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The search for the imperfect language

Abstract: The meta-semiotic ideology that underpins most contemporary semiotics seems at odds with the one that underlies the attempt at planning and creating a new language. Semiotics, as well as modern linguistics, has increasingly evolved into a substantially descriptive endeavor, excluding any consistent normative purpose. Faithful to the epistemology of Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics does not primarily aim at either pointing at some supposed flaws of such or such language or at proposing some new linguistic forms meant to fix them. The article analyses linguistic utopias from the perspective of present-day semiotics.

Keywords: semiotics, linguistics, perfect language, interlinguistics, semiotic ideology

> De liberalibus studiis loquor: philosophi quantum habent supervacui, quantum ab usu recedentis! Ipsi quoque ad syllabarum distinctiones et coniunctionum ac praepositionum proprietates descenderunt et invidere grammaticis, invidere geometris; quidquid in illorum artibus supervacuum erat transtulere in suam. Sic effectum est ut diligentius loqui scirent quam vivere.
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> – Lucius Annaeus Seneca (1979 [4 B.C.E. – 65 C.E.]: XXXVIII, 42)

1 Introduction: A semiotic contradiction

The meta-semiotic ideology that underpins most contemporary semiotics seems at odds with the one that underlies the attempt at planning and creating a new language. Historically, those who have sought to give rise to a new system of verbal communication pursued this goal with various motivations but they all shared the same implicit or explicit contention: language as it is, and especially natural languages as they are found in the context of one's childhood, absorbed,

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mastered, and spoken, are not satisfactory.[1] That was the case of the first early modern experiments with artificial linguistics, such as John Wilkins'[2] *Mercury: Or the Secret and Swift Messenger: Shewing. How a Man with Privacy and Speed Communicate his Thoughts to a Friend at any Distance* (1641),[3] George Dalgarno's[4] *Ars signorum*[5] (1661), or György Kalmár's[6] *Praecepta grammatica atque specimina lingvae philosophicae sive universalis, ad omne vitae genvs accommodatae* (1772). In all these projects of artificial linguistics, language planners see that the currently available idioms feature some shortcomings, which the elaboration of the new language is meant to overcome.

This meta-semiotic attitude contrasts with that of most present-day semiotics, for this discipline, as well as modern linguistics, has increasingly evolved into a substantially descriptive endeavor, excluding any consistent normative purpose. Faithful to the epistemology of Ferdinand de Saussure, structural linguistics does not primarily aim at either pointing at some supposed flaws of such or such language or at proposing some new linguistic forms meant to fix them. That is the case for a fundamental reason: for structural linguistics, language evolves in a systemic way, which is generally immune to the linguistic desires of single individuals, of groups, or even of the entire linguistic community. There are instances, in history, of natural languages that change because of a political decision, yet these changes usually affect quite superficial and mechanical levels of communication, for example when Turkey decided to adopt the Latin script to transliterate its language with Turkish Republic's law number 1353, the "Law on the Adoption and Implementation of the Turkish Alphabet," passed on November 1, 1928. The law went into effect from January 1, 1929, making the use of the new alphabet compulsory in all public communications. Another example is the adoption of the Cyrillic script to transliterate Tajiki Persian in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic in the late 1930s, thus

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1 Literature on the topic is quite extensive; among the most recent contributions, see Guérard (1979); Slaughter (1982), Strasser (1998) and Stillman (1995) (the three of them mainly on the early modern period); Rossi (2000); Couturat and Leau (2001); Eichner (2012); Perreiah (2014) (mainly on the Renaissance); classic semiotic surveys on the topic are Pellerey (1992), Eco 1995 [1993], and Marrone (1995).

2 Fawsley, Northamptonshire, February 14, 1614 – Chancery Lane, London, November 19, 1672.

3 On Wilkins's *Mercury* and later *Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668), see Funke (1929) (comparing Wilkins and Dalgarno), Shapiro (1969) (an intellectual biography), Formigari (1970); Stillman (1995) (comparing Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins), Subbiondo (1991), Maat (2004) (comparing Dalgarno, Wilkins, and Leibniz), and Fleming (2017).

