirer, 1972:149). This separation has made possible the separation from the myth, but after a strong rooting of the sensitive forms in the self-consciousness of the talking being.

While elaborating his theory found in *Deux Aspects du langage et deux types d'aphasie* (1956) Lacan reinterprets Freud, by means of R. Jakobson's linguistics. Just like Saussure⁵ and Jakobson, Lacan considers that the linguistic sign has an arbitrary character, that between the significant and signification respectively, between the acoustic image and content there are no factors motivated by the association. Saussure sees language as a unified and autonomous sign system, the continuous interaction of which ensures the values and the functions of the components. The linguist represents graphically the linguistic sign as a relationship between significance (s) and significant (S), a representation that Lacan reverses, for him, the significant preceding the significance.

While Lacan was discussing again structuralist theses, Cassirer had already produced a change of vision, passing from the minimal sign level, noticeable in the architecture of the word within the sentence unit and considering there is an indissoluble connection between the spiritual means with which the language builds the universe and the forces that incorporate universality⁶:

« Il est à prévoir que dans le langage aussi la même corrélation indissoluble entre les moyens spirituels avec lesquels il construit son univers va se vérifier, et que là aussi chacun de ses thèmes particuliers va déjà inclure l'universalité et le tout spécifique de sa forme. Et on en trouve en effet la confirmation dans le fait que ce n'est pas le simple mot, mais seulement la phrase qui constitue l'élément véritable et originaire de la formation de la langue. »

Quoting Humboldt, Cassirer claims that the origin of language does not lie in the initiatives that begin with the creation of signs for the designation of the objects for their subsequent classification, meaning that the discourse is not an accumulation of words that pre-existed before this process⁷:

« L'histoire des langues aboutit aux mêmes conclusions; elle semble toujours montrer que le mot singulier ne s'est que très lentement, faisant d'ailleurs quasiment défaut aux premières primitives élaborations linguistiques. »

The individual, from Lacan's point of view, is conditioned by the language as pre-determined linguistic and cultural structure, the unconscious being subordinated to these external structures. Within this vision, there is a permanent encounter, an inter-conditioning between philosophy, psychoanalysis and structural linguistics. Language becomes an enigma that Lacan defines by means of a known formula: „*l'inconscient humain est structuré comme un langage*” (Radzinski, 1985:123), while Cassirer states that *nihil est in intellectu quod ante fuerit in sensu* (Cassirer, 1972:54). Within the communication process, language does not manage to solve the enigma. Metaphorically, for Lacan, language is a mirror on which the unconscious is structured. With the help of symbols, the language conveys messages to the human psychic, the latter occupying a secondary place as compared to the pre-existing linguistic code. Lacan⁸ stated:

⁵ For a more detailed presentation of the issue, see A. Radzinski : « Lacan/Saussure : les contours théoriques d'une rencontre. » in: *Langages*, 19^e année, n°77, 1985. *Le sujet entre langue et parole(s)* pp. 117-124. http://www.persee.fr/doc/lgge_0458-726x_1985_num_19_77_1509

⁶ Cassirer, *quoted work*, p.275 for the quotes, as well.

⁷ Cassirer, *quoted work*, p. 276, for the quotes as well.

⁸ "The individual is born to live, he/she deals first of all with language; the language is almost like a given fact to him/her. The individual being in a relationship with the language right before he/she is born, doesn't he/she have a marital status, we wonder? Yes, the child who is to be born is gathered within the nets of the hammock that adopts him/her, but keeping him/her prisoner at the same time, as well" (our translation) in J.Lacan., *Discours du Congrès de Rome et réponse aux interventions*, 1953. Consulted :

« *L'homme qui naît à l'existence a d'abord affaire au langage; c'est une donnée. Il y est même pris dès avant sa naissance, n'a-t-il pas un état civil? Oui, l'enfant à naître est déjà, de bout en bout, cerné dans ce hamac de langage qui le reçoit et en même temps l'emprisonne.* »

Therefore, starting as soon as the individual is born, from Lacan's point of view, he/she is the prisoner of the linguistic and cultural structures, which will mark his/her entire existence. In other words, the individual finds himself/herself immersed in this structure (language, culture of belonging), the unconscious being subordinated to this structure. In Lacan's opinion, the structures, the symbols precede the individuals' existence, human nature being thus influenced, if not even determined, by culture, by the laws and evolution of the culture „to the intimacy of the human body” (Lacan, 1965:860). These symbolic-cultural structures act like a filter built out of the social and family bonds, even cultural bonds that precede the arrival of the individual.

For Cassirer, language is an *organism, a whole that precedes the parts, a complex expressive overall that only splits progressively in elements and subunits relatively independent, it being an already established unit* as compared to a *symbolic function of consciousness*⁹ to which Cassirer grants the role given by Lacan to culture. The philosopher of the symbolic forms considers that the particular relationship that the individual maintains with culture is conditioned by the creation circumstance and by the use circumstance of the various groups of symbolic sign systems. The culture, as a sensitive form, is not taken into consideration from the point of view of the human being's pre-existence and encompassing, but as a manifestation of the spirit about which we know that works by means of sensitive forms specific to the humans. The human being, from the sensitivity point of view, acts in relation to the culture in a particular way. The intellectual and cultural life of an individual involves *a sort of mental adaptation to the immediate contact environment*, but, as Cassirer asserts, *while the culture is progressing, we discover immediately an opposite trend of the human nature* consisting not of a refusal of contemporarization with culture, but of *an internal apprehension of life, accompanying and completing the external apprehension*¹⁰.

Therefore, meeting due to their initiatives of defining language, Cassirer and Lacan argument their options by referring to the myth, but also to the imaginary, to the sensitivity, but also to the unconscious, to the word, but also to the superior discursive unit. Thus, language becomes, for them both, a form of sensitivity or a structure of the unconscious where the sensitive human being functions within the limits of imagination or reality.

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⁹ Cassirer, *quoted work*, pp. 276 and 54.

¹⁰ Cassirer, *Essai sur l'homme*, traduit de l'anglais par Norbert Massa, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1975, p. 15.

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