

## LANGUAGE AND REALITY

Speech—both audible and inaudible—is always speech *about something*. The subject matter may be natural reality, social reality, or psychic reality (the manifestations of a person's spiritual life exist for us objectively, i. e., outside us and independently of us, and thus form part of reality which we investigate). The epistemological controversy up to this day has been over which element is *primitive*: language, which *creates* our image of reality, or reality, which is *mirrored*, reflected, mapped by language. Two solutions are possible: either the linguistic process is an act of *creating* an image of reality, or it is an act of *mirroring*, reflecting, etc.

It has been assumed that if the linguistic process is held to be a cognitive reflection of reality, language plays no active role in the process; and vice versa, that if language does in fact play this role, the linguistic process cannot be a cognitive reflection of reality. This is not the first time in the history of human thought that faulty formulation of problems has made solutions difficult or impossible.

Let us remove the source of possible misunderstandings at the outset. By language we mean a uniform product of signs and meanings, actually functioning in the human speech, not a system of sounds or other signs *per se*. Of course phonetics

## *Language and Reality*

deals with the phonic aspect of language. But sounds alone are not language, and as long as they have no definite meanings the controversy as to whether they create an image of reality or merely mirror or map objective reality is meaningless.

What does the assertion that language *creates* human reality or the human world mean? Such an assertion is to be found in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, Carnap's principle of tolerance, and Ajdukiewicz's radical conventionalism.

Of the wide range of trends which subscribe to the general formulation that language *creates* our image of the world, but differ (often quite radically) in the interpretation of this formulation, I have chosen consciously only *one* group.

We shall not discuss views that have a clearly idealistic ontology. The view that language does not create an *image* of the world, but the *world* itself, is a mystic phantasy, which cannot be discussed here. Our interest will focus on those views that make epistemological statements concerning the *image* of the world.

Cassirer, and, to a certain degree, Carnap were indifferent to matters of ontology, while Ajdukiewicz affirmed the objective existence of the world. But these verbal declarations were at odds with their refusal to leave room for anything not a subjective image of the world. Their authors may be accused of inconsistency and *de facto* idealism in the sphere of ontology, but such views differ from the mysticism of subjective idealism. Hence an analysis of these views may prove useful for our purposes, especially since the arguments of these schools against the vulgarized copy theory of reality include a hard core of rational ideas.

We also exclude such theories as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, since they combine the thesis on the creation by language of the image of the world with the inconsistent admission that language itself is a product of definite social conditions, a product formed under the influence of environment in the broad sense of the term (both natural environment and social milieu). Such conceptions are better analyzed within the copy theory of reality.

What then is the point of those who claim that language *creates* that reality given to man?

They mean above all that language contains a definite

*Weltanschauung*, that it determines the way we perceive and grasp reality. Hence in this sense language *creates* our image of reality, and imposes its image upon us. It is, as it were, a mould which brings order into the original chaos of reality "in itself." By imposing upon the human mind (which always thinks in some language) a definite manner of combining elements of that chaos (or, in other words, of eliminating certain elements of that chaos), language decides *de facto* what is to be treated as thing, event, regularity, etc. Some trends make the conception apparatus (Carnap, Ajdukiewicz) creative, others, the thought-shaping function of symbolic forms (Cassirer). We have become familiar with a number of ideas on this question, from the rational to the mystic. These ideas underline the active role of language in the process of cognition—and that is their rational element. We shall return to this issue at a later stage, and shall try to interpret it in terms of the copy theory of reality.

But the authors of those opinions combine the thesis on the *Weltanschauung*-shaping role of language with the thesis often tacitly assumed that language is a product of an arbitrary convention (Carnap, Ajdukiewicz) or a product of a symbolic function to human psychology (Cassirer).

This combination of these two theses is characteristic of views discussed above, views which explicitly set out to refute the copy theory of reality. By itself, the first thesis can be interpreted in ways consonant with a version of the copy theory.

The second thesis makes it possible to question the conception of language as the *maker* of our image of the world. It suffices to question the origin of that language which creates our image of the world or determines our *Weltanschauung* to force the advocates of that idea to adopt standpoints, scientifically untenable, or to adopt an interpretation which enforces, indirectly, one version of the copy theory of reality.