4 Aberdeen, 1616–1687.

5 See Funke (1929), Shumaker (1982), and Maat (2004).

6 Tapolcafő, 1726–4 settembre 1782; see Hegedüs (2008).

replacing that Latin script that, in turn, had substituted the Arabo-Persian one after the Russian Revolution of 1917.[7]

Even in the most cohesive and dictatorial society, indeed, it would be impossible for speakers to intentionally plan and carry on changes at deeper levels of language and communication, for instance, introducing a new morphology to express the idea of future in Chinese, or the concept of possession in Japanese. Structural linguists and semioticians know that the *langue* evolves because of the *parole*, but this change is nothing but an unintentional social byproduct of many individual acts of speech.

2 Furnishing possible worlds with languages

Language planners, on the opposite, may deliver themselves to the sheer pleasure of creating a new language from scratch. That is the case of what could be called 'fictional artificial languages', that is, languages that are created by mimicking some or even most of the features of natural languages but without the intention that these artificial languages might be actually spoken by anyone or constitute an improvement whatsoever in relation to existent idioms. The reasons for the elaboration of such fictional artificial languages are sundry but they all essentially revolve around the same aesthetic rationale of most artistic creation: that of creating possible worlds to be received as temporarily alternative to the current one.

In many circumstances, the creation is, however, not utopian at all but pursues, instead, some pretty realistic objectives. For instance, in a literary creation that proposes an alternative world, like in fantasy or in science fiction, or even simply a remote world, like in the genre of the historical novel, the world creator must furnish it with all sorts of believable features, including a local natural language that, given the commonsensical understanding of the variety of language in both time and space, should more or less radically diverge from the existent languages, and in particular from that which is adopted to create the possible world itself. In these terms, the language planner does not dream of a better language but plans a language that seems more suitable for the fictional environment in which it is meant to be spoken. That is certainly the case of the famous Klingon, created by Marc Okrand for the TV series of *Star Trek*.[8] That is

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7 On this topic, see Wright (1996).

8 For a general survey of this kind of languages, see Okrent (2009), Adams (2011), and Peterson (2015); see also "Esperanto, Elvish, and Beyond: The World of Constructed Languages" an

also the case of joke languages such as Starckdeutsch, created by German sculptor and painter Matthias Koeppel[9]; the category includes also Europanto and Pimperanto.

The meta-semiotic ideology of these fictional experiments does not conflict with that of semiotics at all, for semioticians on the opposite can only rejoice themselves in witnessing the somewhat combinatorial creativity of language planners. In this case, moreover, planned languages are also clearly artificial, since they have been created to remain such. Creators do not cultivate the ambition to replace or improve the language that they themselves use to write, and that they probably also master. Fictional planned languages are artificial, indeed, exactly because they are meant to be spoken in the fictional world of the novel, between its characters, and not outside of this framework. That is also why the not so uncommon cases in which a real community of speakers adopts these languages are mostly hilarious, and usually confined to the itself artificial world of fandom. There is, indeed, a *Klingon Language Institute* that monitors Klingon.

3 Utopias of perfection

The case of non-fictional planned languages is different. In such cases, indeed, the planner considers that the language that a community commonly speaks or even that all the currently spoken languages are flawed and that, in most circumstances, these flaws are so serious that they cannot simply be fixed: a new language must be invented, adopted, and spoken so as to overcome the difficulty. As a consequence, these planned languages are as artificial as the fictional ones but they are not so in the intentions of their creators, who would like them, instead, to be spoken by all instead of the existing natural idioms. That is why, for instance, Esperanto promoters do not speak of it as of an artificial language but as of a planned language, which is artificial only at its incipit but is destined to subsequently evolve exactly like natural languages do, albeit without their flaws.

Both creators of fictional and non-fictional planned languages share the pleasure of transferring at the individual level of creation what normally evolves at the

exhibit that was displayed at Cleveland Public Library (CPL) from May through August 2008. Many relevant references are available also in the website http://library.conlang.org (accessed September 10, 2019), devoted to conlang studies ("conlang" meaning "invented language").
9 August 22, 1937.

social dimension of it. It is a demiurgic attitude, which often betrays both scarce trust in a community's ability to unfold in the desired way and a voluntarist Weltanschauung. These demiurgic initiatives are not interesting to linguists and semioticians as linguistic projects. It is clear that there is no hope that they might become natural languages. The case of modern Hebrew is probably not an exception at all, since it cannot be considered as a planned artificial language but, in a way, as the planned variety of a mostly dead language.[10] If one day Catholics from all over Europe were persecuted, and they found solace in the creation of a Catholic state, and they decided to rekindle ecclesiastic Latin as the common language of the new political community, then there would be many chances that this plan succeeds exactly as the institution of modern Hebrew as a national language has succeeded and flourished.

