

**WHAT IS A GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT?: REFLECTIONS ON THE MYSTERIES OF LANGUAGE.<sup>1</sup>****Sonia Petisco Martínez, PhD**

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**Abstract**

*One of the most deeply rooted mistakes present among theologians, philosophers and linguists throughout the ages is the misleading identification of the universal “I” with the individual or personal self. This ill-fated misconception seems to be closely connected with the pervasive failure to distinguish between Logos, which does not belong to this world, and the particular idiomatic languages whose semantic vocabulary creates the different cultures of the Earth. The present discussion aims at unveiling the innermost contradictions related to the first grammatical person through exploring the deepest or less conscious levels of language itself, but also making some raids in the realms of theatre, dreams, and the mystery of the mirror. Implicit in this is also an attempt to point towards the liberation of the Word from the limits of mere subjectivity, thus questioning human’s enthronement as the owner of Truth and the measure of all things. Textual sources worth being taken into consideration include Heraclitus’, St. John’s, and Hegel’s writings on Language, among others.*

**KEY WORDS:** Metalinguistics, Logos vs idiomatic languages, grammatical subject, impersonality, deixis.

There have been numerous attempts throughout history to respond to the question of “What is consciousness” or “Who is the speaker”. Most of the answers to this puzzle have inserted Language into the semantic world, turning it into a real entity or object. In doing so, they have eradicated its capacity to think and act, depriving it of its contradictory nature: that of being “inside” and also “outside” reality.<sup>i</sup>

My interest in Language is not based on any philosophical, religious or scientific system, but rather emerges from contemplating a paradoxical and basic denial: The speaker of the world cannot be spoken about because it<sup>ii</sup> would no longer be the subject who speaks, but the object about which something is uttered.

This argument should not be considered as another “theory” of Language among many others. On the contrary, it has to be seen as a discovery, which was implicitly present in Heraclitus the Obscure (Khan 1979: 123-134) when he stated that *Logos Sophon* (the intelligent) is separated from all things, and, paradoxically, shaping all of them.<sup>iii</sup> This leads us directly into the question of the grammatical subject “I” which is the main concern we are addressing in this article. In the very moment we try to explain or grasp it by definition, “I” stops being “I” who was anybody that says “I” in order to become a person who defends particular opinions or interests; it becomes the object about which anything can be said, but which cannot truly speak anymore. Here again, we encounter the same mistake that we have just seen regarding Language itself.

Our methodology aims at unveiling all these pervasive errors which keep identifying “I” with a matter of knowledge. This misleading identification is the result of failing to make a distinction between Language and Culture, between Logos and the different languages of the world, between *Verbum in actu* as opposed to *Nomen*.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, many people believe Language is just made of its semantic vocabulary at its most superficial level. They are completely unaware that beneath this level, Language is embedded in its grammatical, phonetic and prosodic rules, which usually are labelled as *Technical Subconsciousness*.<sup>v</sup> Therefore, Language can be divided into two realms:

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a lecture delivered by the author at Real Colegio Complutense (Harvard University) on the 20th of May 2010.

1. The realm of Culture, Consciousness and Will: semantic words of a language, that is, proper nouns and common nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc...
2. The realm of Technical Subconsciousness or popular language: phonemes and prosody, syntactical indexes and rules, demonstrative, interrogative and personal pronouns, defining and non-defining quantifiers, and, above all, the main core or heart of language: the negative particle, which is a common element shared by all languages (see Figure 1).

The Grammatical subject “I” is obviously located in the latter, because “I” has no semantic meaning at all; on the contrary, it is a deictic element which is pointing to the place where the act of speaking is taking place. And yet, “I” is often conceptualized and considered either as a Supernatural Being equal to God, or as an individual person, a private man, an “idyota” who has his own personal theories or world views.

This ill-fated misunderstanding regarding the Speaker, “I”, has been going on and on since the very early stages of Christianity, continuing with scholastic theologians such as Saint Thomas Aquinas who refers to God as an Absolute Being. When talking about names versus the Name, he writes: “*Alia nomina dicunt esse secundum aliam rationem determinatam. Sicut sapiens dicit aliquid esse. Qui est dicit esse absolutum.*” (Aquinas 1981:32). Note that the Latin verb *esse* originally had two functions: as a copulative verb “to be” or a verb meaning “there is”<sup>vi</sup>. Therefore, the name “Qui est” can be interpreted in two ways: “The one who is who he is” (with a perfect definition of itself) or “the one who is there” (absolutely there or in an absolute way).<sup>vii</sup>

How can the deictic element “there” be considered or expressed in an absolute way if “there” lacks meaning because it only points to the place where something is being uttered? How can “the one who is there” be conceived as an Absolute Being, a supreme Ideal?

