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To break free without breaking off: Questioning the coherence of language systems. A conversation with John Joseph

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Abstract. The following interview with John Joseph, a linguist specializing in the history of linguistics, applied linguistics, and the relationships between language and identity, is divided into two parts. The first part presents a small overview of Joseph's academic trajectory, emphasizing the struggles faced by emerging fields in the linguistics of the 1980s (e.g. language standardization and history of linguistics itself), and then deals with the problems of doing history of linguistics, including questions of the methodology and epistemology of historical approaches. The second part of the interview touches upon the relationships between the history of linguistics and semiotics, the relationships between linguistics and culture, and the problems of subjectivity in linguistics and semiotics. The interview concludes with a small comment on relevant questions linguistics faces when it comes to the role of academics in helping to solve pressing social issues.

Preamble

Professor John Joseph is a linguist concerned with several areas of his field. From the history and epistemology of linguistics to questions of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, or discourse analysis, John Joseph has made several important contributions. He is well known in the field of history of linguistics as the author of *Saussure* (Joseph 2012), the most complete and authoritative biography on Ferdinand de Saussure published to date. He has also authored several important books tracing the historical developments of linguistic ideas, for instance, the ever-changing conceptualization of how language relates to the brain and the mind in *Language, Mind and Body: A Conceptual History*

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(Joseph 2018), or the problem of linguistic arbitrariness in *Limiting the Arbitrary: Linguistic Naturalism and its Opposites in Plato's* Cratylus *and Modern Theories of Language* (Joseph 2000). His most often cited works, however, are on topics related to language and identity, language and power, and language and politics, e.g. *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious* (Joseph 2004a). There is, undoubtedly, a continuity between the approach Joseph has developed in his historical work, and his treatment of the topics where language and politics meet. Such continuity constitutes the focus of interest in the following interview.

I had the occasion of meeting John Joseph, although only virtually, when I invited him to participate in a series of lectures on the history of linguistics and semiotics (see Chávez Barreto 2025a) that took place in the autumn of 2023. It was because of that lecture series that I first interviewed Patrick Sériot (see Chávez Barreto 2024) and then decided to start a series of interviews with linguists, semioticians and philosophers to discuss language, history and politics. Two of those interviews have already appeared in this journal – the aforementioned one with Patrick Sériot, and one with Silvana Rabinovich (see Chávez Barreto 2025b). For the third installment of these interviews, I asked John Joseph to talk on several topics where our interests overlap. The following conversation thus unfolds through many different dimensions of linguistics: its history, or rather *histories*, the political consequences of how language is conceived, the works of Henri Meschonnic, and the relationships between scientific work on language and the culture that produces and sets the conditions for such work to appear. The interview took place online, with me in my apartment in Olomouc, and John Joseph speaking from his office in Edinburgh. Due to some time constraints in our schedules we met twice, on 4 April and 7 April 2025. The following text is accordingly divided into two parts.

Following the steps taken in the previous interviews, I transcribed the conversation with Professor Joseph in a way that aims to maintain the normal features of spontaneous spoken language. However, at his request I had sent him an advance outline of the questions I wanted to ask him. These questions can be found as an appendix at the end of the interview. As was the case with the previous interviews, the reader will find a list of references of the works cited during the talk, and some notes that clarify which linguists, or historical figures, are being referred to, along with further information and references to articles, books or events mentioned throughout the conversation.

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The conversation with John Joseph
Part I (4 April)·

In which we talk about John Joseph's career trajectory; Roy Harris, Konrad Koerner, and linguistics in the 1980s; the problem of influence in the history of linguistics; Noam Chomsky and the histories of linguistics; and some historical works on Ferdinand de Saussure.

Israel Chávez (***I.C.***) The first thing I wanted to ask you is about your trajectory. I read, I think in one of your books, that you first started working with language standardization, and a bit with sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. I have the impression that it was that work that led you into the history of linguistics, but is that true? Would you say some words about that, and maybe about significant encounters that might have further influenced you (I am thinking about people like Roy Harris,[2] or Konrad Koerner,[3] especially) and how all that came together?

John Joseph (***J.J.***) Well, the work on language standardization, that is my PhD thesis. And I didn't think about it as sociolinguistics, so I was surprised when, after I got the degree… you know, it used to be the case, and sometimes it still is, that some journals would publish recently defended dissertations – you know, a list of them, and so on – and I was very surprised to see mine under the heading 'sociolinguistics'. I thought, no, it is not sociolinguistics. For me, at that time, sociolinguistics was something I associated very strongly with Labov[4] and variationism, of course, and my work had nothing to do with that. Applied linguistics too meant something else to me – the applied linguistics course I'd done was about language teaching. But in the longer term… yeah, absolutely, I think language standardization *is* a part of sociolinguistics, *is* a part of applied linguistics, is even a part of *pragmatics*… but, for me it was… I came out of a training in historical Romance linguistics and the big problem that I kept having, and my teachers did not really take seriously, was that they would work indiscriminately on data from dialect atlases (like, you know, the French dialect atlases) and data from the standard language *as if* they were the same. And it seemed to me that they were *not* the same. That there were important differences. But I struggled to find where to go to have this sorted out. The best I found was probably work like that of Einar Haugen,[5] a Norwegianist. I met him as a PhD student, he came to Michigan, and

2 Roy Harris (1931–2015), see Joseph 2015.
3 Ernst Frideryk Konrad Koerner (1939–2022), see Joseph 2022a.
4 William Labov (1927–2024).
5 Einar Ingvald Haugen (1906–1994).

I was telling him that people… when I would tell them that I wanted to do work on language standardization, the answer would be: "Well, that's interesting, it's not linguistics of course, but it's interesting." And he said: "Yeah, they told me the same in 1936, you know." So… [*Chuckles.*] He was very supportive, and I have always been very grateful to him for that. But I was expecting that I would have a career in Romance linguistics doing basically historical linguistics, and that [my thesis] was an important prolegomenon to doing that.

Then, my first jobs were in language and literature departments, and well, I came out of a language and literature department in the University of Michigan, and then had jobs in two other American universities, first of all in foreign language and literature departments, and then in a French and Italian department. There, I was *the linguist*. My other colleagues were literature people. They were all oriented towards history, towards the history of literature, and they all had a historical approach to literature. So, you know, there, in the French and Italian department in Maryland where I taught, there was a medievalist, a *seizièmiste*, a *dix-septièmiste*, a *dix-neuvièmiste*, a couple of people in the twentieth century… and that was how they divided things up. That's how they taught. Their research was historically oriented, and it was in accord with my own education as a Romance linguist, where, you know, there was not a strong distinction between a historical approach and a synchronic approach.

So, all of that just came quite naturally to me. And what I have learned about, insofar as I have learned things about, how to do historical work in linguistics, came from my literature colleagues. A bit from my supervisor as well, and my other Romance linguistics professors. Because, again, what they were doing was basically the Neo-grammarian method. I did not have to learn about all that historically; I was brought up in all of that. My supervisor[6] had been a student of Trubetzkoy,[7] he was pals with Jakobson.[8] So, these were not distant historical figures to me. And we read Saussure.[9] I think I must have been eighteen or nineteen when we were expected to read Saussure. So, all of that, again, it just came naturally to me. There was not… you know, in your question, you got the perception, that I bet other people have too, that some kind of switch occurred with me, from working on language standardization to historical subjects. It is not true. I just could not get anything published on language standardization. My PhD thesis was turned down by Cambridge University Press.[10] [From] most of the articles I sub-

6 Ernst Pulgram, 1915–2005. – J.J.

7 Nikolai Sergeyevich Trubetzkoy (1890–1938).

8 Roman Osipovich Jakobson (1896–1982).

9 Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).

10 The thesis eventually did become a book, see Joseph 1987. – J.J.

mitted, only a few were accepted. For the most part, this was not seen as a field. It was not seen as a part of linguistics, as I said. And so, when this book [shows *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Standardization*[11]] came out from Cambridge, I really felt like: yeah! That's amazing, things *have* changed! What I was doing, that was not linguistics back in 1981, now has a *handbook*! [*We laugh*.] That was a real sea change. But for me, I just… I was asked to do a review article on a couple of books about Saussure, so I did that. And that led to a couple of things being noticed.