In all other cases, instead, these attempts at creating artificial languages concern the present-day linguist and semiotician not as much for their viability but for the semiotic ideology that underpins them. They are never going to work but they nevertheless indicate what a community of speakers, at a certain stage of its evolution, sees as a problem in the common understanding of language and communication. In most of these attempts, the problem coincides with a dystopian conception of the variety of languages. Such conception derives from a common linguistic naiveté: since language is also used to communicate, or even predominantly used to communicate, language planners extol this characteristic as the only important one, and consider that the best language is the one that eliminates linguistic barriers. For those who mostly unconsciously promote this semiotic ideology, it is difficult to consider the opposite but equally viable ideology, according to which:

1) linguistic barriers are not linguistically so but only in relation to the purposes that are hampered by linguistic variety, such as trade or mailing, for instance. More linguistic efficacy in postal services was, indeed, the rationale behind the auxiliary language known as Volapük, the first planned language used by a wide circle of people, invented in 1879 by the German Catholic Priest Johann-Martin Schleyer.[11] By his own account, he first conceived of this "world tongue" out of a conversation he had with one of his parishioners, a semi-literate German peasant whose son had emigrated to America and could no longer be reached by mail because the United States Postal Service was not able to read the father's handwriting. Moreover, the first applications of Volapük were in international trade. Given an autarchic community, living on an island, such as the population of the Sentinel Island in the Indian Andaman Islands, for instance, linguistic barriers would be just linguistic differences, which would be

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10 For a discussion, see Lepschy (2001): xxxix–xlii.
11 Oberlauda, Grand Duchy of Baden, July 18, 1831 – Konstanz, German Empire, August 16, 1912; see Eichner (2012) and Garvía Soto (2015).

ideological to evoke with the term "barriers," as something that is meant to be removed;

2) Even more counter-intuitively, the unification of all natural languages into a single linguistic variety might actually be detrimental to some different political purposes, such as the preservation of cultural memory, for instance. Indeed, most of those who seek to 'fight Babel' by creating some artificial languages propose them not as much as replacement of natural languages but as inter-linguistic supra-languages to be universally adopted as lingua franca. This milder option, though, which foresees a functional coexistence of local natural languages together with a universal supra- and super-language, also reveals an ideological slant as regards two key issues: a) devaluation of the 'natural' emergence of a lingua franca; b) devaluation of translation.

4 Interlinguistic biases

As regards the first point (a), the history of languages indicates that they show both a tendency to break down into separate varieties – as it occurs, for instance, in the case of civil wars, for example in the progressive differentiation of the Serbian and the Croatian in recent times – and a totally opposite tendency to fusion into a lingua franca, as it happens in all sorts of pidgins but as it is also the case with the raise of English as western lingua franca after WWII.[12] Nevertheless, utopian language planners would like to isolate the latter trend from the former, as if they were not part of the same dialectics, and foster only the latter, also out of impatience and, again, lack of trust in the self-regulatory linguistic power of the community.

As regards the second point (b), the semiotic ideology behind such universalistic projects excludes that the same titanic goals might be achieved with 'natural' means, such as the device that, since immemorial times, communities of speakers adopting strongly diverging linguistic varieties have resorted to so as to overcome that which was considered 'linguistic barriers': translation. According to such view, having a supra-linguistic lingua franca, or even an inter-linguistic one, would be preferable than relying on translation. To a closer scrutiny, it is evident that such attitude represents an instance of disintermediation: since translation always implies mediation, and since mediation implies trust in the mediator, artificial languages are underpinned by the wish to eliminate the necessity of translation not only for quantitative reasons – such as increasing the speed and decreasing the costs of communication – but also for qualitative reasons, such as eliminating or curtailing the need of losing part of control in the passage of meaning between two different speakers or communities of speakers. That is perfectly visualized by the poster of the Second

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12 See Crystal (2003) and Seidlhofer (2011).

Figure 1: Poster of the Second World Esperanto Congress (Geneva, August 28 to September 6, 1906).