The first dilemma occurs when one claims that language is a product of an arbitrary convention. Neither a sociologist, nor a psychologist of language, nor a linguist will agree with the assumptions of Carnap's principle of tolerance or Ajdukiewicz's radical conventionalism (and these or similar concepts lay at the root of the logical positivists' philosophy of language). Any theory which claims that the origins of language are to be

## *Language and Reality*

found in arbitrary choice or convention must be considered fantastic. To a sociologist of science they might serve as a proof that claims to "strict scientificity" are often based on clearly anti-scientific arguments (by anti-scientific we mean theses which are in contradiction with positive knowledge achieved in a given field at a definite stage of its historical development). The fact that eminent and exact thinkers adopted basic theses which are obviously false can probably be explained, psychologically, by their fascination with the methods of the deduction sciences. In these disciplines one usually adopts certain axioms and transformation rules regardless of their origin and concentrates one's attention on the calculus itself. Such reasoning, even if it is correct in the deductive sciences, fails completely when it is applied to products of social life like language. Carnap and Ajdukiewicz had special mathematical languages in mind, and neglected to study the connections between these languages and natural languages. In doing so they generalized theses valid with respect to specialized languages to cover all languages in general.<sup>1</sup>

The situation is no better when, like Cassirer, one claims that language is one of the forms in which the function of symbolizing occurs, a function characteristic of human thinking alone. In fact this does not answer the question posed, but avoids answering it altogether. We are not asking what language is a form or realization of, but whether its present-day form is given (biologically? by a supernatural force?) or has developed under the influence of some factors, and if so, what these factors may be. Our problem begins where the philosophy of symbolic forms stops.

The closer we approach the proper answer to this question the more untenable is the notion of language, the "maker" of

<sup>1</sup> A still more radical criticism of this standpoint is made by Joergen Joergenson, who refuses mathematical and other symbolism the right to be called a "language," and reserves that term for the natural languages only. This is the more interesting as he himself at one time belonged to the thinkers that came close to logical positivism, and his critical opinions mentioned are presented in a paper included in a collection dedicated to Carnap (cf. J. Joergenson, *Some Critical Remarks Concerning Languages, Calculuses and Logic, in Logic and Language*, Dordrecht, 1962, p. 28ff.).

the image of the world. For what else remains than to state that a language may *create*—in a definite sense of the word—our image of the world, but that it is itself a product of social and historical processes. Language-thinking is shaped in the phylogenetic evolution of mankind, and becomes a product and an element of the practical activity of man in transforming the world. In a word, the *maker* of the image of the world is himself a *product* of that world.

The consequences of such an approach become obvious when we come to the problem of the classification of real phenomena by language, to the problem of the articulation of the world by language. For the time being let us agree without reservation that language affects our mode of perceiving the world and that, in this sense, it creates its image. Does our interpretation of the sense of the word “to create” mean that such a “creation” is arbitrary? Not in the least! Once we understand that language is a *social* product, genetically and functionally connected with man’s *practical social activity*, we realize that the image of the world, suggested or imposed by a given language, is not arbitrary and cannot be changed in an arbitrary manner. The psychologist, the linguist, the historian or the sociologist of culture tells us explicitly that language is one of the most traditional and the most change-resistant elements of human culture. And this is easy to understand if we consider the social origin of language. He will tell us that Carnap’s principle of tolerance, which refers to an arbitrary change of logic and of language, Ajdukiewicz’s radical conventionalism, with its conception of a change in the perspective of the world following an arbitrary choice of a new conceptual apparatus, Kořakowski’s surrealist ideas on the possibility of an arbitrary classification of real phenomena (the possibility of constructing such “objects” as half a horse and a segment of a river)<sup>2</sup> are all fantastic ideas which have abounded in the history of the problem of language.

Hence it is one thing to assert language “creates” the image of reality arbitrarily, depending on *my* choice of language, and

<sup>2</sup> L. Kořakowski, “Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy” (Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth), in *Studia Filozoficzne*, 1959, No. 2, pp. 51-2.

## *Language and Reality*

quite another thing to claim that it "creates" reality by imposing patterns and stereotypes shaped in the phylogenetic evolution of mankind upon the perception of the world manifested during the ontogenetic evolution of the individual. The second interpretation of the creative role of language may not be imposing but it is rational in character and may be accepted by scientific disciplines concerned with the problems of culture. But, such an interpretation is not compatible with the original theory of language as the maker of the image of the world, and can be comprehended only in the light of the copy theory of cognition. It becomes part of the copy theory and imparts a specific, *dialectical* character to it. One need only step back a step, and the fantastic theory of language, the maker of the world image, is immediately refuted. The logic of thinking points us in the direction of the copy theory of cognition.