So, in 1987, I sent a paper in for the Linguistic Society of America's centenary celebration for Bloomfield,[12] it was the centenary of his birth,[13] there was a panel and [my paper] was accepted. I think that was when I first met Konrad [Koerner], and also Talbot Taylor,[14] who was a student of Roy Harris, whom I mentioned in my talk on Bloomfield. He came up and introduced himself to me afterwards. You mentioned both Roy and Konrad in your question and it was through that meeting where I … there were also students of Bloomfield there. Charles Hockett[15] and Kenneth Pike,[16] I think, ran the symposium. And afterwards, Rulon Wells[17] came up to me and talked to me, because my paper was on Bloomfield's Saussureanism, and Rulon Wells was the only American linguist of that generation to have written about Saussure, an important paper from 1947,[18] and he was extremely kind. And it meant a lot, because Hockett and Pike, especially Hockett, were very shitty. [*We both laugh.*] You know: "How dare this thirty-year-old come and think he can talk to us about Leonard Bloomfield whom we knew and love! Our great teacher!" and, anyway… I later learned that Hockett was just naughty to everyone, it was not just me. Pike, I later encountered him at other conferences, and he was actually quite ok.

So, Konrad then decided to start NAAHoLS, the North American Association for the History of Language Sciences. At the next LSA, I think, he organized a meeting for that. We met there, and it was in the course of that year or so that I published a couple of things in *Historiographia Linguistica*, and I certainly learned

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11 See Ayres-Bennett and Bellamy 2021.

12 Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949).

13 The programme is available and referred to in the bibliography of this interview under LSA 1987. Joseph and Koerner's papers were back-to-back in the morning of Monday 28 December. – I.C.

14 Talbot J. Taylor (b. 1951).

15 Charles Francis Hockett (1916–2000).

16 Kenneth Lee Pike (1912–2000).

17 Rulon S. Wells III (1919–2008).

18 See Wells 1947.

from Konrad's editing practices. I learned a lot about the kind of detailed work that you need to do, the kind of detailed attention that is required to work on the history of linguistics. It is not required in theoretical linguistics. I was mostly publishing in the theoretical area where you can say anything. You can say anything; make an argument, claim that these things hold together… but you do not have to *document it*. And in the historical work, you do. Every sentence has to pay its way in historical terms. So I learned a lot from Konrad.

Roy Harris was important to me because he was liberating. Reading Roy Harris at a time when, in the 1980s, I struggled to be taken seriously, even in the university where I taught, because I was not Chomskyan, my teachers were not Chomskyans. We all see the leaps of faith that were being made by Chomskyans in what they did, the greatest leap of faith of all being a universal grammar that is innate, you know. That was still the days of that in the 1980s. It was starting to go away, and at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s it finally gave way. But, you know, you could not be taken seriously if you were not a Chomskyan.

But Roy Harris… it is so liberating to read his work, and also that of my colleague and dear friend Geoffrey Pullum,[19] who's just moved back to Edinburgh. I saw him yesterday, and he has a history of moving from the UK when a government is elected that he doesn't like and then moving back when the US government is one that he doesn't like, and so he's just done that again. [*We both laugh.*] But he too. He wrote in the journal *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*. He would have, in each issue, at the back of it, a piece where he would, at free range, take aim at Chomskyans. He had been a Chomskyan himself up until he and Gerald Gazdar[20] started GPSG, Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar, which still claims to be generative but without all the transformations, it is flatly structured. But he would go after the Chomskyans, including the head of the linguistics department of my university at the time, David Lightfoot,[21] who is… Yeah, he is a friend, a dear friend, and I like him very much, but he had on the door of his office a poster of the pope [*Laughter, from both of us.*] and it was *so* appropriate, because that is really how he thought of himself… And they just didn't know what to do with me. I seemed to them to be some kind of nineteenth-century relic.

So, I found… I suppose my publications gradually drifted toward being more historical, but that was only [because they were] the ones that were getting accepted. A lot due to Konrad too, and his journals, his books series, and so on… even his series Current Issues in Linguistic Theory; it was one of the few places

19 Geoffrey Keith Pullum (b. 1945).

20 Gerald James Michael Gazdar (b. 1950).

21 David William Lightfoot (b. 1945).

where you could get a non-Chomskyan book published in those days. So, he was very important in keeping linguistics *a bit* diverse at a time when, particularly in the US, but also here in the UK, I think, and increasingly in France as well, there was incredible pressure to follow whatever line Chomsky[22] was following at the moment. Of course, he kept changing his line. So he would leave behind these groups of former apostles who were saying: "No, no, no! No, he was right in 1973!", "No, he was right in 1978!" – you know, they would fight with each other… that sort of thing.

But that was really the importance of Roy Harris for me, it was that liberation. And for Konrad, it was the details. But I did not really learn that much about how to go about doing history from either of them really. It was just… in the case of Konrad, it was just "do it, with all your heart and do it in fine detail", and with Roy it was "just don't be afraid of anyone or anything".

I.C. That sounds in tune with my impression of Koerner, at least, because I understand that his book had a rather rough reception, right? His book on Saussure, I mean.[23] That was his dissertation, right?

J.J. Aha, right. It was a revised version of his PhD dissertation. And yes, he had a rough ride with it. Absolutely. And, as a result, a difficult start for his career. But he was the kind of person for whom that kind of a challenge would just make him want to fight harder, and not to give up. But, yeah… Also, he was unafraid to criticize people like Coseriu[24] and Aarsleff[25] who would… there's one problem with doing the history of linguistics, and this is something I learned from Konrad about the historical method, for sure: *influence* is impossible to falsify. It is impossible to disprove that *x* influenced *y*. But that is what these guys were doing, you know. Coseriu insisted that it was Gabelentz[26] who had influenced Saussure, and, with Aarsleff, it was various other people – Hyppolite Taine (1828–1893) in particular. *Everything* in Saussure comes out of Hyppolite Taine… and, you know, uhm… how do you disprove it?[27] Well… I tried to disprove Aarsleff's argument by show-

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22 Noam Chomsky (b. 1928).

23 See Koerner 1973.

24 Eugenio Coseriu (1921–2002).

25 Hans Arsleff (b. 1925).

26 Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893).

27 There's a summary of the discussion in Joseph 1989, a review on Koerner's *Études Saussuriennes*. The review includes some references to the relevant articles where the discussion unfolded. – I.C. Additionally, the publication in which I mainly dealt with these aspects is Joseph 2004b. – J.J.

ing how (a) there's never a hint of anything referring to Taine in Saussure, and (b) everything that Aarsleff said that Saussure took from Taine you can actually find in people that he *did* cite, and that he *did* quote, and who were influential on him. But nevertheless, that still does not *disprove* it, still does not falsify, the influence thing. So, I've always tried to avoid it, and I tell my students to avoid the word 'influence'. Again, it's just too easy to throw around.

Coseriu and Aarsleff went after Konrad with hammer and tongs, along with some other people [like] Keith Percival,[28] who would become a good friend of mine, but he and Konrad could never get along. So, there was that. And Konrad did have a difficult time. He never left, once he got his job at Ottawa. He stayed there, but he never… they didn't quite know what to do with him. I think they mostly let him do his editorial work, which was incredible editorial work. He was not a good teacher, he was surprisingly disorganized as a speaker, and as a teacher. I think he taught a course on history of linguistics at Ottawa, I don't remember what else he taught, but it wasn't where his strengths lay. In any case, you know, they found a place for him, and he found an acceptable intellectual home there, so it could have been much worse. I remember when my wife and I went up, we were not married yet, and we went up to visit Konrad, and I had something to do, some work to do with him, and so we drove up to his flat in Hull, across the river from Ottawa – Hull is in Quebec, Ottawa in Ontario. He had a very large master bedroom, with a king-size bed. I had been there once before, on my own, and the bed was completely covered with manuscripts. Konrad slept on a cot (!) in an adjoining little room. But on this occasion when I came… no, I am sorry, it was after we were married in fact… we went up, and he had prepared the king-size bed for the two of us. He was still sleeping on the cot but the whole floor of the living room now was covered with the manuscripts. That really was his life, so, yeah, it could have been much worse for Konrad, but it was tough.

I.C. Ok, so… as you know, there was another question I had prepared, about the relationship between the history of a discipline and its current state and how one dimension informs the other… but now I also want to ask you a little bit about your own book on Saussure. Because I actually… well, I think it is a great book, but I don't really know what its reception has been. I assume it was a good reception, but I actually have not read any reviews on it. I've only read the book! [*I laugh.*] And I know there are a lot of people working on Saussure right now and that they sometimes make different claims than the ones you do. For instance, I

[28] W. Keith Percival (1930–2020). See, for instance, Percival 1977, a thorough and critical review of Koerner 1973. – I.C.

think Gasparov[29] has this book about German Romanticism and its *influence*, precisely [*I chuckle.*], on Saussure. But maybe there is a link there, I mean, a link between the reception of these historical works, and the development of a discipline, that you could comment upon…

J.J. Well, my book got… it got very good reviews, except for Roy Harris's. But I knew that was inevitable. [*Laughs.*] At the end of his review, he put a sentence that was complimentary. It was the final sentence of a rather long review in the *Times Literary Supplement.*[30] That was just Roy. If Roy ever gave a good review, I have not seen it. But yeah, I reviewed Gasparov's book[31] and I disagreed with the view that there is some real continuity between Humboldt and other German Romanticists and Saussure. But that is what we are supposed to do, we are supposed to disagree. I have no problem with that at all. It is just that having spent several years giving up my eyesight in Geneva, going through these tens of thousands of pages of manuscripts, I just did not see the evidence for it. And, again, I did see evidence for other people who might have transmitted things second-hand.