This is not possible and Aquinas himself is going to contradict his own affirmation when he refers to God as “*pelagus substantiae infinitum*” (an island of infinite substance) borrowing the image from Damasceno. When reflecting on God, the meaning is lost, and what is left is something similar to Aristotelian *agnostos hýle*<sup>viii</sup> or inscrutable matter, something which remains in a cloud of unknowing (“*in quadam tenebra ignorantiae*”). We can easily observe how the author of the *Summa Theologica* is fiercely struggling with the paradox inherent to his matter of study and putting at risk the very concept of divine essence.

Following this thread, we should be aware that not only have theologians enclosed the anonymous “I”, the Speaker, within the notion of God, but they have also identified Christ, the Word, with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. As Rudolf Bultman affirms in his study on the theology of John’s Gospel: “*the Revealer is nothing but a definite historical man*” (Bultmann 1955:47).<sup>ix</sup> Apparently, the German theologian misunderstood Christ’s words when he says to his followers: “*I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and speak*” (Jn 12:44-50). This is precisely what is relevant for our reflection: Jesus’s recognition that his words are not his, even though in the Biblical text we still find the usurpation of the Word by the patriarchal figure of the Father.<sup>x</sup>

On the other hand, John’s Gospel refers to the deictic element “I” in Christ’s “I-am” statements:

“The bread of life-it is I. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35)

“The light of the world-it is I. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life” (8:12)

“The door is I” (10:9). “The good shepherd is I” (10:11,14).

“The resurrection and the life are I” (11:25)

“The true vine is I” (15:1,5)

In these assertions, “I” is a predicate nominative and not the subject. The meaning is therefore something such as “in *me* the thing mentioned is present, it is I”. Here the metaphors “bread of life”, “light”, “door”, and “vine” lose their own constraining definition thanks to this deictic element “I” which dissolves but also liberates them from their conceptual boundaries.

We find other instances in which Jesus can pronounce this “It is I” alone, without any real subject: “*unless you believe that it is I, you will die in your sins*” (8:24) or “*when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that it is I*” (8:28). What is it to be supplied as the real subject in place of “I”?

Obviously nothing definite but something of this sort: “All that I say is I”. Hence, “I” becomes the action of speaking itself, deprived of any semantic shape or form. And this stands in clear contradiction to the consideration of Christ with a definite historical man.

Similar to Christ’s attempt to disembodify the voice of denial from the *idyos*, the private person, Hegel in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, focuses on what he calls “the Haupt-Diferenzierung” (the crucial difference) between “Ich” (“I”) and “Gegenstand”<sup>xi</sup> (“the thing”).<sup>xii</sup> He refers to the subject as “dieser” (Nominative) and to the object as “dieses” (Accusative), and his use of these demonstrative deictic elements can be conceived of as one of the greatest moments in which his thought goes beyond philosophical jargons.

However, Hegel mistakenly inserts both the subject and the object in the same realm or sphere, in order to place them in a relationship of opposition. Thus, there is a relation of difference, which derives in their mutual creation. Therefore, his philosophical system continues identifying “I” with “the I”, that is, with a matter of thought, an Absolute Spirit, a thing about which anything can be said, but which cannot speak anymore because it has been objectivized.<sup>xiii</sup> There is a failure to acknowledge that “the eye” of observation that is perceiving the crucial difference, or “the tongue” which is talking about it remains outside, following our initial recognition that the intelligent is set apart from all things.

Despite this misinterpretation, Hegel was not completely unaware of the paradoxical nature of Language. Later on in his work, he considers language as a negative mediation, whose construction is based on a contradiction where I, in order to become “an I” has to be both singular and universal:

“The ‘I’—he writes—is merely universal like “Now”, “Here”, or “This” in general; I do indeed *mean* a single “I”, but I can no more say what I *mean* in the case of “I” than I can in the case of “Now” and “Here”. When I say “this Here”, “this Now” or a “single item”, I am saying all Thises, Heres, Nows, all single items. Similarly, when I say “I”, this singular “I”, I say in general all “Is”; everyone is what I say, everyone is “I”, this singular “I” (Hegel 1977: 62).

In other words, for a person to be recognized as a person, first he or she has to be “this particular individual” and not any other, but at the same time, he or she has to be a person like the other persons (a sample of its kind) so that they can be counted as members of humankind. Similarly, “here” and “now” have to refer to any space or time in which I say “here” and “now” (*hic et nun*), but at the same they have to refer to a specific or conceived place and moment within the semantic reality (e.g., RCC Conference Room, 7:30 pm).