What do people mean when they claim language reflects (mirrors, copies, etc.) reality?

This is not merely a matter of the purely phonic aspect of language. The phonic aspect is only important in the case of onomatopoeic effects, i.e., secondarily. What does it mean, then, when we say that language as a system of signs and meanings reflects (mirrors, copies, etc.) reality?

The copy theory is old, at least as old as the classical definition of truth, and hence burdened with the ambiguity resulting from different interpretations in different philosophical systems. We must bear in mind all these differences (often difficult to grasp) in the interpretations of the copy theory but emphasize its connection with the classical theory of truth. For when a person says that between human cognition and the reality known there is a relation *analogous to* (no reasonable person will claim that it is *identical with*) the relation between a reflection in the mirror and the object being mirrored, or between the original and the copy, or between an object and its photograph, etc., he then expresses an opinion inseparably linked with the idea that a statement is true if in reality it is as stated. The classical definition of truth, which has dominated for a thousand years the theory of truth, is a specific formulation of the copy theory of reality and is simply impossible outside that theory. What else could Aristotle have had in mind but the copy theory of reality when

he wrote in *Metaphysics*: a person is really pale not because we think so; on the contrary, our statement about him is true because he is really pale. Once we comprehend the interconnection between these theories, we can understand the copy theory better, and easily refute what I consider an incorrect interpretation of that theory which would claim that sense data and not thought reflects reality.

But let us return to the intuitions associated with the term "copy theory."

Helena Eilstein has correctly demonstrated that the term "copy" (or "mirroring," or "reflection") in the theory of human thought may be interpreted in three ways.<sup>3</sup>

First, it is the name for the cause-and-effect relation holding between the stimuli originating from the material world and the psychic acts which they evoke. This is a "copy" in the *genetic* sense.

Secondly, the term denotes the relation between psychic acts and the properties of society which condition the former; society thus shapes the attitude of a given individual. This is a "copy" in the *sociological* sense.

Thirdly, when we talk about a "copy" in the *epistemological* sense we mean a specific cognitive relation between the contents of certain psychic acts and their correlates in the form of definite elements of the material world.

The distinction is interesting and valuable, although the classification is not exhaustive. The meanings distinguished for the term "copy" demonstrate its ambiguity but are interconnected and partly overlapping. Despite this reservation it is worth while bearing in mind that:

"...When we say that a theory 'copies' a given state of things faithfully or unfaithfully—'copies' in the epistemological sense—means that it states the truth or untruth of that state of things. When we say that a theory 'copies' interests, opinions or attitudes of a social class, 'copies' in the sociological sense means that the rise, evolution and propagation of such a theory is conditioned by the existence of a class with such interests, aspirations, and attitudes, a class whose intellectual elite uses that

<sup>3</sup> H. Eilstein, "Szkiec o sensach pojęcia odbicia" (An Essay on the Meanings of the Concept of Copy of Reality), in *Myśl Filozoficzna*, 1957, No. 1.

## *Language and Reality*

theory as guide lines in the class struggle, as an instrument of propaganda, or as both.”<sup>4</sup>

What is common to all those meanings of the term “copy”?

First, all of them imply the acceptance of the existence of some *objective* reality, i.e., reality existing outside any mind and independent of any mind, reality that is “copied,” “mirrored,” etc., by that mind. In each of its meanings the copy theory implies the acceptance of a *realistic*, though not necessarily materialistic, standpoint. An objective idealist may also defend the concept of “copy.” This has actually occurred in the history of human thought. But the idea is not conceivable outside realism; if mind is to copy something, in any meaning of the term, that something must exist objectively, i.e., independent of that mind.

Secondly, each of the meanings of the term “copy,” specified above, accepts the relation of *genetic dependence* between an experience or its content and an objective reality which has evoked it, i.e., the acceptance of the casual nexus between the effect of reality upon the mind and that which the mind experiences.

Thirdly, each of these meanings claims that a *mapping* relation holds between the content of a given experience and reality. The term “mapping” is understood here more broadly than “similarity” or “correspondence,” which are terms of the rival interpretations of “copy” (see below).

Fourthly, the term “copy” is connected with the distinction between an experience or its content, and reality. That is why copy is always understood as something other than reality. It is something subjective compared to objective reality. This statement is very important for the analysis of the category of “copy.”