Roy Harris, in particular, was appalled at something I wrote about the man who was Saussure's mentor in his youth, Adolphe Pictet, and whom Saussure wrote about, and talked about in his lectures as well. He was the most important linguist to come out of Geneva, prior to Saussure, and there are things that I think you can point to as quite… directly… undeniable… *influences*!!... [*Laughs.*] …and there are other things that, you know, are speculative, and I have tried to distinguish between them. But Roy Harris… he just thought it was absurd that someone *he* had never heard of, that Roy Harris had never heard of, could actually have been an influence on Saussure, of whom *he* was the great expert in the English-speaking world! [*I laugh.*] … But I really liked Roy. There were many evenings when we stayed up late talking and drinking – and Roy's capacity for drinking was unmatched by anyone I've ever known in my life. He was charming. Both Roy and Konrad were very charming people, who nevertheless had lots of enemies. I succeeded Roy at the University of Hong Kong. After he retired, I then got that post that he had held, and he had left a big mark on the place. I even remember we had a visitor come, and when an international visitor came, I could take the university limousine to the airport to fetch them. On one occasion that happened, and the driver said to me, "You are English Department?" and I said yes, and he said, "Before you, Professor Harris.", I said yes, he said, "Ah, very short, lots of arguments".

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[29] Boris Mihailovich Gasparov (b. 1940). The book referred to is Gasparov 2013. – I.C.

[30] See Harris 2012.

[31] See Joseph 2014.

[*Laughs.*] And that was it. That had him to a T. Konrad was convinced that Roy's being short actually was the fundamental shaping thing in his personality. Konrad had this Napoleonic vision of things, and he said the same about Sylvain Auroux who is not quite as short as Roy was, but Konrad was very tall, unusually tall, and he was convinced that the fact that many of his enemies were short men was not a coincidence.

Anyway, [when it comes to] the history and the current state of affairs [of a discipline], for me… I cannot understand something academically, or intellectually, without understanding its trajectory: how it got to where it is. So, I do not see how we can separate them. And… how does one inform the other, that is another question. I think that, for me, understanding the trajectory of an idea *affects* how it is now, it affects my belief about where it will be in five years' time. Again, I am remembering the 1980s when people in the US universities in particular believed, unlike Chomsky himself, they believed that Chomsky had discovered linguistics. Chomsky, of course, himself had a very strong historical sensibility – has, I should say. But his followers had no time for that, they thought that everything that came before Chomsky was pointless, and it seemed to me that, well… no. If you actually understand how Chomsky's linguistics came about, that helps you to understand the developments that happened subsequently, you know, between *Syntactic Structures*[32] and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*,[33] between *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* and the lexicalist move of the early 1970s, and then on from there to later developments. Their inability to see it that way is why, I think, when he made these big shifts, as I said before, he left groups of apostles in the wake, and they could not move with him, and it was because of their lack of a historical understanding of where the ideas had come from, their lack of a trajectory, that they got stuck. So, I could see that happening and thought that it was unfortunate.

But… I gave a talk at the Linguistic Society of America last year. It was the centenary of the LSA and they had various symposia. There was one that was about teaching the history of linguistics, and I gave a talk where I put forward the idea that there have been three ways in doing history of linguistics which I called 'presentist', 'trajectorialist', and 'heliocentric'. I think I'm a trajectorialist. I try to be a trajectorialist. That is to say, I'm looking at where things are going over time, from as far back as we can go that is relevant, into the future. There are quite a number of trajectorialists in the history of linguistics. There are also quite a number of presentists who teach the history of linguistics starting from now, and going backwards, you know, how did we get to where we are now? And it is a subtle dif-

[32] See Chomsky 1957.

[33] See Chomsky 1965.

ference, but I think it has consequences for what you do. I contrasted Whitney,[34] who is very much a presentist – when you read the history of linguistics parts of Whitney's books, they are presentist. With Saussure, when you read the *Course in General Linguistics*, he is a trajectorialist. And Chomsky is heliocentric. That is to say, he is like many others who believe that there was some great moment in the past when people got things right, and everything revolves around that, and for him, of course, that is the seventeenth century, what he calls Cartesian linguistics. His courses at MIT in history of linguistics were taught that way. But then he was succeeded by, I think, Paul Postal (b. 1936) in that course, who suddenly changed it to being presentist. And so, one of the organizers of the symposium was actually Stephen Anderson (b.1943), who has written on the history of phonology. He was there at MIT. And it was really interesting hearing from him what it was like to have that shift from Chomsky's approach to Postal's and Kiparksy's, Paul Kiparsky (b. 1941) was the other one… and from their point of view, Chomsky's history of linguistics was more interesting, more enlightening and more inspiring, because Chomsky really could connect the past to the present. But again, he was succeeded in that role by Chomskyans [*chuckles*] who did not see things that way, you know, they could not see that the past was of more than antiquarian interest…

I.C. That is very interesting, because I… in my own work I have noticed that difference. This distinction between presentism and trajectorialism that you make. I called it differently, I simply used 'teleological' and 'chronological'. And for me, it was relevant because working with Prieto[35] I had a problem of not knowing exactly how to tackle the development of some concepts within his theory, and how they are linked to what came before him… so there are two ways: you can go from, well, Prieto is dead now, so there's like a "final point", and then you can go back (this would be, in my view, 'teleological'), or you can go the other way around (from earlier works to that "final point") and it does look different, when you do that…

J.J. Well, I mean, Saussure's career started when he died, didn't it? So, I do not think Prieto is dead, from my point of view, there is still plenty of archival stuff…

I.C. [*I laugh.*] Indeed… but…

J.J. …yes, I understand what you mean…

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[34] William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894).

[35] Luis Jorge Prieto (1926–1996).

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Part II (7 April)

Where we talk about the history of linguistics as applied semiotics, and as applied zoosemiotics; Saussure, Chomsky, their cultural milieus and the inseparability of umwelt and individual; Meschonnic and Saussure as magnificent failures in the history of linguistics; Bourdieu and the problem of subject and agency in linguistics and semiotics; translanguaging, the normativity of linguistics theories, and the destabilizing of subjectivity and (not only linguistic) identities.

I.C. So, about this idea of whether you think the history of linguistics can be seen as a form of applied semiotics… I do think so. I think that, in a way, to work on the history of a discipline has to do with explaining the way in which something has been known, or conceived, and that is, precisely, one definition of semiotics: "the study of forms of knowing", so… I really think that, for instance, Sériot's book *Structure and the Whole*[36]… I see it a bit like a book on applied cultural semiotics...

J.J. Yeah, I would agree… I mean, if by 'applied semiotics' you mean sorting out and aligning signifiers and signifieds, well, yes, I think we can say that the history of linguistics involves doing that, but doesn't all academic enquiry involve that? And I do not mean only historical. I mean, when Saussure starts sorting the meanings of '*langue*', '*parole*', '*langage*', which have always overlapped in French usage, that is certainly applied semiotics, I would say. And if I include '*usage*' that adds a further level, that's Hjelmslev,[37] followed by Coseriu… And if I then question whether Saussure should be called a structuralist, or whether Benveniste[38] was a structuralist, I can see an applied semiotics going on. When you talk about ways of knowing, or conceiving language, yes, that is certainly a major part of the history of linguistics, but for my part, I would call it applied epistemology, or maybe just epistemology, because we would be opening another battlefront to work out what 'applied' means, you know.

