

The Discursive Ethos: From The Social Conception of Language to The Social Conception of the Subject

Karima LAAMIRI

Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco

Abstract

The discursive ethos is a notion that is primarily related to communication including verbal interactions. Indeed, language is not only a simple means of individual expression but it reflects the linguistic and extralinguistic side of the talking subject. This social conception of language has developed over the years to show that language activity is closely linked to the social and societal activity of individuals. In an interactive process, as in the case of political communication, interlocutors are led to persuade their audience through a positive self-image. It is thus that projecting a successful ethos becomes primordial. Indeed, the study of the speaking subject in the political discourse shows that the speaker is part of his speech. In other words, he marks its subjectivity through linguistic processes that arise throughout his communication. In addition, the political actor reflects both the image of his political group and that of his social group. And this is through the use of the personal pronoun "we" which gathers three instances: political, citizen and patriotic. It is in this context that this research is carried out from a sociodiscursive approach that involves the linguistic aspect and the social aspect of language.

Keywords: Discourse - individual ethos – collective ethos – verbal interaction - language – communicator/ speaking subject.

Introduction

The social ethos referred to in this article has an essential communicative aspect. Being closely related to the argumentative threesome Ethos, Logos and Pathos, this notion remains an enunciative strategy which is pertinent and appropriate to the field of political communication. Thus, and via the ethos, the communicator reflects, through his ways of being and his ways of saying, a positive self-image. In effect, it is a question of persuasion strategy which is conspicuously manifested in and by the discursive activity. Actually, the communicator can be entirely revealed only through the interactional

dimension where the elements of the communication process intertwine so as to determine and work out a specific ethos.

Far from being a simple message that transmits reality, language stands as a deconstruction, construction and reconstruction of this reality, in a like manner, “the self” as an individual specificity can be manifested only through the relationship between the subjects. Anyway, the individual and social subjects coexist and get manifested in the discursive activity, placing, then, language and interaction in the core of the human activity with its individual and social aspects. It is in this regard that George Hebert Mead came up, in an evolutionary perspective, to the same conclusions as those of Cassirer. George Hebert Mead stated that social activity presuppose effectively language communication. As a consequence, and in view of the limited nature of the communication theories mentioned above and following G. H. Mead, human sciences have the theoretical tools that are likely to define a new approach for the subject and the social which Habermas described as a psychology of individual identity.

The importance of this subject lies in the overcoming of the communication reductive theories that of the mechanistic theory of reflection and the mentalist theory of consciousness. The former holds that communication is reduced to the simple fact of transmitting information and language is nothing but a mere tool that vehicles an already non-linguistic experiment performed outside communication. The latter, on the other hand, considers communication as the individual expression of a conscious willingness. This research case, therefore, is to be placed in a social conception of the subject where the resort to diverse human sciences will allow to comprehend everything that is implicated in communication. By clearing away the transmission problematic, we will trace the functions that language effects within society.

Reviewing language and interaction, in this way, leads to speak of the social and subject categories in communication in terms of a sociodiscursive approach. This is done through two main axes namely: the social conception of language; the verbal interaction: an articulation between the individual ethos and the collective ethos especially in the political discourse.

I. The social conception of language

The work and the ambition of Ferdinand de Saussure to develop an abstract model of language are seen as the cornerstone of modern linguistics. In effect, *Course in General Linguistics* (De Saussure, 1916) is a reconstruction of his lectures on the basis of notes compiled by his students and carefully prepared by his colleagues. The book is regarded as the starting point of structural linguistics. Structuralism sees “*language as a system that*

knows only its own order»⁹ and emphasizes that ‘the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself »¹⁰. The extra linguistic elements are pushed aside in the context of this linguistic research and this in spite of some passages that alluded to the social aspect of language where it is regarded not only as “the social part of language” but as “a social institution” as well.

Subsequently, other linguists like De Saussure have given priority to demarcate and bound their scientific research in a way that restricts language as an object of study. The research of Bloomfield¹¹ and Chomsky¹² who have formulated diverse and substantial descriptive systems for the general study of language while discounting its social aspect, fit into this linguistic theorization.