As in the case of any essential philosophical category, here too certain implications result from a given solution of basic philosophical problems. Two philosophical positions are implied in the acceptance of the copy theory of reality in any of the above interpretations. One is realism which disputes subjective idealism, and the other, anti-agnosticism which disputes the assertion that the world is unknowable.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

For all the common theses and common epistemological assumptions which connect the meanings and interpretations of the copy theory, differences are to be found. They are revealed in our interpretation of the term "mapping."

The controversy between the various representatives of the copy theory is whether the relation of "copying" is to be interpreted as *similarity* or as *correspondence*. Similarity entails a relation between what the mind experiences and reality, where some qualities of the copy and what it copies are of the same kind, if not identical. Correspondence entails a parallelism of two orders—reality and that which is experienced by a given mind. There is a one-one relation between these elements. Their structures as a whole are identical, but they are not similar because their qualities are neither of the same kind nor identical.

Zdzisław Cackowski demonstrates in his monograph<sup>5</sup> the significance for Marxist epistemology of this controversy. Nevertheless I think that its importance has been exaggerated. The controversy is significant when the copy theory is applied to sensory images, but not when applied to abstract ideas. It is at this point that the connections between the copy theory and the classical theory of truth become important. The latter also refers to *thoughts* about reality, and not to artificially isolated impressions or sensory images.

It can be disputed whether the sensory impression of redness shows "similarity" to or "correspondence" with those properties of objective reality which evoke it, but thoughts may only be classified as true or false. Of course, a thought formulated as the statement "This tree is green," or the like is controversial, but such statements as "The category of honor is of great significance in the description of the gentry community," "The indeterminacy principle establishes a correspondence between the precision of the measurement of the momentum and the precision of the determination of the position of a particle," "The gamma rays are a kind of electromagnetic waves," etc. are not. We may legitimately ask of such statements whether they are true or false, i.e., whether they copy (mirror) reality in the human mind, but the problem of similarity or correspondence makes no sense

<sup>5</sup> Z. Cackowski, *Treść poznawcza wrażeń zmysłowych* (The Cognitive Content of Sense Data), Warsaw, 1962.

## *Language and Reality*

here. The statement that the category of honor is of great significance in the description of the gentry community is true, and can be proved by research. Hence this statement "copies" in our mind a certain objective state of things. We say that things are a certain way, and they really are that way and this can be verified according to certain criteria. But the controversy over whether "copying" is similarity or correspondence is simply senseless; this is not what we ask about, and we cannot ask about that meaningfully in the given case.

But even statements about sensory images are not as simple as they might seem at first glance. Here too proving analysis is indispensable for the proper interpretation of the copy theory of reality.

First of all, we must bear in mind that "pure" sensory impressions are "pure" sensory images, or that sensory cognitions are abstractions which are useful in certain considerations, but do not stop being abstractions. In the real process of cognition we can separate neither sensory perception from conceptual thinking, nor conceptual thinking (associated with language) from the sensory aspect of cognition. They form an indivisible whole, in the process of phylogenesis, a whole which can be investigated from various points of view. A person who takes a product of abstraction for reality errs, and if he tries to base his mental constructions on it he errs twice.

During analysis we may speak about the sensory aspect of the process of cognition and consider it separately, but in doing so we must bear in mind that we have artificially divided a whole for research purposes. On the other hand, we should not use the term "the sensory level of cognition," so common in Marxist epistemological literature, because it suggests a temporal sequence in cognition: sensory perception first, then abstract thinking, and finally practical experience. Lenin was the indirect and unintentional culprit here. During his readings in philosophy he made a note (not meant for publication) that cognition proceeds from sensory perception through abstraction to practical activity. But the guilty ones are really those who abuse publications like Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*. The preliminary notes made by the great thinker shed additional light upon the way he worked and upon some of his ideas, but they should not be

treated as texts ready for publication. On the contrary, everything seems to indicate that the notes were made for private use, and in view of their brevity and interpolative character were only meaningful for the author himself in the context of his other ideas. That is why they should be quoted and interpreted with utmost caution. Even greater caution is required if one wants to use them as the foundation of a theory.