As I mentioned the other day, when I was student, the applied linguistics course was about language teaching. And here, I am professor of applied linguistics and it is… if you look at the British Association of Applied Linguistics, it

36 See Sériot 2014.

37 Louis Trolle Hjelmsev (1899–1965).

38 Émile Benveniste (1902–1976).

includes much more than that, it includes even sociolinguistics, so that is another semiotic battle, I suppose… You wrote *"…the previous question presupposes that the history of linguistics is the study of how language has been conceived across time and is the actual subject matter of the history of linguistics?"*, and let me say something about your personal applied semiotics, as I perceive it: you strike me as a reductionist. [*We both laugh.*] It is not an insult. You want it to be one single signified for this signifier 'history of linguistics', whereas I am inclined to resist what could become a boxing in of what we, and our students, are permitted to do. I know that is not your intent, but, as I say, I grew up professionally during a period of intensive boxing in, everybody was trying to box in linguistics very strictly, and it was a struggle to break free. But, you know, that said, a great deal of the history of linguistics is *not* about how language is conceived, rather, it takes this for granted: language is a given. And such history looks instead at how *particular languages have been conceived*, or the relation of the language to its speakers, whether in social or cognitive terms, or in the analysis of particular features or categories within one or more languages and, you know, it could go on and on, so, I'm resistant to trying and, you know, giving a one-line definition…

I.C. Well, I think, indeed, there is some reductionism hidden in the question, and I think it is due to… From my own experience of working at the archive, I felt that these processes of arranging the data I had, and putting them into historical terms, I mean, this process of actually extracting a "history" out of the data, it was a sort of… it felt like a field where I could use the semiotic tools I had acquired during my previous studies. So, in that sense I say, 'applied semiotics'. It is just that the whole thing struck me, precisely, as a problem of cultural semiotics; because it is not only about the way how language has been conceived, but also about how such conception changed, and about specific languages and specific categories… so, I agree… But, as you understand, I was also trying to elicit a specific answer from you, hence the reductionism…

J.J. Yeah, I mean, you know, another thing I should add is that you have to be, one has to be, reductionist, to a certain extent anyway. Otherwise, you… you cannot communicate. In order to communicate effectively, and that's what teaching is about, you *have to* reduce. And I think that is an important aspect of understanding Saussure. He was very aware of that. He was looking at this group of twenty-year-olds, you know, who were taking his course because they were not good enough in Latin, or in Greek, or whatever, to learn linguistics the way *he* thought linguistics should be learned – which is just by going into texts, you know, deeply.

Bally[39] could do that, but not the students for the course in general linguistics. And by the reductionism that he undertook, he founded modern linguistics [*We both laugh.*] and this almost miraculous job, together with Sechehaye[40] and Bally, of creating this book that has spoken to and opened the minds of so many millions of people. Of course, when Bally and Sechehaye are not faithful to Saussure, sometimes that takes the form of further reductionism from Saussure's. We have to remember, I think we have to remember, that if they had not done that so successfully… who would be talking about Saussure? Saussure would be completely forgotten, and the whole history of twentieth-century linguistics would be totally different…

I.C. Yes… I wanted to stick to the questions I had planned, but other things come up… When it comes to Saussure, I am sure you have been asked this question a lot of times, but what do you see as the exact originality in Saussure? Because it seems like that is debatable, right? But what was the actual contribution? It seems possible to answer that in many ways…

J.J. Interestingly, I have been, I was asked… There is a special issue of *Language History* coming out, dedicated to Konrad Koerner,[41] so I went back and re-read his doctoral thesis and such, and he… In there, and throughout his career, he denies that Saussure had any originality, you know, that's his big thing. He says, "No, this was a social enterprise, it was not an individual thing." Konrad was very dead set against what is called the … you know, this Romantic theory of the, what is the term exactly? … 'Great Man Theory' it is called! The Great Man Theory of history… But, I think, I disagree, [*Laughs.*]… I think what is completely original in Saussure is the conception of a language as a system of values generated purely by difference. I'm sorry. You look anywhere else before him, and you will not find anything comparable to that. It is entirely original. And I think that, you know, that needs to be recognized. It gets more complex because then he conceives differently of the signs of the language, which are arbitrary, and the system, which is there to limit arbitrariness. So it does get more complex. But that idea of value through difference is my answer to your question on what is the specifically original thing…

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39 Charles Bally (1865–1947).

40 Albert Sechehaye (1870–1946).

41 See Joseph 2025.

I.C. I see, and I think it kind of goes together with the next question… which was about the interaction between different conceptions of language and different societal configurations and whether or not they influence one another, and especially… because I even phrased it so: "Could Chomsky only have appeared in the US of the 1950s? Or Saussure only in the Geneva of his time?" And then, this other question about folk conceptions of language and how they influence scientific conceptions of language… I think that is something interesting to which extent the centrality language might have in religion, for instance – how much does that influence science? But not only that… you know very well Whorf[42] and the ideas he had, and some were not exactly "scientific" ideas, but nevertheless they kind of boosted his own research in linguistics, so… what do you think about that? About this interaction between milieus and theories…

J.J. You must've done a course in zoosemiotics, did you not?

I.C. Yes.

J.J. All right, so you're familiar with the concept of umwelt?

I.C. Yes.

J.J. All right…

I.C. And I'm a student of Kalevi's,[43] so I am…

J.J. …exactly! I think we can say that some aspects of the history of linguistics are applied zoosemiotics. You cannot separate a Chomsky, or a Saussure, from his umwelt. However, Chomsky insisted that you must. It is difficult talking about Chomsky, because I don't know if I should use the present or the past tense, you know, he is alive but I am talking about things he wrote in the past, that is why I'm using the past tense now. He said in an interview, he's talking about David Hume (1711–1776), and he said, "I'm looking at the ideas. I don't care what the person who expresses the idea had for breakfast that morning, or read yesterday and so on, but rather how the idea's developed in many different traditions."[44] But… I am sorry, the ideas have no existence apart from the people in whose minds they

[42] Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941)

[43] Kalevi Kull (b. 1952).

[44] See Dillinger, Palacio 1997. – J. J.

reside. First of all, you cannot lump together what a philosopher read and what he had for breakfast. What Hume read is *essential* to understanding his ideas, not just in historical terms.

And as for breakfast, well… a crucial moment in my comprehending Saussure's career, and therefore his intellectual path, came when looking through his wife's household accounts and seeing how, when her father died, it was 1895, she inherited his estate, and the account books changed completely. Before that they were struggling financially. Saussure's father had not inherited much money, they had this mansion to keep up, and he made terrible investments that lost what money he had. So, Saussure grew up quite… in genteel poverty. Then his first years of marriage were the same. But when her father died, she inherited, and that freed Saussure up to do more research. You see a change in his research pattern from that point forward. That's when he's sitting writing all those manuscripts, the free-form thinking, the *double essence* and all of that. And he could have a full English breakfast every morning [*Chuckles.*], because the family's butcher bill was almost exactly his salary from university from that point forward – his salary was something like twenty-five hundred Swiss francs, and I think the butcher bill was twenty-four hundred [*Laughing.*], whereas before it had been much less. So that's where the breakfast part comes in, you know. I think that, again, his umwelt changed, and when that happens, it would be, I think, it would be too restricting to say to ourselves, "Oh no, we just must look at the ideas, only the ideas." So, I think, yes, Chomsky is a product of his umwelt, Saussure's a product of his umwelt. Could Chomsky only have appeared in the US of the 1950s? Well, I mean, I guess the question is: his umwelt, would it have been different in another time? And I don't know, we can't possibly know, but I do think we are all shaped by our umwelt…

I.C. Yeah…

J.J. That's my zoosemiotic theory of the history of linguistics… [*Chuckles.*]

I.C. But, of course, it makes sense, and also because… There is another way of reading the question, that maybe it is not about Chomsky or Saussure themselves as individuals, but rather, about the ideas… I do not want to completely detach them… because, again, I had the same problem with Prieto. When you look at his trajectory, there are some things I am not able, or I don't feel able, to fully explain without looking at the conditions in which he was living. So, there are things, that are very noticeable in his works, that very obviously relate to the fact that he was

in Paris with Martinet,[45] for instance, and otherwise it is difficult to explain them, but… influence lurks here, again… [*I chuckle.*]

J.J. Also the Marxism that comes through in your commentary,[46] or materialism, it is interesting that he seems to… wait, this was somebody else, wasn't it, that comes into the picture using the term 'materialism' … Was it 'materialism'?

I.C. Yes. And yes, it was Cesare Luporini (1909–1993).

J.J. Yeah, that's it… and it is an interesting choice… he seems to want to avoid 'Marxism', maybe?… I do not know.

I.C. They kind of shifted back and forth between 'materialism' and 'Marxism', I think it had something to do with also including Lenin. But, in any case, Prieto was, very openly, a self-declared Marxist, and he was publishing in all these communist newspapers. There's this interview where he says that he was at the edge of a personal crisis because he really did not like this very technical side of linguistics anymore at some point, and he says that semiology really opened up new horizons for him.[47] And those new horizons were connected to political consciousness, in a way, and all that had to do with being in Paris in the 1950s, and later again, in Vincennes, I would think.

J.J. Yes, I heard the same thing from people in Eastern Europe, that semiotics came to them as an unshackling of chains. Kristeva[48] says that, Todorov[49] and others too. So, it is interesting because, you know, this is not obvious when you look at the linguistics of the time, and the semiotics of the time. But I understand it, because I went through something rather similar, as I was telling you the other day, where I was not… it was specifically Chomskyan generative linguistics that I needed to break free from – that we needed to break free from, and semiotics was not the way out for us, but clearly for a lot of other people it was. For people in Paris, Marxism was, or it could also be oppressive. I have done some work on Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), and that was a problem for him – and for

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45 André Martinet (1908–1999).