World Esperanto Congress (Figure 1), which took place in Geneva from August 28 to September 6, 1906: on the right, a character waves an Esperanto handbook with his left hand whilst, with his right hand, he waves goodbye to the character at the left side of the image, who is removing his hat as interpreter. In the background, three more characters, a woman and two men, follow the main one, all wearing green and one of the symbols of Esperanto, the five-point star signifying the five continents. The message is clear: people from the entire world will now autonomously communicate, without the intermediation of the *traduttore/traditore*.

One should wonder, however, whether resorting to translation, instead of speaking a common lingua franca, might be also beneficial for the communities involved, albeit from a different perspective. The major advantage that translation brings about, and that would be eliminated in the case where it were to be

totally superseded by generalized knowledge of a supra-linguistic lingua franca, is that, through translation, speakers become aware of the peculiarities of their language, whilst that is not the case with a lingua franca. One may be 'lost in translation' but may be much more uneasily 'lost in lingua franca'. Failure to perceive this benefit derives from the abovementioned prejudice that languages are mostly or even uniquely communication devices; yet, empirical evidence and theoretical analysis shows that languages are not only that, and that they are so mainly because they are fundamentally and primarily something else, that is, ways of cognitively structuring the environment. That is why the asperity of translation is, from a certain point of view, more precious than the smoothness of a lingua franca: through translation, communities of speakers realize the singularity of their own Weltanschauung.

The desire for creating a universal language also reveals, in certain cases, a religiously biased conception of language: existent languages are not to be trusted for they represent a decay from, or even a corruption of, a primordial language, which is considered of divine creation, institution, or, at least, inspiration.[13] There are significant elements of dovetailing between the conception of an Adamic language, or its equivalents in other religious or spiritual traditions, and religious fundamentalism.[14] Religious fundamentalists too tend to discard translation as human contamination of an otherwise pure language, although in this case translation is not rejected as instance of undue intermediation between two communities of speakers but as unwanted intermediation between the pristine source of revelation and its human receivers.[15]

Both supra- and inter- linguistic utopias and fundamentalist rigidities share, then, the same semiotic ideology, according to which natural languages are intrinsically flawed not as much because of this or that of their linguistic characteristics but for the fact itself of their multiplicity. They differ, though, in that the latter tend to identify an existent natural language, be it Arabic, Sanskrit, or Latin, as super-natural language, whereas the former tend to propend for the creation of a supra-linguistic language from scratch, so attributing to the language planner, again, a demiurgic condition. Both linguistic projects, however, clash with the perspective of semiotics, which, again, is essentially a descriptivist one and not a revisionist one. That does not mean that semiotics does not realize that the multiplicity and ambiguity of languages may sometimes or even often hamper smooth communication.

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13 See Eco 1995 [1993], Mazzocco (1993), and Coudert (1999).
14 See Lodwick (2011).
15 See Leone (2015).

What semiotics underlines is, first, that language is not meant only to create community but also immunity, through the creation of shibboleths and consequent belongings.[16] That has been tragically evident in the Nazi opposition to Esperanto, which Hitler considered as a Jewish language through which the "world Jewry" would plan to gain mastery over the world. This view was infamously condensed already in Albert Zimmermann's pamphlet 1915 *Esperanto, ein Hindernis für die Ausbreitung des deutschen Welthandels* and culminated in the Nazi 1938 decision to shut down the Esperanto Museum in Vienna, as it is witnessed by a letter handwritten by Paul Heigl, the Nazi chief book expert, currently kept in the same museum (Figure 2).
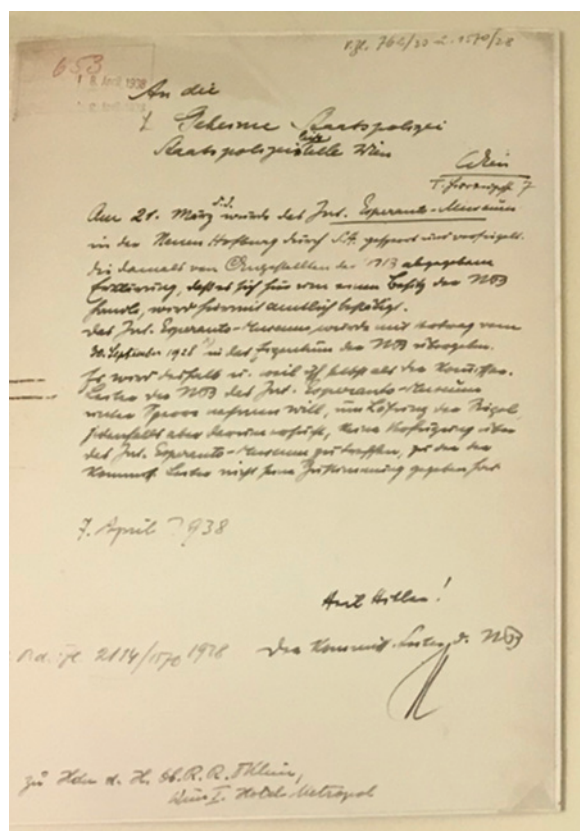
Figure 2: Handwritten letter by Paul Heigl, the Nazi chief book expert, advocating the closure of the Vienna Esperanto Museum.