This matching of the general with the particular proves clearly contradictory. And yet it is the basis for the construction of this fictional representation we call “reality”. Indeed, it reveals the paradox within the very concept of person, as well as within the concept of time and space as we usually conceive it. Nevertheless, we still keep saying: “I am a person, a human being who belongs to a definite historical period in time” and we believe it, without any further questioning. Needless to say that this marriage between “I” and a human being through the copulative verb “to be” has mortal consequences, as we can read in Aristotle’s premise when he states: “*All human beings are mortal. Socrates is a human being. Therefore, Socrates is mortal*”. Here two things can be called into question: a) that there cannot be something such as “all”, because “all” is an ideal entity. b) that Socrates cannot be a human being because the very concept of human being is based on a declared contradiction.

At another level, we are going to devote the last part of this essay to analyze this paradoxical I, from the viewpoint of how it is interpreted in theatre, dreams and in the mystery of the mirror.

If we have a closer look at this cultural manifestation of reality which is Living Drama we find, on the one hand the real person of the actor who earns his living on stage and has his own private life. On the other hand, we find the character (the mask) that this person adopts on the scene: such as Hamlet, Ophelia or the Ghost. Neither of the two are “the true actor” who, while acting, has forgotten about the real person in real life but cannot identify himself with any of his fictional roles either. The actor is the action itself, pure, simple, and undivided, and his action is identical to his speaking. He is the only one who can act freely, because the other two cannot do more than what they are supposed to do: that is, to obey their destiny either in art, or in the bad theatre of every day life. A similar trichotomy can be drawn in the case of dreams (Freud 1949: 46). Here we find, on the one hand the sleeper, who is a real person that has gone to bed and hopes to wake up without too much alteration of his personal identity. On the other hand, we have the oniric reality or representation within the dream in which we also encounter real people, although somewhat contorted or blurred.

Neither of them (the sleeper or the figure in the dream) is “the true dreamer”, because the sleeper is sleeping, his eyes are even closed. And the dreamt figure cannot be the dreamer either, since it is the object of the dream.

There are also some parallels between the realm of theatre and dreams and the mystery of the mirror. When a person is in front of a mirror, this person is also confronted with a duality. On the one hand, we have the real person who performs a specific role within society; on the other hand, we have the image of this person reflected in the mirror. Mysteriously enough, in this projected image of him/herself, the right hand has become the left hand, and the left hand has become the right hand. Who sees this? Who is able to notice this inversion? Definitely it is not the real person who is situated in front of the mirror, because the eye which sees the inversion must be placed behind the reflected image in order to perceive this inversion. Therefore, that eye that sees from behind is neither oneself, nor the mirrored shadow.

Nevertheless, we mistakenly tend to identify “I” the observer with the real person who is looking at and being reflected in the mirror. In the same way as we usually identify the actor with the person whose name is written on the publicity board, or we take the dreamer to be the actual sleeper lying on the bed. In this way, we identify “I” with “the I”, with a real person, condemning it to be inside the semantic world. This is the true death of the Observer, the Actor, the Dreamer, this is the true death of the Living Word. This is a death which is foretold by the King Tyresias when he says to Narcissus’s mother that his son will die if he gets to know that the image reflected on water is himself. (Ovid 2003: 149)

To conclude, we have tried to show how there is not such a thing as a unitary consciousness: how consciousness is always accompanied by a subconsciousness that is all the time questioning it, and leaving it open to the realm of the unknown, of the endless possibilities of thought and feeling.

It is within this subconsciousness of Language, theatre and dreams that we have come across the grammatical subject “I” who should always remain contradictory and paradoxical. “I” is not from this world and it is precisely this position as an outsider which makes it a source of true political action, of true salvation against this increasingly ferocious Faith in the human individual as the owner of Truth and the measure of all things.

What T.S. Eliot wrote in his *Four Quartets* may not be far from common sense in that: “In order to arrive at what you do not know/ You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance/In order to possess what you do not possess/ You must go by the way of dispossession./In order to arrive at what you are not/You must go through the way in which you are not./And what you do not know is the only thing you know/ And what you own is what you do not own/ And where you are is where you are not.” (Eliot 1971: 127).

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>i</sup>The term “reality” is being used in its etymological sense. In Latin, *Res, rei*, originally meant the matter or topic about which a discussion was being led. It was a wide-spread term used in the legal and business fields.