1. *Language and the postsaussurian conflict*

As an abstract form, language cannot, however, exist outside the social context in which its interlocutors shape it and give it form. Hence ‘the history of a language is that of its interlocutors »¹³ linguistic approach has to take into account what it reports to the social side in language. As a consequence and just after Course in General Linguistics had been published, linguistics had approached language in two different ways, and the first approach emphasizes the internal aspect of language whereas the second underlined its social conception.

For a very long time, these two conceptions have been evolving simultaneously surveying and analysing each, the purely linguistic or extra linguistic side of language. Since the emergence of modern linguistics “it appears vis-à-vis a structural discourse which highlights the form of language, another discourse which stresses on its social functions”¹⁴.

The French linguist Antoine Meillet (1866-1939) is considered as the forerunner of the social conception of language which is revealed in a couple of texts. Seen as Saussure’s student, Antoine Meillet distances himself by underlying that “in separating linguistic change from the exterior conditions on which it depends, De Saussure deprives language of reality and turns it into an inexplicable abstraction”¹⁵.

9 De Mauro T., (1985), Course in General Linguistics, critical edition, Paris: Payot, p.314

10 Ibidem

11 BLOOMFIELD, (1970), “Language or ideas”, *Language. Hockett Conference*. La Haye – Paris : Mouton. pp.322-328

12 CHOMSKY N., (1968), “*Language and thought*”, Payot/Rivage. Coll.

13 CALVET L. J. (1993), *Sociolinguistics*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France. P.3

14 Ibidem

15 MEILLET, A., (1965). ‘How words change meaning’, published in the year of Sociology,

Unlike the language strictly internal approach, Antoine Meillet in his social conception calls, at the same time, for the internal and external approach of language. If Saussure talks about the dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony, Meillet aspires to account for the structure of history. According to him “language cannot be fully understood without reference to its evolution”¹⁶.

In his famous article, “how words change their meaning”, Meillet suggests a definition based on Durkheim’s outlook for this social side of language, he founded his conception on three criteria. First of all, he deemed that the limits of different languages tend to coincide with those of the social groups which we name nations. Moreover, language is, thus, an eminently social fact. In effect it enters exactly into the definition proposed by Durkheim: a language exists independently of each of the individual who speaks it, and though it has no reality beyond the totality of the individuals in question, it is, nonetheless, aside from its generality, exterior to each of them. Finally, the characters external to the individual and coercion by which Durkheim defines the social fact appears, then in the language with the last evidence.

Through this anti-Saussure theme, Meillet reveals clearly, after the publication of the Course of General Linguistics, that language is a social fact and that post Saussurian structural linguistics delve in studies that are not relevant to this theme.

2. *Language: towards a sociolinguistic approach*

The position of Meillet vis-à-vis the conception of language is regarded as the fount of the conflict with structural linguistics. In this respect, Calvet points out that ‘*we will practically wait for William Labov to trace the affirmation that if language is a social fact, then linguistics can be a social science, that is to say that sociolinguistics is linguistics*’¹⁷. In that respect and in the framework of the research published in English that this social aspect of language emerges especially in the research of Basil Bernstein, an English specialist in sociology of education. This latter was the first to take into consideration the linguistic productions and their social context.

In supporting the idea that learning and socialization are characterized by the social context which affects the linguistic behaviours, Calvet insists strongly on the social dimension of language. Actually, he underlines strongly

1905-1906; Incorporated in *historical linguistics and general linguistics*, Paris: Champion, chez C. FUCHS, ‘*La Co-énonciaod section, Carrefour of linguistic anticipation*’, R. Sock at B. Vaxelaire, *the anticipation at the horizon of the present*, Mardaga, 2004. (Hashs-00067945.) p. 166

16 CALVET, L. J. op.cit. p. 7

17 Ibid. p.4

the sociological aspect of language and stressed that “*in a sense, the concepts of restrictive codes and elaborated codes have their origin in the two forms of solidarity distinguished by Durkheim*”¹⁸.