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16 See Leone (2009).

Second, semiotics underlines that whatever project to amend these two characteristics – the intrinsic multiplicity and ambiguity of languages – albeit theoretically praiseworthy, is doomed to fail, exactly because languages are social organisms escaping the agency of individuals and even of communities. Neither individuals nor communities, indeed, may speak as they wish, or may use other systems of signs as they wish, because they 'are spoken and used' by these languages and systems of signs as much as they speak and use them. Actually, the more a system of sign plays a central role as primary modeling system ordering and structuring the environment of a community of speakers, the less will they be able to voluntarily fix its ambiguities or, even more hardly, replace it with a supposedly unambiguous language.[17] That is so because it is not true that we merely *speak* our ambiguous natural languages, we actually *think* within them or it could be even said that we *are* the ambiguities of the languages we speak.

5 Linguistic ambiguity and semantic scars

Explaining the origin of such ambiguity is a complex task. A good point of departure, though, might be that of considering that, exactly because language is a primarily modeling system, which seeks to order and structure the natural and social environment wherein speakers live, it must be more rigid than the other structuring patterns emerging in culture. Natural languages evolve much more slowly than other systems of signs; moreover, part of their efficacy in structuring reality derives from the fact that speakers normally acquire them as a sort of second nature, thanks to the the plasticity of infant cognition. As a consequence, natural languages end up being powerful semiotic patterns that, on the one hand, allow smooth interactions among individuals belonging to the same environment and, therefore, community of speakers, whereas, on the other hand, accumulate a huge amount of that which could be called "semantic scars."

The metaphor of the scar is particularly appropriate for indicating that the ordering structures of a language arise as a consequence of a complex array of contextual agencies, which determine that the language takes on the shape that it does. This phenomenon is macroscopic in the field of semantics, whereas the perimeter of the flexibility of words depends on the pressure that sociocultural forces exert on it at a given moment and a given point of a semantic community's history and geography. A word like 'marriage', for instance, currently inherits a semantics that was primarily

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17 See Lotman (2009).

molded by religious ideologies throughout centuries of history but is clearly at odds with the current sociocultural needs of many communities of speakers, in which a mostly non-religious evolution of sexual and sentimental relations is making more and more acceptable that couples and even parents must not necessarily be of a different sex. Ambiguities then arise because, even in what is apparently the same community of speakers, individuals and groups situate themselves at different perspectives as regards the semantic status quo of a fraction of natural language.

For a conservative Catholic, for instance, the word "marriage" may continue to mean exactly the same that it used to mean in the 1950s, whereas for an LGTB activist the same word as it is commonly understood might be considered more and more as the scar of an unpleasant or even tragic past social equilibrium. The point here is not to suggest whether the scar should be removed or not; the point here is, rather, that semioticians are no plastic surgeons. There is nothing that even the most credited scholar or group of scholars could do so as to convince a conservative Catholic to think about gay couples too when he or she utters or even conjures up the word "marriage." Much of the tragedy of political correctness has derived from the wishful thinking idea that perceiving a linguistic scar, or perceiving at least that a feature in language could be a scar for a group of individuals – usually a minority – should immediately lead to the creation of an artificial semantic field in which such scar would be eliminated.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, that is not the way in which language functions. Even when a language academy or, more significantly, a constitutional agency decides that, for instance, the word "fetus" should not be included in the semantic field of "life," that occurs because the sociocultural agencies that were responsible for the previous structuration of the same semantic field have significantly changed, producing an outbalancing of the new semantic order over the old one. Even in such circumstance, though, the law will be able to register that the semantic field of the word has changed, whereas it will certainly be unable to prevent the previous majority from seeing it as their current scar, as something that was previously referring to life and that, because of a mysterious restructuring of agencies in society and culture, is now tantamount to non-life. Such is the rigidity and the inertia of a natural language, indeed, that few of its words and other linguistic features will mean exactly the same thing, without any discrepancy, for all the speakers of that community. Such homogeneity probably emerges only in very small and very little complex societies, not certainly in post-modern linguistic communities.