46 See Chávez Barreto 2025c. I had sent John Joseph a manuscript of a translation of a text written by Prieto in 1987, along with an introduction and a commentary to it. That is the text being referred to. – I.C.

47 See Calabrese 1976.

48 Julia Kristeva (b. 1941).

49 Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017).

Foucault[50] as well. Foucault was actually ejected from the communist party, the French communist party, for being homosexual… that is how *doctrinaire* they were, you know. It is hard to believe that was the case. I'm not sure exactly when that was, I think it was the 1960s. But Bourdieu likewise said… he wrote a lot about Marx, and the Marxists didn't like that. Marx was there and they were not questioning Marx. And what Bourdieu said was, "If Marx were alive today, he would be rethinking Marx! [*We both laugh.*] and that's what I want to do." So, that really was their umwelt. That was probably the main thing in their intellectual umwelt. And you had to make a choice: to walk the line or break free, and there were consequences if you broke free. But I think that mainly what semiotics did was to offer you a way to break free without breaking off, that doing semiotics was not regarded as anti-Marxist, but neither did it box you in…

I.C. Yes, and, at least in Prieto's case, he really aimed at linking semiotics with third-world struggles, and he sees semiotics as a kind of *emancipatory* discipline… he sees semiotics as helping in liberation and decolonial struggles, and he did say 'decolonial', but only in some interviews given in Spanish, actually. But there is one article of his[51] that appeared only in German and Claire Forel translated it into English; it was not published, her translation. But I think it is one of his most political articles. He says there that semiotics should help to build a classless society, and… that is interesting… so, I'm still thinking about this… on the one hand, it is good to acknowledge the umwelt, but then, also, for me, I am always a bit afraid of… you know, a dear professor of mine says we should always follow a critic-paranoid method, and always criticize our own categories.

J.J. Yeah, the danger is determinism.

I.C. Exactly… so, it should be avoided.

J.J. Yes.

I.C. Because sometimes it seems really easy to arrive at a deterministic conclusion, and to think "it had to be like this", but I think that relates a lot to the problem of culture and how culture influences scientific disciplines, so another part of the question was whether history of linguistics was rather a part of philosophy of sci-

[50] Michael Foucault (1926–1984).

[51] See Prieto 1979.

ence, or of sociology of science, or of the history of ideas, I think in a way these are kind of recent fields.

J.J. Yeah, I think it is all of those things. I think history of linguistics has… I was going to say three feet – it is a part of sociology, yes, part of philosophy of science, yes, part of the history of ideas, yes, and I think they all overlap each other. Sociology of science, you know… think of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[52] In the introduction it says it was inspired by Whorf, by reading Whorf, and I asked him [Kuhn]. I emailed him, I did not realize he was on his deathbed, he died not long after. But I said to him, "Were you really serious about that? Or was it just some sort of a hat tip?" And he wrote back and said, "I was absolutely serious, my reading of Whorf totally changed my way of thinking about the history of science." The whole idea of paradigm comes from his reading of Whorf, and Whorf's articles on the influence of language and words on thought, so, you know, we have to make these separations so that students get degrees and jobs and such, but… they have a downside.

I.C. Yes, and I think this allows us slowly to move to the next question. I wanted to ask you about this problem, again, of how language is thought of, or how it is conceived, and this was the main question I wanted to ask you, but I was not sure how to phrase it. It is related to Meschonnic,[53] and to the critique he makes of linguistics and of semiotics. I think what he says is very relevant. I think he is brilliant, of course, but… so far, after reading him a bit, I just don't know exactly how to answer to him. It seems as if he calls for a whole reconstruction of linguistics. And maybe some areas of linguistics are starting to address some of Meschonnic's concerns. There is some really interesting work on prosodic phonology being made here in Palacký[54] about how prosody is one of the first things we acquire, and *it is* related to rhythm… These colleagues of mine, they focus their research on language education and teaching, and they noticed that writing really biases people; so, if you're exposed to a language only by sound, you will recognize some of its prosodic features way better than if you are exposed to it alongside writing, so…

J.J. That sounds very Saussurean, doesn't it? *The dangerous supplement*… Actually, I just went to an event a couple of weeks ago for my former, late colleague

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52 Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996), also see Kuhn 1962.

53 Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009).

54 See Chládková *et al.* 2025. A popularization version of the article's main tenets was published in *The Conversation* (https://theconversation.com/how-to-learn-a-language-like-a-baby-250551).

Colwyn Trevarthen (1931–2024) who was working on this question of what the fetus gets from the language of its mother. He started working on this from the 1960s onwards, and I would have him come give guest lectures, after he retired, in my 'Issues in applied linguistics' course. It was incredible. He had ultrasounds and things showing the mother speaking and the child, sort of like a conductor, an orchestra conductor, repeating exactly the rhythm of what the mother was saying. It is not really a new discovery, but I think more is being learned, and the consequences of it, as you say, are so… for linguistics, they are potentially so profound that people in this very conservative discipline will have to discover it over and over, in a sort of rhythm [*Chuckles.*] for decades and decades before it has any impact, if it ever does.

I never met Meschonnic, but he was very close to my wife's uncle (Jean Verrier, b. 1936 – J.J.). They were colleagues at Paris VIII, and the way I got to know Meschonnic's work was that every time we would go and stay with her uncle in Paris, Meschonnic's latest book would be there. I got to know his work that way. And I have met some of his students including Chloé Laplantine and they all, you know, adored him, although every other linguist absolutely hated him. My wife's uncle's a literary specialist (he is still alive) but he did literature, so he did not have reason to hate Meschonnic. On the contrary, the literary aspects of Meschonnic, which are very strong, gave them a connection. Meschonnic was not a threat to him, the way he was to every other linguist, apparently. And still to this day – you may have experienced this – if you say to linguists the name "*Meschonnic*", they will all go: "*Arrrrrgh*! *Me-scho-nn-ic*!" [*We both laugh.*] Which I think he would have liked.

I think he was like the equivalent of Donald Trump [*Even more laughs.*] in Paris linguistics. That is to say, he's not taking any prisoners, you know. He is going in and [*J.J. claps hands.*] knocking it together, you know. And he's a couple of steps ahead and thinking through what good could come out of all of this, even if there is immediate pain. I think that was what Meschonnic wanted to do. I mean, he recognized that the structuralist linguistic establishment was so all-powerful that he had to go in with a sledgehammer, or chainsaw, you know, like Elon Musk [*chuckles*], and tear it down so that something new could be built up… and of course, that is not the way to make friends and influence people… the way to have a career like Meschonnic… You will have a very devoted small group of apostles… and *a lot of enemies*. But I think that… again, why did rhythm matter? First answer, because structural linguists did not really care about it. They put it in a little box, a little container within phonology – and not even, you know, maybe even only in phonetics, which is not even really part of structural linguistics.

So I think he wanted to turn things on their heads, and rhythm, as you say… If you look in, say, Martinet; how much there is on rhythm? I'm not sure… [*We both*

chuckle.] I think the answer is: "Not much!" You know, rhythm is there, but it is very much a secondary consideration, mainly thought of it in terms of poetry and metrics. And Meschonnic is saying, "Goddammit, no! This is the very first thing, this is the fundamental thing." and then saying, "Actually, not only all of language builds on it, but all of *life*, all of *society*." Society can be conceived of in terms of rhythm, in a sort of layered movement. And so, I think that is what he was aiming to do. For the people who understood him, it changed their way of thinking. It certainly changed *my* way of thinking – not to the point that I have become a *meschonnicien*, but I do refer to him often, and do bring him into things. However, you cannot really be *a bit meschonnicien*… you know, it's all or nothing, so I understand your own frustration in trying to build him into what you're doing.

I.C. Yeah, but for me it is also about seeing this more concrete outcome of thinking *with* Meschonnic, because – I told you I am teaching phonology at my university, it is a BA course, so it's quite basic, but, for a while now, I have not been feeling very comfortable with this idea of a 'segment', and I guess of 'phoneme' either. It just did not seem to make much sense all of a sudden, and it got worse after reading Meschonnic. This had to do with Martinet's claim where he says that linguistic units are a choice.[55] He gives this example of saying '*pierre*' versus saying '*bière*', but… does one decide on 'p' versus 'b'? Granted that the choice is unconscious, it seems to me that the choice is '*pierre*' versus '*bière*', I am not sure if it is over the segment, it should be over a *gesture*, rather. So, the problem, I think, is that if there is a decision, where is it, who makes it. And via Meschonnic, the problem of the segment, seems to me, moves on to involve, or include even, the problem of the *subject*. I guess that is a conclusion one can make from what he writes about the *continuous*.[56] So, revisiting Firth,[57] and then Clements,[58] I was thinking that, ok, maybe this is a way to answer Meschonnic, but *in a way*, only *in a way*. In the end, I simply have the impression that to imagine a linguistics that addresses Meschonnic's critique results in a completely different linguistics than the one we have… and that is the real frustration.