Hence it is not Lenin who is responsible for the theory of "levels" of cognition (a theory we are concerned with here because it leads to a vulgarization of the copy theory of cognition); the responsibility devolves upon his unfortunate admirers who have rendered a great disservice to Marxist epistemology. The theory of "levels" of cognition would have us believe that in the process of cognition "pure" sensory perception, or "pure" sensory impressions isolated from one another, come *first* and are *followed* by "pure" abstract reflection and conceptual thinking, to which practical experience is finally added. Such a conception of cognition must be rejected by the psychologist, who studies the process of cognition empirically, and by the Marxist epistemologist. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx claimed that the materialism of his own time was limited because it disregarded the subjective factor of practical experience in the cognitive process. Other things being equal one cannot claim that the characteristic feature of Marxist epistemology is its constant and systematic elaboration of the role of practical activity in cognition (this is true), and at the same time claim that such activity only becomes significant in the last stage as a criterion of truth (this is also true if we do not reduce the function of practice in cognition to this alone). At any rate, in the normal process of human cognition there is no such thing as sensory perception independent of abstract thinking and its categories. On the contrary, we now have enough experimental data to state that perception is not only connected with language-thinking, but is dependent on language because it is directed by it. This statement is important because it enables us to oppose the degeneration of the copy theory into a form of naive realism. It was this naive realism which offended critically-minded researchers.

Naive realism, as distinguished from critical realism, asserts that things are as they seem to be, and that sensory qualities are

## *Language and Reality*

inherent in the things themselves. We know that neither of these statements is tenable. Things *are not* as they seem to be. An analysis of common errors in perception reveals this fact. And science is constantly demonstrating the distance between our everyday image of the world, and the microscopic and macroscopic image provided by additional instruments. Sensory qualities *are not inherent* in things themselves. Perception depends on the perceiving apparatus. It varies with the different kinds of perceiving apparatus and with changes in the properties of a given apparatus (following chemical treatment, mechanical injuries, etc.).

Naive realism was a pre-scientific standpoint, and with the spread and advance of science, it has become anti-scientific. Unfortunately, it is the point of departure for certain interpretations of the copy theory of reality. This happens when the copy theory is illegitimately applied to an analysis of sensory perception taken autonomously and isolated from the cognitive process as a whole. By interpreting the copy theory in such a way that the qualities of sensory perceptions are *similar* to the qualities of objects (and hence are inherent in the objects themselves), and that objects are what they appear to be, we propagate naive realism, and our theory, erroneously interpreted, becomes embarrassingly shallow and primitive. In Marxists the error is astonishing since it is based on theses that clearly contradict the epistemological assumptions of the Marxist doctrine: cognition is an *eternal* process, and the results of cognition are not absolute truths (in a particular sense of the term).

What gave rise to a tendency that vulgarizes the copy theory of reality, and is markedly in contradiction with the postulate that cognition is a process? Among other factors the use of such terms as "copy," "reflection," "mirroring," etc., despite care, has contributed to this misinterpretation.

Why do we use a misleading terminology? For historical reasons. The term "copy theory" was the name of that intellectual trend shaped in the *struggle* with particular adversaries. In the struggle against subjective idealism, the term "copy" emphasized the fact that what is given in the mind is evoked by something which exists independent of the mind, and that thought (and not just a sensory image) is a copy of objective reality. In the struggle against agnosticism, the term emphasized the conviction that

the world is knowable. By using the term "copy" we wanted to stress the material adequacy of what we state about reality, i.e., that reality is what we state it is and not what it seems to be. But this does not say that there is some *physical similarity* between cognition and its object. Such an assertion makes no sense in reference to abstract statements about reality (though such statements can be interpreted by the copy theory of reality as well).

Thus historical analysis justifies the use of this terminology, enables us to interpret the meanings of the various terms properly and protects us against the abuse of such terms.

But there are other factors involved.

The idea suggests itself that this term "copy" is only a metaphor. The copy theory does not apply to the sphere of visual perceptions exclusively, but covers all forms of cognition, our entire knowledge of the world, and in the case of its broad interpretation, the sphere of our emotional, volitional, aesthetic, etc., experiences, although in the latter case the problems of interpretation become greater. How then could such terms as "copy," "reflection," "mirroring," which suggest a mirror, an image, a photograph, be anything else but metaphors? If a formulation that is clearly metaphorical is interpreted literally, then the conclusions drawn from it are quite unwarranted.