As utopian linguists consider as a flaw that which is probably a consubstantial characteristic of all natural languages, that is, their external variety, so utopian logicians and philosophers of language consider as a flaw that which is probably a consubstantial feature of each natural language, that is, their

internal variety, the fact that words and other linguistic elements convey different meaning depending on the ideological point of view from which they are uttered and received.[18] That might be unpleasant in some or most circumstances, and create social conflict, yet in this case too the solution cannot consist in creating an artificial semantics that, while keeping the expressive plane of a language unaltered, works for the reengineering of its semantic plane.

Unfortunately, there is no Archimedean point so as to invent an artificial language totally immune from the characteristics of the natural language in which and through which the artificial one is planned, as there is no Archimedean point so as to fix the semantics of a language one is entangled in. As a consequence, a philosopher of language might decide to exert a political agency, advocating for such or such evolution of a certain semantic field or feature, but cannot exert a normative agency, claiming that there is logical or, even less, empirical evidence that such evolution is not simply the final outcome of the existent sociocultural forces but their *necessary* outcome, whatever they might be.

6 Conclusion: Linguistic seismology

I shall conclude with a personal example. As a vegan, I might want, like utopian inter-linguists, to invent a language in which the word designating that which can be eaten, unlike the English word "food," should not include products derived from animals or animal exploitation; or else I might want, like utopian philosophers of language, to reengineer my natural language so that what designates edible matter in it, such as "cibo" in Italian or "food" in English, does not include any longer any animal derivate. Such linguistic invention or revision, however, is destined to have zero social impact until it is somehow endorsed and interiorized by an entire community of speakers, embedded into law definitions, and, above all, enshrined in common sense. The semiotic fallacy of such utopias, indeed, would consist in believing that the simple invention or revision of language might trigger sociocultural and ideological uniformity about the semantic acceptance of food, whereas the opposite is true: calling hamburgers not "food" but "corpses" might be a propaganda strategy, but the semantic field of the word "food" will expel from its intention hamburgers only when people will have actually stopped to eat them, which is unlikely to happen just on the basis of the simple fact that they are called "corpses." On the opposite, a very complex and mostly ineffable evolution of the semiosphere

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18 For a discussion, see Cappelen (2018); cfr. Diniz Junqueira Barbosa and Breitman (2017).

should first slowly conduce the word "food" to be a scar of past and now shameful eating habits, exactly as the word "property" would previously include laborers or women, a shameful intention from the point of view of present-day emancipation, but a perfectly acceptable one when emancipation was a minority ideology.

For as much as we dream to invent and speak artificial languages, by either concocting new expressive planes or engineering new semantic planes, we are actually doomed to speak and think into natural languages, meaning that the agency that we can exert on them is somehow limited by the fact that they exist and evolve as social second natures rather than as individual speech acts. As for the creators of planned languages, they are doomed to fail in their task not because it is impossible to plan a perfect language, but because it is impossible to perfectly plan the imperfection of natural languages, for this characteristic, which emerges from the myriads of social interactions that daily occur in a community of speakers, is exactly that which bestows upon natural languages their flair of authenticity.

That will not rule out, however, that scholars continue to map the ambiguities that arise through history and interactions both between languages and within them, although not with the purpose of titanically fixing them, but rather with the aim of having a firmer grasp of what sociocultural agencies, in a society, determine that languages mean what they mean.

That is what semioticians are called to do. They are not engineers building anti-seismic buildings but seismologists seeking to detect the clues that forerun an earthquake, knowing very well that earthquakes are very difficult to predict and that, when they occur, they are impossible to stop.

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