J.J. Well, up and down the halls here, my colleagues, a couple of them my age, most of them younger, are all, from my point of view, much more conservative than I am. You know, I am the radical of the lot. And students are going to have to get good marks from the colleagues who constitute my umwelt, so I would

55 See Martinet 1991[1970]: 26–27.

56 See e.g. Meschonnic 2009: 21.

57 John Rupert Firth (1890–1960).

58 George Nickerson Clements (1940–2009).

not disdain… I once had to teach a syntax course here, and I taught that syntax course. And it is kind of like a game, you know, like squash. I think that's the way you have to approach it. If you're the only one, you've got to think about the students, what students need, and do introduce your doubts, and those that others have expressed, including Meschonnic, but at the same time it cannot be just that, otherwise the course, as you say, it would not be a phonology course. I mean, it would be an applied semiotics of completely changing the definition of phonology.

A couple of months ago, it was in January, I guess, I was at Chloé Laplantine's habilitation jury. I was in the jury in Paris, and the head of the jury also had been Meschonnic's student, and I said something about Meschonnic's project being a glorious failure and: Ah! [*We laugh.*] They were all shocked! To my surprise, they were all shocked. And I said, "First of all, let me point out, the most glorious failure in the history of linguistics is Ferdinand de Saussure." [*Laughs.*] And my impression is, from what I know through personal contacts and family, my impression is that Meschonnic was under no delusions, no illusions, that his project was anything but a failure… but a magnificent failure, you know. But I am not ready yet to be a magnificent failure [*Laughs.*], and you should not be either. But the students *should* be aware of these people, and some of them will pursue that, a very small minority, but some of them will, and I think that's valuable…

I.C. Yes. I like the 'magnificent failure' label.

J.J. Yes!

I.C. …and this discussion about Meschonnic also has to do with what language is about, or what it is for. Because I assume that the answer to what language is about, or what language is for, depends on how language is thought, or conceived, and this has to do with what we were discussing before. You know, I have always had the impression, but it was like something really subjective, or intuitive – I studied linguistics in Mexico, and my school is, or was, a very Boasian, four-field, school of anthropology, so we were mostly trained to be descriptive linguists, we were taught a bit of generative grammar, but we were mostly trained very intensely in American distributionalism, from Hockett to Pike's tagmemics, and we used the same textbooks they used in the US and so on… And from that "upbringing" I always had this view of linguistics as primarily an anthropological discipline, and as a descriptive discipline, and there is a specific kind of view about what language *is*, and what it is for, in such an approach. So when I looked at European linguistics, it always struck me as if, *as if*, in America, the continent of course, linguistics would have something to do with describing the other, and in Europe, linguistics

would be about a kind of self-description, and way more tied to questions of the self-ethnicity, and the self-national identity. There is of course an aspect of that in anthropological linguistic orientations, *especially* in Mexico, of course, but I always saw this seeming qualitative difference between these two approaches – *as if* American linguistics would be somehow more focused on the quantitative aspects of language, and European linguistics, more focused on the qualitative aspects. But I say this mostly is an impression, you know: I entered university to study linguistics when I was sixteen, and this impression comes from those years, it simply somehow stuck… and I guess that it explains my current interests, and some of the questions I have been posing to you, I think…

J.J. Well, you know, I have just written a talk I am going to give in Athens. I have never been to Greece before, but I'm going to Athens. They asked me to come and talk. Their linguistic department is under threat, and they thought that if I come and talk about the history of linguistics it will persuade the people in charge to keep linguistics going. I told them, "Save your money." [*We both laugh.*], they said, "All right, well, come anyway." So, I am going to talk to them about Saussure and Socrates. But so… there is this fundamental question: what language is for? And views on it have changed historically. For centuries, the dominant view was that it is essentially for cognition, the organizing of knowledge and thoughts within the mind. In Plato's *Timaeus*, Timaeus says the gods gave us sight and hearing so that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heavens and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are keen to them. Socrates, when he talks about communication, says it is a paltry thing. Communication hardly figures in Saussure's *Cours*. Even Chomsky has said that what a pity it is that the wonderful intellectual faculty that is language, this beautiful structure, has to get distorted by its use in mere communication.

So, there's a very long history of this. And then there is Romantic thought, where self-expression becomes the key function. But starting in around the late nineteenth century and continuing up to the present, communication is what most linguists, and non-linguists, will tell you is the main reason why language exists. You know, tracing this history reveals a lot about the human conception of human existence *vis-à-vis* God, animals, other people, and above all, oneself. That's the language identity thread of my work. You know, *one's selfhood*, personhood, identity, that is up there with the other functions of language at least. If you look me up on Google Scholar, you will see that that is the part of my work that's received by far the most attention, certainly it's not the history of linguistics. My work on history of linguistics is much less cited than the work on language and

identity. That suggests to me that, maybe, that also represents a shift, that the identity aspects have become more and more important to people.

So, historically, I think, we have seen ways of conceptions, or ideas of what language is for… The semiotics course, which is new here, actually – I did it five years ago during the lockdown, I did a research seminar with a small number of students – and then only this semester did we start a new course. I mentioned to you that the last three weeks were taught by my deaf colleague [Gabrielle Hodge – *J.J.*] who does sign language linguistics. And, yeah, it has changed my way of thinking about what language is for, just seeing in detail the nature of, not just formal sign languages, but gesture as well; and seeing, from her point of view, the inseparability of gesture and sign language. There are a lot of linguists I hear talk about sign language, who would be afraid to say that… I mean, I have even had arguments with linguists who insisted that the semiotics of sign languages are identical to the semiotics of spoken languages, and I've never met a single deaf linguist who agrees with that. [*Laughs.*]

So, you asked me what is there to be learned about the different ways in which language has been conceived. I think that there is a tremendous amount to learn there. Regarding the European and American thing, I would not… I mean, I think yes, there are generalities, there are some characteristics that are stronger on the one side, and on the other, and at the same time, I'm sitting here, where? If you would divide the world between Europe and America, where am I? I am not sure… When we say Europe here, we do not usually mean to include Britain, we mean the continent, unless it is Europe vs America, in which case we probably do mean it, so a lot of ambiguities… And I must say, you know: look at who are the great thinkers of American linguistics. Boas,[59] well, there is Whitney of course, who was a specialist in Sanskrit, studied in Germany… Boas, of course was born in Germany and was already an adult when he went to America; Sapir[60] – born in Germany, then came as a young boy; Jakobson – he worked for more than half of his life in the US. And there is so much in common between Boas's and Bloomfield's distributionalism and Saussure. So, a lot of common ground. But I think you can see two pictures… one is Bloomfield's embrace of behaviourism, and what behaviourists said. They were sort of scientific Calvinists: "We cannot talk scientifically about things we cannot observe, and that includes the mind; we can only observe, and anybody can observe, how a person behaves, so science has to be restricted to that, anything else is metaphysics." So, Bloomfield, you know, preached that. He did not, he could not really practise it. He *had* to talk about

[59] Franz Boas (1858–1942).

[60] Edward Sapir (1884–1939).

meaning. Even when doing phonology, you know, it's how you decide what a phoneme is: if it distinguishes meaning. But, at the same time he could not talk about "mind", and his students grew up with that. Some of them thought he did not take it far enough, and tried to take it further than he did, Trager[61] in particular. So, that did set things on a different course.

You did not really have anybody in Europe as committed to behaviourism as the Bloomfieldians were. Benveniste discovered that when he first went to that symposium in New York and then the one in Nice and realized that they were not speaking the same language in terms of meaning.[62] But there was something else, and that was that when Europeans talked about meaning they tended to go all *Humboldty*, and they tended to align it and associate it with culture and… there is a blurry line when it starts to get… racist. [*We laugh.*] That is the problem.

And with people like the idealists, Vossler,[63] for instance… There is a book review that Firth, J. R. Firth, wrote about Vossler's book, that is very interesting to look at.[64] He is very aware of where Saussure sits, where Vossler sits. He does not talk much about the American linguists but they are sort of hovering in the background. And then, the Second World War was a real turning point. I think, after the defeat of Hitler and everything, the American linguists really wanted to get as mechanical as they could. Anything that would take you down that Humboldtian path, even the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis… they just wanted to stay as far back as they could. That was a slower process in Europe and never went as far, I think. So that did create differences in the American and European *umwelten* of linguistics in those times when it came to the nature of language, the purpose of language, and then functionalism…

Well, functionalism meant different things to different people in different places. For Jakobson, for instance, he was not talking about… he did not think in terms of… all right, let's go further back, let's go back to Charles Bally. Charles Bally's stylistics is all about how the French language made people feel, the affectivity that is embedded by and in the French language, and how the German language made people feel, and the affectivity of the German language… and then how French and German differ and how we can find this *in* the language.[65] That is not what Jakobson is interested in doing. Jakobson is taking a universalist perspective

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61 George Leonard Trager (1906–1992).