The self-imposing comparison with the mirror makes the metaphorical interpretation of the terms "reflection" and "mirroring" indicative because the copy theory is meant to interpret more than just visual images. A mirror has nothing to do e.g. with auditory images, all the less with abstract ideas. But here additional difficulties emerge, which I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> They concern what is called the problem of the impartial observer, who would have to settle whether and to what extent there was a similarity between the reflection in the mirror and the object reflected, if the cognitive relation were *identical* with reflection in the mirror. But this possible objection can be waived, because the human mind is not a mirror and its function does not merely consist in *passive* reflection. Hence it follows that we are speaking about "mirror reflection" in a

<sup>6</sup> A. Schaff, *Z zagadnień marksistowskiej teorii prawdy* (Selected Problems of the Marxist Theory of Truth), Warsaw, 1959, pp. 47-65.

## *Language and Reality*

*metaphorical* sense. The terminology has been dictated by the need to oppose subjectivism and agnosticism, and the attempt to bring out the fundamental difference between our theories and those presented by the trends we opposed. Nobody intended to adopt, together with the metaphor, the burden of obsolete mechanistic traditions, associated with that metaphor historically. This only applies to rational interpretations of the problem and the endeavour to interpret the copy theory in accordance with Marxist philosophical assumptions. It does not alter the fact that some Marxists vulgarized the theory by taking the metaphor literally.

Marx's firm rejection of the mechanistic conception and his explicit requirement that a *subjective* factor be introduced into epistemology, a factor connected with human *practical activity* makes our interpretation the only proper Marxist one. In the oft-quoted but rarely understood *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx is not talking about any external factor, but about a component element of human cognition, an element of the theory explaining such cognition.

In criticizing Feuerbach, Marx wrote:

"The chief defect of all previous materialism (including that of Feuerbach) is that things, reality, the sensible world, are conceived only in the form of *objects of observation*, but not as *human sense activity*, not as *practical activity*, not subjectively."<sup>7</sup>

And a little further:

"Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thought*, wants *empirical observation*, but he does not conceive the sensible world as *practical*, human sense activity."<sup>8</sup>

We need only analyze Marx's criticism of "contemplative materialism" (*der kontemplative Materialismus*) in detail, in particular his postulate of inclusion of the *subjective factor* into the conception of object, to see how remote Marxist epistemology (which consistently includes practical activity in the process of cognition) is from the vulgarized form of the copy theory, which resulted from literal interpretation of the metaphor. That was

<sup>7</sup> K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (ed T. B. Bottemore and M. Rubel), 1961, pp. 82-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

why Lenin protested the interpretation of copying as “dead mirroring” and emphasized that every generalization, even the simplest, includes a modicum of fantasy.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, when we analyze the Marxian postulate further, we realize the error of all those who would see in Marx a subjectivist and a voluntarist, a supporter of an alternate articulation of the world either along the dividing line “the river—the horse” or along the dividing line “half a horse—half a river” (that would be that part of reality, distinguished by cognition, which functions as the object). Marx was a materialist, and it would be groundless and foolish to deny that; he was a materialist who understood the complicated nature of the process of cognition and the active participation in it of the objective factor (that is why, among other things, Marxian materialism may be classified as dialectical).

The interpretation of the copy theory in the Marxian system is closely connected with the interpretation of the concept of the *human individual*. Objective reality is comprehended, reflected, mirrored, etc., by a *given man*, since cognition, for all its social conditioning, is always an individual act. Both in epistemology and in the philosophy of man, the logical (not genetic, chronological) starting point is the appropriate conception of the *human individual*. There is, therefore, nothing extraordinary in that fact that in the *Theses on Feuerbach* these two problems—the subjective factor in cognition and the conception of the human individual—occur together and are closely interconnected. In the *Theses on Feuerbach* we find not only extremely valuable explanations of the role of practical activity and the subjective factor in the process of cognition, but important remarks on the construction of the concept of the human individual as well. In my opinion these remarks often underestimated are of fundamental significance for the development of historical materialism.

The human individual is a biological organism, a *separate* being. It is a thinking organism which acts because it thinks. Hence an individual is always a *social product* and cannot be properly understood in isolation from society. Marx’s formula that the human individual is the totality of social relations, is in

<sup>9</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, quoted from a Polish version, Warsaw, 1956, p. 315.

## *Language and Reality*

my opinion one of Marx's most brilliant discoveries. It made it possible to develop the theory of historical materialism consistently and to oppose subjective voluntarism, religious personalism, and vulgarized sociologism in the analysis of the position of the human individual and of his practical activity. We shall see that this is also of great significance for epistemology.

In criticizing Feuerbach's opinion of religious alienation, Marx attacked Feuerbach's conception of the human individual first.

"Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of *man*. But the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each particular individual. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations."

