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Open System, Net, Island, Organism:

On Vilém Flusser's Metaphors of Language

Vilém Flusser's inventive and innovative way of thinking, linking the most dissimilar subjects across the disciplines and combining heterogeneous worlds and periods of time, in order to create new astonishing arrangements has been termed by Abraham Moles 'metaphorical phantasy'. Throughout his work Flusser introduced metaphors of all kinds using them as possible models of interpretation. Flusser also made use of a series of metaphors to describe the form and functioning of languages, as well as their relationship to each other. But there is more to it: Flusser used the notion of language itself as a metaphor to interpret society and culture at large. In his early work *Língua e realidade* reality is seen as a globe divided by a vertical and a horizontal axis. Reality and language overlap. The vertical axis separates auditive and visual symbols, the East and the West, spoken and written language, music and sculpture. The horizontal axis that Flusser calls the equator of reality separates two halves, each of which consists of different linguistic layers. The upper one moves from conversation through poetry and prayer to the north pole of nothingness, the authentic silence, and the lower from informal chit-chat to word salad and incoherent babble to end up at the south pole of nothingness and inauthentic silence.

Two conflicting views of language cohabit in Flusser's work from the very beginning. On the one hand, he describes language as a net, anticipating his future vision of telematic society, on the other, even while defining languages as open ended and constantly evolving systems he conceives of them as separate entities divided by the chasm of a fundamental difference. Furthermore, Flusser openly criticizes the notion of languages as organisms – a conception that can be traced back to the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt whose influence on Flusser is undeniable – but at the same time makes use of metaphors that suggest the contrary, that is, that languages do indeed possess an independent character of their own. The notion of languages as self-contained entities is closely linked to Romantic conceptions of mother tongue and nationality, two perspectives that Flusser strongly

criticized, especially in the later part of his writing career. In addition to this, the idea of a mother tongue spoken within a specific national territory and the idea of languages as entities with a personality and individuality of their own presuppose the highly questionable notion of countability that has come under attack within contemporary linguistics.

Connected with these two contradictory visions goes a specific view of the role of borders: Nets are not clearly separable from each other but tend to overlap and merge into each other. They do not have any clear cut edges but tend to grow and expand. Flusser has taken up these considerations in the late 1980ies and early 1990ies in connection with the notion of *fuzzy set* and the idea that borders are not so much lines to be crossed but hybrid borderlands in which opposites meet and merge. Strangely enough, however, he has not applied this vision to his description of languages and their relation to each other, especially when reflecting on translation and writing.

Organisms, or self-contained entities for that matter, on the other hand, are clearly separated from each other and have a life and character of their own. To use another of Flusser's early metaphors: languages are like islands floating in the ocean of nothingness, separated from each other by an abyss. In the following passages both points of view are articulated side by side: "I am programmed for various [...] languages", writes Flusser in *The Gesture of Writing*. "They have each, their own function, (although those functions overlap), and their specificity is due both to their 'objective' character and to the place they occupy 'subjectively' within the program."

Flusser used the idea that single languages possess a clear cut identity, a singularity and a spirit of their own. This conception can be traced back to E. B. de Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) where the notion of '*génie des langues*' is first introduced to highlight the fact that languages are different from each other because of mentality and climate and that this represents something to be cherished. In his essay *Retradução enquanto método de trabalho*, most probably written in the mid 1970ies after his return to Europe, Flusser writes: "O que fascina é o confronto com os acordos e desacordos entre os vários 'espíritos da língua'. Tais e 'spíritos', embora não definíveis, são no entanto concretamente palpáveis. É concretamente palpável a involuta profundidade obscura do alemão, parcialmente devida à origem não-latina de muitos termos, e parcialmente à construção involuta das suas sentenças. O alemão desafia a mente para que esta não se entregue ao convite sedutor da profundidade, e para que busque clareza. O oposto ocorre com a língua

francesa. Embora a célebre clareza e distinção do francês seja mito (basta, para constatá-lo, comparar o francês com o latim), não pode ser negado que o francês convida a mente para ser brilhante. O desafio consiste em resistir ao virtuosismo verbal, e a procurar obrigar a língua a tocar em surdina. Se o “espírito” da língua alemã leva a mente a mergulhar, e se o da língua francesa a leva a fazer piruetas, o “espírito” da língua portuguesa leva a mente a partir tangencialmente do assunto. O português é a língua das digressões, das associações ditas ‘livres’, talvez por ser língua que carrega pouco peso de literatura disciplinada (filosófica, científica, técnica ou crítica). De modo que a língua portuguesa convida a mente a formulações rigorosas que a obriguem a conter-se.” Although Flusser puts the term *espírito* in inverted commas and points out that it cannot be defined properly he is endorsing a basically essentialist vision of language(s) that is clearly at odds with other central conceptions of his work. However, Flusser is using the notion of spirit also in a critical sense. In fact, the specific spirit of each language represents a particular challenge for the multilingual writer which calls for a precise transformative strategy. Writing means going against the grain – the specific spirit – of each language. The same way marble, wood or any other material determines the active intervention of the artist, the specific language material of German, Portuguese English and French calls for a differentiated writing strategy.