62 An overview of Benveniste in America, with references to the Nice congress on semantics can be found in Laplantine 2020. On the place and stance of Benveniste regarding 'structuralism', on both sides of the Atlantic, see Joseph 2019. – I.C.

63 Karl Vossler (1872–1949).

64 See Firth 1933.

65 See Joseph 2022b.

in which, OK, language is shaped teleologically, it is shaped by the functions that all human beings need to carry out in order to live, in order to survive, and so he's got a universalist perspective that passes to Chomsky, who, as a young man, spent a lot of time at Jakobson's feet, and did not like what he was being taught by his Bloomfieldians teachers so much. So, I think those were big developments that I would tie to the differences you are describing between the American and European outlooks.

I.C. And there is something there with "universalism"… But I guess what you are saying also illustrates this sort of feedback loop between historical and societal conditions and linguistics, I mean the activity of *doing* linguistics and other things. Somehow I thought about the problem of essentialism in relation to the potential racism that sometimes can be there in linguistics. And so I was meaning to ask you, although you have almost answered already: how much do you agree with the idea that a theory of language is, or involves, a conception of subjectivity, and a whole political positioning? I guess you have already formulated some answer, not only in this interview, but also in your works… but what do you think?

J.J. I think… it's… complicated. [*Laugh.*] I'll send you the article I wrote about Bourdieu,[66] because I go through it in there, and because these were his big problems, particularly the problem of the subject – and the subject in the 1960s in France still had Cartesian overtones. So, Bourdieu tries to replace it with the agent, but that raises a whole other series of questions, which is about how… what defines an agent is that the agent acts willfully, but we also… our wills are conditioned by our *umwelt*, and, you know, the other people around us. So, I think it is complex, and… that is what Bourdieu makes into his problem: looking at, specifically in terms of language, what are the things that we choose to do, what are the things that we think we choose to do, but really we are doing them because of social forces, or maybe even economic forces in a Marxist sense, and what are the things that the bodily configuration of a human being imposes on us.

Again, there it gets difficult, because, you know, the *Renaissance* begins with Neo-Epicureanism, and Epicurus breaks from Aristotle. Aristotle said, "What words signify are impressions of the soul, and they are the same for all, for all men." Epicurus says, "Oh, no, they are not, they are different", and points to ethnicity: the configuration of the ethnic body is what explains the existence of different languages. Aristotle never takes up that question: why are there different languages? And Epicurus says, "Well, this is an important question", and it's be-

66 See Joseph 2020.

cause the ethnic body causes us to expel air differently, and also the climate that we live in has an effect, so… This is a problem. When you get to the bodily aspect of it… I do not think you find racist connotations in Bourdieu – although I have heard he would be accused of it, I think by people who feel as though the great deal of research he did in North Africa, specifically in Algeria, where he was sent during the civil war, it is seen by some people as a sort of cultural appropriation, I suppose. But I totally disagree. I think that is very wrong-headed.

In any case, these are the sorts of questions that arose in his approach, and those are the sorts of questions I try to look at in my own work. I am not, you know, looking at the syntax of Old French as I was as a student. I am interested in why people in a particular family might have a language policy, a family language policy, that says: "We speak Berber at home and French outside the home", but the children might not like that family policy. So, you know, there will be a split between generations, and then what is the school language policy… that sort of thing. I think that implies linguistic questions that interest me. And now, that connects to an individual's linguistic identity. I think that my conception of who I am is one version of me, and there are as many versions of me as there are people with whom I come into contact. They decide who I am, based on a lot of things: how I dress, the grayness of my hair… but primarily, how I speak, that is the most powerful thing *of all*.

Those are the kinds of questions that I am focused on. Would it be possible to merge those into the kind of structuralist linguistics which is done up and down the hallways here? You know, I asked some of my colleagues a few years back, "Are you a generativist?" And they all hesitated – one of them's a hardcore Chomskyan, but the others hesitated, and then said yes. I said, what does that mean to you? And they said, "It means that there is a system, a language system, in the mind that structures the way I speak and understand". I said, "OK! You're a structuralist!" [*Laughs.*] But 'structuralist' to them is *passé*, you know, it is something that died out sometime in the 1960s or -70s. So, they won't identify with 'structuralist'. But that is what they are. And I do not myself see a way of combining that with the sort of enquiry into the social aspects, the discriminatory aspects, the political aspects of linguistic enquiry except in specific instances, when you are analysing a specific bit of discourse, or whatever, but in the grammar as whole… sometimes, occasionally. For instance, the pronouns of English – it has changed *radically* over the last few years on account of social and political reasons, but you still read linguists saying that English has three person pronouns, 'he', 'she' and 'it'. Well, actually, it has six hundred and fifty and climbing… You know, pronouns that people use, and insist on using, and insist be used in reference to them, and to different persons. Most of the messages I get have people's preferred pronouns and so on.

But for my colleagues, no! For them, English still has three pronouns, 'he', 'she', 'it'… and 'they' – all right, 'he', 'she', 'it', and 'they', four pronouns, and stop. The rest of it belongs to another realm, something to do with politics, or social studies, or whatever… but it's not *grammar*! *Grammar* is 'he', 'she', 'it', 'they'… well, I disagree. And I have tried to argue this, but it does not seem to be taking much uptake. Arguing with other linguists is a lot like arguing about religion. [*I laugh.*]… Really, people have fundamental beliefs, and they are not going to change, you know…

I.C. Yeah, and pronouns… I mean, they are the best example of that, because, you know, Spanish has grammatical gender…

J.J. That makes it even harder…

I.C. Yeah, it makes things complicated…

J.J. Of course there are people trying to undo it.

I.C. Yes, and it is really interesting, because you find many very good linguists who insist on claiming that the things going on with gender and pronouns are merely part of *discourse*, not part of *language*… that's complicated.

J.J. Yeah, I mean, this is another of my hobby horses: how much of linguistic theory is *normative* pretending to be objective? And this is part of that. If you say that the change in the pronoun system is a part of discourse, and so it is for discourse people to worry about, not for us grammarians, that is a normative judgement, amongst many others. And also the fact that there is so little attention in grammatical theory that has ever gone to questions about how much we are working with standard English as opposed to other forms of English… And when you get those asterisks which say that this is ungrammatical… It has always amazed me that: Gee! A ton of these ungrammatical sentences are ok for me! [*Laughs.*] And I go to people and they say "Yeah, I know what it wants to mean", "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what that means, it might not be how I'd say it, but nothing wrong with it, I *understand* it". Well, if you *understand* it, then it must be part of your I-language. But that asterisk says it is not. And that's a normative judgement, again, making its way in as if it were an objective observation.

I.C. I think it is quite surprising how that mirrors some very conservative positions in society. Especially when it comes to pronouns, there's this fear of *losing* understanding, that people will just speak however they want. Well, I think un-

derstanding doesn't get lost *that* way. [*Chuckles.*] But let me go back on our steps for a second, back to Bourdieu. There is a historical link between Bourdieu and Prieto, they knew each other,

J.J. I didn't know…

I.C. Yeah, it was because Prieto worked a lot with Jean-Claude Passeron (b. 1930), in Algeria, he was there because of Passeron, and then published *Pertinence et pratique* in the series directed by Bourdieu…

J.J. Ah, yes… Bourdieu also published Benveniste in this series…

I.C. Exactly, it is the same series.[67] And you see, in Prieto there is also the problem of the subject, and in the manuscript I sent you, I tried to tackle that. Because, at the beginning of the 1980s, Prieto was having this discussion about knowledge and essences with the Marxists, especially Luporini, and I think that Prieto makes, inadvertently, a return to the notion of essence when he talks about the subject. And I didn't use the term 'cartesian', but maybe there is a bit of that… but the main thing I wanted to insist on is that the shift from subject to agent is also happening in semiotics, at least in biosemiotics, to my view, that is *the main* problem: not subjectivity, necessarily, but agency.