Marx says that the adoption of such an attitude obliged Feuerbach "to postulate an abstract—isolated—human individual," which makes him "conceive the nature of man only in terms of a 'genus,' as an inner and mute universal quality which unites the many individuals in a purely natural (biological) way."

Hence the conclusion:

"Feuerbach therefore does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyzes belongs to a particular form of society."<sup>10</sup>

Only the combination of the two: the inclusion of the subjective factor in the conception of object, and the conception of the human individual as a social product, as the totality of social relations, lays the foundation for the proper interpretation of Marxian epistemology, to the Marxian interpretation of the copy theory of cognition. Having such a foundation, we may return to specific problems of the copy theory and examine them from the point of view of the role of language in cognition.

Marx spoke about the subjective interpretation of reality. In the language of epistemology we say that cognition is objective in nature (which means that cognition copies or mirrors objective reality), but that there is also a subjective factor in cognition. Cognition is copying, but copying with a subjective tinge. Unfortunately, when we approach the problem in such a general way, it is nothing but a cliché. It is not enough to say that the process of cognition is objective from one point of view and

<sup>10</sup> *Theses on Feuerbach* cit.

subjective from another. We must explain in what that subjective element consists. And it is there that the difficulty arises.

Usually we emphasize the fact that the image of reality must be related to the perceiving apparatus, and that the quality of the image depends on the structure of that apparatus. This is certainly true and worth emphasizing, though rather trivial.

The problem begins to grow complicated only when, like Marx, we take into account the fact that man, both in phylogenesis and in ontogenesis, comes to know the world through action and in *transforming reality* cognition therefore is not a passive "mirror-like" copying, but an *active* way approaching objective reality. The cognition involves human *practical activity* in all its forms and is in a sense a *projection* of man. This means that man's approach to objective reality—from the articulation of that reality in sensory perception to the conception of regularities in its evolution—depends not only on what *reality* is like, but also on what cognizing *man* is like. For *what* and *how* man perceives and cognizes depends on the kind of experience (accumulated in phylogenesis and in ontogenesis) at his disposal. For that very reason the same reality can be, and is, perceived differently by different persons. This is, of course, the channel through which the main stream of the subjective factor, i.e., the factor that tinges cognition with the individual properties of the given cognizing *subject* penetrates the process of cognition.

Now that we have introduced a subjective element into the process of cognition by including practical activity, we must try to formulate the general category called "the subjective factor." For that purpose we shall examine the effect of language upon cognition, or, in other words, its effect on the copying of reality in the human mind.

When we spoke about the effect of human practical activity upon cognition we made it clear that we meant practical activity accumulated both in the ontogenesis and in the phylogenesis of man. It is not primarily one given human being's transformations of reality which become a part of his individual experience, but the products of all *social* practical activity which are conveyed to the members of society in various ways. Foremost among these products is language which quite effectively through education conveys society's experience to its present and future members.

## *Language and Reality*

Thus we return to the problem of language as a product of social practical activity.

As we have seen, man always thinks in some language, and, in that sense, his thinking is always linguistic. His language consists of signs and meanings: it is language-thinking. Although, thinking (in the sense of problem solving) includes elements of pre-verbal orientation in the world (sensory perception and the resulting mechanisms of concrete associations), at the stage of linguistic thinking those elements are clearly subordinate (demonstrated by the effect of words upon sensory perception). How a man thinks depends primarily on social phylogenetic experience conveyed to him by society in the process of linguistic upbringing. From that point of view von Humboldt was right in saying that man thinks as he speaks. Formulated slightly differently one might say that an individual looks at the world and grasps it conceptually through "social spectacles."

But this is only one aspect of the role of language in the process of the human mind's copying of reality. We have to realize that language, which affects the way the human mind copies reality, is in turn a *product* of copying, a product of social practical activity in the broadest sense of the term. Thus the second part of von Humboldt's thesis—that man not only thinks as he speaks, but also speaks as he thinks—proves true. It is only when we realize the significance of this complementary thesis that we obtain a full picture of the problem and the dialectics of its inner relationships.

When we speak of the effect of language upon the copying of reality in the human mind we treat language as a *ready-made* system of signs. But that system, so essential for our cognition, is itself a *product* that is markedly social in nature. In many cases, in order to emphasize the effect of language upon cognition we note the extraordinary number of terms which, in various languages, denote the aspects of reality of particular importance to speakers (e.g., in the case of Eskimos, the large number of terms denoting the various kinds and states of snow; in the case of desert peoples, the large number of terms for the various shades of the brown and yellow colors; in the case of peoples living near the sea, the large number of terms denoting the various kinds of fish; in the case of peoples living in the steppes, the large number of terms denoting the various plants; etc.).