In the following considerations, I would like to compare briefly these two contradictory conceptions of language in an attempt to describe Vilém Flusser’s overall ambivalent and (self)contradictory theoretical position. It is important to point out that the two visions outlined here can already be found in his first texts and that even if the notion of the net eventually takes over, the organic conception of separate bodies of language persists to the very end, especially when it comes to descriptions of the practice of writing and the workings of re/translation. This is particularly important in view of the inner coherence, continuity and overall evolution of Flusser’s oeuvre. One cannot separate an early Brazilian from a subsequent European Flusser. Flusser’s work contains from the very beginning the seeds for a series of (self)conflicting ideas that evolve, meet, overlap, mix and mesh, only to separate again. I would also like to argue here that this lack of theoretical coherence should not be considered an inner weakness but the very principle that lends dynamism and flexibility to his thinking.

“[...] as línguas não são seres vivos”, writes Flusser in *Língua e realidade*. “O paralelo com a biologia é perigoso. O português não descende do latim como o pinto ga galinha. Línguas são sistemas abertos que se cruzam com grande facilidade e promiscuidade.” After this first consideration, however, the argumentation shifts gear and moves on to more essentialist and objectifying considerations. Language is personified as all devouring figure: “Ávida, tôda língua absorve elementos de qualquer outra, assimila e digere aquêles que pode, e deixa, como corpos estranhos, porém integrados, aquêles elementos que é incapaz de assimilar [...] O conceito ‘língua específica’ não pode ser, portanto, bem definido. Em muitos casos a passagem de uma língua para outra é gradativa [...]. Mas a possibilidade de tradução revela que é graças à sua capacidade ontológica [...] que as línguas adquirem a sua individualidade [...] personalidade impícita.” It is the act of translation that Flusser defines as a jump from universe to universe that makes the inherent unity of single languages visible. Translation is never gradual but always implies a rupture.

The same vision can be found in the article *Das Heilige im Abgrund zwischen den Wörtern* – The sacred in the abyss between the words – published in the *Basler Zeitung* on the 3rd October 1991. Languages may overlap and merge but their kernel, that is, their very essence is always radically different. “One has to jump over an abyss from one kernel to the other [...]. For such jumps over abysses there are specialists: ‘pontifices’, builders of bridges.”

In *Língua e realidade* more organic metaphors can be found in connection with language. Flusser uses the difference of morphology, anatomy and physiology to describe the form and functioning of languages. “Nessa nossa hipótese, o hebraico servira de peixe para os mamíferos modernos, que são as [...] línguas indo-germânicas sob estudo.” Even the relationship between the different linguistic layers of the language globe is described in biological terms. „[...] a poesia é uma mutação da conversação. Como nas mutações de espécies biológicas, a filogênese descobre semelhanças e parentescos entre conversação e poesia. [...] a poesia é uma nova espécie de língua.”

In *Bodelos. Uma autobiografia filosófica* Flusser describes his writing languages in organic terms in order to illustrate the task ahead. The same way the spirit of a language has to be worked against, the syntax and the semantics of each individual language – the skeleton of linguistic rules and the soft parts of the linguistic repertoire – have to be manipulated and broken in order to be renewed. “[...] o alemão e o inglês são como vertebrados, nos quais um esqueleto de regras sustenta um organismo em crescimento, e o português é como

concha, na qual cascas crescentes de regras protegem um organismo.” This defines completely different writing strategies. The English skeleton is easier and less consistent than the German one, which, however, can be forced to move in all sorts of grotesque directions, without breaking its bones. The Portuguese syntax, on the contrary, has to be cracked so that through the fissures the soft nature of its linguistic repertoire and the hard hidden pearls become visible. This phenomenological considerations show that different methods have to be applied with each language and that the same methods do not lead to the same conclusions. “O organismo inglês cresce com quase total liberdade [...] todo neologismo é rapidamente absorvido [...]. O organismo alemão cresce com maior dificuldade [...]. Em consequência, a germanização de elementos estranhos é desafio criador [...]. O organismo do português não pode crescer sem romper as regras que o encerram. Em consequência, a introdução de elementos estranhos significa a libertação da língua, e é engajamento contra a sintaxe. [...] surge a perigosa dialética entre o enriquecimento da língua e a perda de identidade da língua.”

To sum it up: two different conflicting views can be made out in Flusser’s conception of language and their relationship. On the one hand, a theoretical stance describing languages as fluid, open, overlapping systems – as boundless nets – together with an explicit criticism of the metaphor of the organism and the dangers it carries. On the other hand, languages are seen as fundamentally separated entities with a personality and a character of their own. Organic metaphors make their appearance above all in connection with the notion of translation and the practice of writing: translation is defined as a jump over an abyss and the practice of writing as a way to work against the spirit of a single language by forcing syntax and semantics to do something they are not programmed for.