J.J. Yeah, and to which extent it can be attributed to things…

I.C. Yes, but I think that behind that there is, again, the problem of how, in this case, 'meaning' or 'interpretation', or 'semiosis' is being conceived. I mean, for biosemioticians, there is usually the recognition that there needs to be a subject, an interpreter – or an agent. And this is what divides biosemiotics from a mere pansemiotic approach. For most biosemioticians, you need the agent, because you need an *actually interpreted* sign: to be virtually a sign is not enough. And so there seems to be some correlation there, between biosemiotics and linguistics. It does create problems to think in terms of 'agent', but in the end, I'd suppose it is good to destabilize the notion of 'subject'...

[67] The series being referred to is *Le sens commun*, of Éditions de Minuit, which Bourdieu directed since its inception in 1966. A small overview of Bourdieu's role in the publishing house, and the importance of the series for French culture is given in Leprince 2023. – I.C.

J.J. Yes… so, in your questions, you also mentioned *translanguaging*. In my department, I'm the main one who talks about translanguaging, and several colleagues, including one next door [Vicky Chondrogianni, J.J.] (who's probably listening to me) who's a bit nervous about the term, prefer to talk about code switching. I believe it is because with code switching you have more of a sense of a subject who is kind of linguistically divided in two, but still a subject, and you don't have to question the structural coherence of the language system either. Whereas translanguaging is about questioning the coherence of the language system, and translanguaging has a more holistic subject, not a subject divided in two, but a subject… You can have a subject, if you want to think in terms of a subject in discourse about translanguaging, who is a unified subject, who speaks a unified translanguaging, you know… But that is hard to come to terms with if you're used to thinking about, I suppose, the monolingual model of the subject of language, but it is an ongoing thing here… Students learn very quickly here that if they are writing a paper for me, they have to talk about translanguaging, and if they are writing one for my colleague, they have to talk about code switching.

I.C. I think here Meschonnic becomes again relevant, because we're talking about monolingualism, and I guess one could say that monolingualism has a lot to do with how the notion of 'subject' seems to be so important, specially in relation to the idea that a subject *must* have a defined identity. And maybe a non-monolingual subject can be more easily thought in terms of some fluidity of identity as well. But, so, for closing, the last question I wanted to ask you is: as academics, what can we do to contribute to solving, or helping a bit in solving social issues? As, you know, I have been doing these interviews partly because I sometimes feel like we, academics, might be at a constant risk of being too much inside our offices and too much immersed in theories and particular studies, and so on. And I guess meaningful research should also be about something else, about something more than what is within our universities So, what do you think we can do, I mean for people who work with language, what is there to be done? I see the relevance of this problem of identity and language, because it seems so relevant for many social struggles, not only gender, but ethnic, political, and many other kinds of identities… but what do you think?

J.J. Well, I suppose I am in a different position from you in this regard. Being a professor of applied linguistics means that I am always teaching about things that will directly affect educational policies, and other government policies, I am writing about these things, but most importantly: teaching about these things, and supervising people's theses in these areas. I do not feel this sort of deficiency that I

would feel if I were doing semiotic… not semiotic, syntactic theory… or semiotic theory for that matter, you know, [*Laughs.*] but syntactic theory is always my go-to example for something that has *no relevance* whatsoever. I think it does depend very much on the kind of work that you are doing. When it comes to semiotics, one thing is that there is still much to be done with regard to deaf linguistics. You'd be surprised how invisible it is, how specialized it is. Not many universities have any kind of programme in it, and so it is a vitally important thing. It is such a rich area for semiotics as well, and I think the surface has only been scratched, with regard to deaf semiotics. But even beyond that, there are also semiotics of deaf-blind communication which I only learned about recently in this course that we are doing, and it raises amazing questions and important opportunities, in terms of spoken language.

With education policies in schools, the ground is constantly shifting, because of, well, you know, immigration, and no longer an expectation that… Well, this varies from place to place, there are some places – my go-to example in this case is France, of course – where only recently there have been small breaches in the monolingual ideology. In France, it's always been the view, and this is Patrick Sériot again, it has always been the view that the shared language creates the Republic, and that remains very strong there. It has weakened in other places, to more of a degree that I thought would have been possible, but it still raises problems about how immigrants, large immigrant populations, or populations of refugees, are to be accommodated for. For instance, there are villages in Scotland where there is one Tajik refugee family: what does the school do for their kids? The only Tajik-speaking teachers may be hundreds of miles away.

Those are the sorts of problems that are starting to be approached in terms of how AI can help with things like that, and I can see how. As much as I am viscerally inclined to recoil at the thought of AI (that's my umwelt) I can nevertheless see how it could make a huge difference in the life of that Tajik family. And that is something where linguistics still has a role to play. I do hear people of the view that AI is rendering traditional linguistic analysis superfluous, but when I talk to people that specialize in AI, they are dubious. They say that what is happening now is that AI systems are getting most of their data now – most of the data that they feed on now, learn from now, has been generated by other AI, and that this is leading to a steady deterioration in the capacity of AI to handle language. That is a spectacular consequence in many regards, but this is their nightmare. They haven't quite worked out how to get out of this death spiral that AI seems to be in, from their point of view. So, I think that linguistics is always going to have a role to play in things like AI, in things like language and education policy, and also in how you teach children to be bilingual. The advantages of translanguaging in

classroom settings seem to be becoming more and more apparent. So, again, I do not really have this feeling that I'm in an ivory tower, and I can imagine that… well, you know, the colleagues up and down the hall here, they should worry about that. But, you know, I believe in peace… I believe that we linguists, we have more in common than what separates us, and we have more to gain from peaceful relations. Occasionally, though, it might be a good idea to slap a tariff on everybody just to get them to deal with you and lower their own tariffs.

I.C. Haha… Thank you!

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Appendix

The questions (or a sketch thereof) sent to John Joseph before our conversation.

1. Regarding your trajectory, I understand you first did some research on language standardization, and that it was the problems you encountered there that eventually led you to the history of linguistics. Can you talk a little bit about this, and maybe about the significant encounters that shaped this shift (maybe your encountering Roy Harris, or E. F. Koerner)?
2. How do you see the relationships between the history of a discipline and the current state of affairs in it? How does one dimension inform the other? Or, in any case, why does studying the history of a discipline matter at all? Maybe you have some concrete examples from your own work on applied linguistics?
3. I know you have been teaching semiotics in Edinburgh for a while now. Do you think that the history of linguistics, or maybe the history of a discipline in general, can be seen as a form of 'applied semiotics', if 'semiotics' is understood as the study of the 'ways of knowing (a given object)'?
3.1. The previous question presupposes that the history of linguistics is the study of how language has been conceived across time. Do you think that is the actual subject matter of the history of linguistics? If yes, what is there to be learned about these different ways in which language has been conceived? If no, is the history of linguistics a mode, or a part, of a sociology of science? Or of philosophy of science? Or simply a part of the history of ideas?

4. You have sometimes put some emphasis on the political consequences, or implications, of how language has been conceived (e.g. several passages of the long section on Cratylus *from your book* Limiting the Arbitrary *deal with this). Do you see these different conceptions of language as arising from societal configurations, or rather as reflecting them? Especially when it comes to linguistics as a discipline (or science), how much is the conception of language in linguistics tied to societal configurations? Could Chomsky only have appeared in the US of the 1950s? Or, Saussure only in the Geneva of his time?*

4.1. What do you think the importance is of, let us say, "folk" conceptions of language in relation to "scientific" conceptions of it? It would seem that some ways of thinking about language (political, religious) very often find their way into the discipline, and I guess it is still happening now…

5. When it comes to this problem of thinking about language, I cannot help bringing up Meschonnic. I think he poses a challenge to all, or almost all, linguists and semioticians (at least to the ones who are willing to listen to him), and I think his critique is really solid and valuable, but at the same time I am not sure about how linguistics, or semiotics, should respond to it. I fail to see how to integrate Meschonnic's critique proper. For example, what would a phonological theory rooted in Meschonnic's ideas look like? Would it be a 'phonology' at all? Sometimes it seems to me that in order to reply to him we would have to start linguistics all over again. What do you think?

6. This problem, I believe, in the end has to do, with what language is about, or what language is for. What is your opinion there? Does it depend on how language is conceived? And if so, are Chomsky and Meschonnic to remain forever apart? Is this question really about linguistics, or about cultural practices and ideologies in general?

6.1. And, in this regard, to which extent do you agree with the idea that a theory of language is, or at least involves, a conception of the subject, and thus a whole political positioning?

7. What do you think we as linguists, and/or semioticians, can do when it comes to pressing social problems of any kind, ranging from gender struggles to other situations of injustice or discrimination like those involving marginalized ethnic groups. For instance, the notion of translanguaging has been proved to be very useful in many contexts, I mostly remember some work done with Romani communities, and it is a useful tool in explaining to people the situation that Romani children, and not only children, find themselves in. So what is your view on that? How can academics, specifically linguists and semioticians, contribute to solving these kinds of problems?

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