<sup>ii</sup> I am using the pronoun “it” to mean neither gender (masculine or feminine), but to refer to “the speaker”, or “the voice” of the world.

<sup>iii</sup> “Thinking is shared by all” reads Fragment XXXI. However, in Fragment XXVII he adds: “Of all those accounts I have heard, none has gone so far as this: to recognize what is wise, set apart from all” (Khan 1979: 41; 43). See also Petisco 2004: 123-134.

<sup>iv</sup> *Nomen* refers to the names which create the semantic reality by means of their definition which is a justification of the name or the meaning. On the other hand, *Verbum in actu* refers to the action of language through its essential function: that of denying its own semantic constructions.

<sup>v</sup> We are following García Calvo’s studies on language (García Calvo 1979: 82).

<sup>vi</sup> Later on, with the development of theology throughout time, the former use of “esse” meaning “there is something” will disappear, and “esse” will be viewed as a synonym for “existere”, which implies that something is what it is, and not anything else.

<sup>vii</sup> This name is borrowed from Exodus 3:14 when God tells Moses that his name is: “Ehye Asher Ehye”. In Hebrew we do not find a copulative verb such as “to be”, but there is an existential with the root “hi”. Therefore “Ehye Asher Ehye” could be translated as “The one who is there”. However, there hasn’t been much agreement between scholars and translators regarding the rendering of this verse into English, and most of them have misleadingly considered it as a copulative verb. It might be the case that due to the intervention of the Latin translation “Qui est”, it is generally interpreted to mean “I am that I am”, though it more literally translates as “I shall be who I shall be”, since “Ehye” is the first person singular imperfect form. In Rotherham’s version, the translation reads as “I will become whomsoever I please”.

<sup>viii</sup> Matter derives from Latin *materies*, whose root seems more closely related to “smedh-” (Wood) than to “mater”(Mother). The Greek correspondent of “materies” is “hýle” which is more or less equivalent to the Latin “silua” which means “woodland”. Aristotle acknowledges the impossibility of knowing this inscrutable matter, and yet he cannot resist the temptation of giving a name to it. Therefore, he calls it “intelligible matter” in his *Metaphysiká*, as if there was a kind of matter lying underneath the sensitive matter which serves the purpose of receiving the abstract name of something (for example, “house”) converting it into a real entity (“a house”) and, implicitly, into an object of knowledge (Aristotle 1928: 42) Nevertheless, this notion of intelligible matter seems wrong in common sense or logic, because the abstract term “house” or “circle”, or “triangle” cannot be found in reality. In other words, it is not possible to encounter “the house”, “the circle”, “the triangle” in reality, we can only come across samples of houses, circles, or triangles, but never “the” house, “the” triangle as an abstract entity. This matching of “the general” with “the particular” creates the idiomatic reality of whatever tribe or social group we may think of (García Calvo 2001).

<sup>ix</sup> “Faith in Jesus, (...) is faith in the exalted Jesus, but not as if he were a heavenly being who had stripped off the garment of earthly-human existence as the Gnostic Redeemer was conceived to do. Rather the exalted Jesus is at the same time the earthly man Jesus; “the glorified one” is still always he who “became flesh” (Bultmann 1955: 49).

<sup>x</sup> Bultmann includes most of the examples from John’s Gospel in which Jesus is identified with the Father as being One in words and actions: “Jesus testifies or speaks what he saw with his Father (3:11; 8:38) (...) He speaks what the Father taught him to speak (8:28, cf. 7:17), or commanded him to speak (12:49). He speaks the words that the Father gave him (17:8). He does what he sees the Father do, what the Father shows him (5:19f). Expressed also in a very general way: he reveals the Father’s name (17:6, 26). (Idem., p. 61).

<sup>xi</sup> In fact, the term “Gegen-stand” is the German translation for the Latin term “ob-iectum”, or more precisely, for the term “ob-stantia”, that is to say, the “obstacle”, the thing that stands “in front of” or is “against” the speaker (Logos) who talks about “it”.