But this example marvellously confirms the thesis that language is shaped by man's social practical activity. It is obvious why the Eskimos have so many terms for snow, and the inhabitants of the desert, so many terms for the various shades of yellow, and not vice versa. Men speak as life and practical activity prompts them to. This applies not only to the names of things, but to names of actions, and possibly to the linguistic interpretation of spatial and temporal relations as well. According to certain hypotheses (for instance, Marx's) it is possible to demonstrate the effect of social practical activity upon the entire linguistic formations, their evolution, syntax, and morphology.

One point is beyond doubt: the ready-made system of language determines our vision of the world in some way. If we do not have one term for snow, *we do not produce* the different kinds of snow in an arbitrary way. These exist in nature in an *objective* manner (though we might not have paid attention to them, when we concentrated on the properties common to all the kinds of snow, its color, temperature, etc.). It is not in the least a matter of convention that a given human community includes them in its vocabulary. Life itself required them. Distinguishing between various kinds of snow has been a matter of life and death for the members of that community. Practical activity contributed to the evolution of a given language; and the social experience fixed in language dominates the minds of the members of the given human community. The Eskimos *see* thirty kinds of snow, and not snow "in general," not because they want to do so, or because they have agreed to do so, but because they are unable to perceive reality in any other way.

An excellent illustration of this thesis is provided by Paul Zinsli's analysis (contained in his interesting book *Grund und Grat*) of the differences in descriptions of the mountain landscape in literary German and in the Swiss dialect.

Phylogenesis (i.e., the experience of the past generations) powerfully influences ontogenesis (i.e., individual experience). What language-thinking distinguishes in reality does exist objectively, but the image of the world may take something into account in a variety of ways, or not at all. In this moderate sense language does in fact "create" an *image* of reality.

These problems give rise to a question suggested by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Given the differences in the occupations

## *Language and Reality*

of various communities, might not some language systems exist which have *no points* in common? Would not they be mutually untranslatable? Given the information provided earlier we must answer in the negative. For all the differences of environment, climate, level of cultural development, etc., human societies are linked by a common biological history. Their practical activity takes place in an objective reality which is similar even if it is not identical. That is why language records differences and similarities (the recently started search for *linguistic universals* will then probably prove successful). The various language systems are not closed, and hence are not untranslatable. Of course philosophers would be interested in whether a "totally different" biological history of thinking beings (should such beings be found on other planets) would produce languages mutually untranslatable despite their reflection of reality (like thinking on the basis of an electromagnetic or X-ray mirroring of reality). The optimists, now constructing languages for communication with intelligent beings from other planets, are of the opinion that all intelligent beings understand relations between numbers. This fascinating problem, which would contribute something new to our analysis of language, can be settled empirically only once man really established contacts with intelligent beings from other planets.

Our analysis has provided the proper form of the copy theory of reality. It is characterized by the constant interaction of the objective and the subjective aspect in human cognition. Human cognition is always cognition of something that stands in an objective cause-effect relation to the cognizing mind. It is in this sense that cognition is a copy (reflection, mirroring) of objective reality. But it is always a subjective copy. It takes place in a given individual whose characteristics determine the character of the copying, the nature of the perceptive apparatus (knowledge accumulated, etc.), and given in a system of language-thinking whose properties are derived from social experience and partly determine the character of the copying. Thus the copy, like the truth attained in the process of cognition, is both objective and subjective in nature. Only if we fully realize this can we comprehend the thesis, of the Marxist epistemology, that cognition and truth are processes. We therefore can and should strive to examine the role of the subjective factor in the process

of the copying of reality in the human mind. This will enable us to reformulate problems of the sociology of knowledge and to view the problem of the active role of language in human cognition in a different way.

In conclusion let us return to the issues raised in the course of our preliminary reflections. Does language *create* an image of reality? Is the alternative, that language either creates an image of reality *or* copies objective reality, a genuine alternative? Language neither creates (in the literal meaning of the word) an image of reality, nor is a copy of that reality in any literal sense of the term "copy." Its copy always includes a subjective element, and in that liberal sense of the word "creates" an image of reality. A copy of objective reality and a subjective "creation" of its image in the process of cognition do not exclude one another, but complement one another to form a single whole.