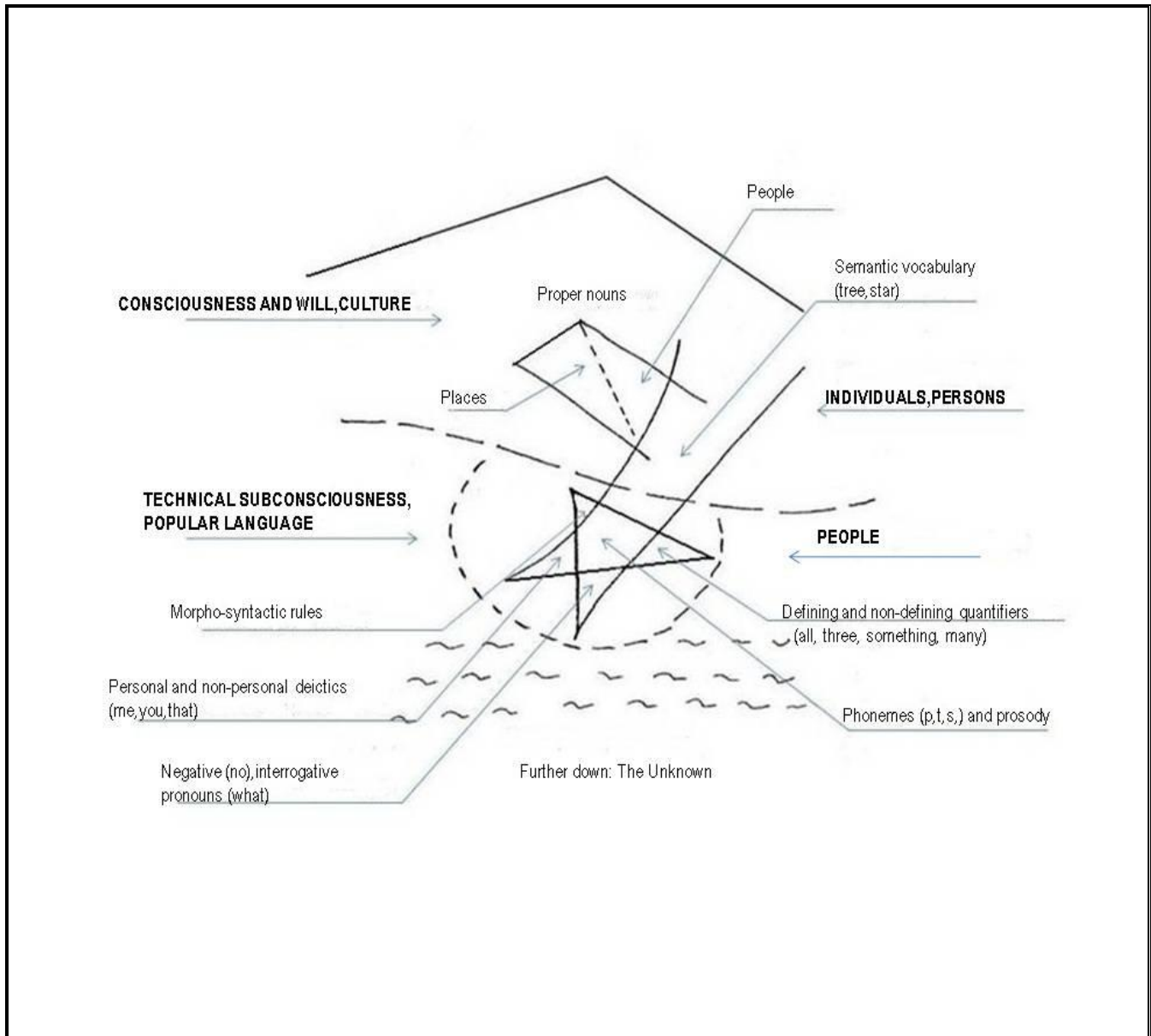
<sup>xii</sup> “Among the countless differences cropping up here we find in every case that the crucial one is that, in a sense-certainty, pure being at once splits up into what we have called the two “Thises”, one “This” as “I”, and the other “This” as object.” (G.W.F.Hegel. (1977). *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 59). This is A.V. Miller’s translation of the original German version: “Unter den unzähligen dabei vorkommenden Unterschieden finden wir



allenthalben die Hauptverschiedenheit, dass nämlich in ihr sogleich aus dem reinen Sein die beiden schon genannten Diesen, ein *Dieser* als *Ich*, und ein *Dieses* als *Gegenstand* herausfallen".(G.W.F. Hegel. (1987). *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, p. 80).

<sup>xiii</sup>Needless to say that this identification results in the crucifixion of the Word or Logos in Actus which has surrendered to a conceived or imagined Logos.

**FIGURE 1**



*Figure 1.* This drawing is an adaption from G. Calvo (1979). It can help to illustrate the two levels of language referred to in this article: a) the level of culture, consciousness and will; b) the level of technical subconsciousness or popular language, where the deictic element “I” is placed. This location implies the lack of meaning of the grammatical subject “I”, as opposed to “John” or “father” which clearly belong to the realm of concepts, to the semantic world.