In 1964 and on the initiative of William Bright, the first conference on sociolinguistics was held in Los Angeles. This scientific meeting has allowed rallying various contributions of different researchers like Jean Gumperz, William Labov, Dell Hymes and many others. By ensuring the publication of acts, William Bright sociolinguistics as an approach the definition of which lacks accuracy and precision and that “*one of the major tasks of sociolinguistics is to show that diversity or variation is not free but it is associated with systematic social differences*”¹⁹. In spite of W. Bright convening role, his conception of sociolinguistics made it attached to other researches related to linguistics, sociology and anthropology. It is with the research works by William Labov that the social conception of language was in fact, confirmed independent.

II. The verbal interaction: a place of articulation between the individual ethos and the collective one

The subjectivism being rejected and the theory of consciousness being substituted by the dialogism, the verbal interaction holds a central place in all language theorization. In this respect, Bakhtine states that “*the true substance of language is not constituted by a linguistic system of abstract forms, and not the isolated monologue, and not the psychological act of its expression, but the social event of speech interaction that is performed by the utterance and the utterances*”²⁰. That is how the verbal interaction constitutes the essential reality of language.

The Interaction: Subjectivity and the production of an individual ethos
Structural linguistics or structuralism in general is considered as a linguistic of the form, a linguistic without a subject. This latter is discarded in the sense that their individual behaviour is nothing but the representation of a linguistic or a social system according to the observation or research object.

(a) The erasure of the subject

As it is indicated by R. Vion, it is a question about, “*determined sociology according to which the activity of the subject is entirely determined by the internal system arrangements*”²¹. Determining the subject in a unilateral point of view, other approaches have this structuralist vision of the subject, as it is the case, in the first place, in sociolinguistics since the linguistic activity

18 BERNSTEIN, B. (1975), *Language and social classes*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit. P. 306

19 BRIGHT, W., (1966), *Sociolinguistics, Proceedings of the UCLA Sociolinguistics*. P. 11

20 BAKHTINE, M. *Marxisme and philosophy of language*, Paris : Editions de Minuit. P. 136

21 VION, R. (1992), *verbal communication : interactions analysis*, Hachette, p. 58

of individuals is conceived as totally governed by norms. In this way, it appears like a social which leaves no room for the structuring action of the actors. It's again the direction of *the systemic approach* which is regarded as a variation of structuralism. Even if we switch to the Symbolic Interactionism, it is conspicuous that it can be assembled to this unilateral vision of the subject when it happens to take it as a "self".

Indeed, the subject is regarded as a construction of the other and confines, by the way, his existence to the fact of being the outcome of the other. Then, his expressions depend exclusively on an "expressive order" which seeks a face-saving. Furthermore, considering communication as a closed system where the subject is approached according to some well-defined rites and social norms brings back the idea that excludes the individual as an active entity and backer or advocates the sovereignty and the supremacy of the system.

Afterwards, the erasure of the subject was seen in such a way to replace the subject as an actor within the system and restrict, therefore, this one-sided vision. In effect, "*from genetic structuralism to systemism, a reflection on the whole social is pursued either in its determinations, its dynamism or its openness on the agents and category strategies*"²².

In short, many works managed to place the subject at the heart of the research, while eliminating their status of "the acting" in a given system. Except that the individual can in no way erase the social marks that permeate in a way or another subject; they remain, however, affected by social habits and constraints.

(b) *The communicator: A projection of an individual ethos.*

In linguistics and as Robert Vion indicates: "*The utterance sets up a true theoretical break, it is no longer a question of erecting systems or describing internal distributional arrangements which are inherent to the messages, but to take into account the activities undertaken by the speaking subject*"²³. On the part of the interactionist approach, especially those which analyse the interactions, the symbolic interactionism remains close to the system and the sociological consideration of the subject "self". On the contrary, the ethno methodology has attempted to establish an equilibrium between the actor and the system and this is quite patent at one of the founders of the Chicago school. Actually, Mead has managed to draw a neat distinction at the individual 'the 'Me' the 'self' who is the byproduct of socialization and the "I" who is the producer of the social and one of the actors of this socialization. For him, this conception has "*a virtue to take away from the*

22 ANSART, P. (1990), *Contemporary sociologies*, Paris : Le Seuil, col. P.77

23 Vion, op.cit. p. 60

sociological explanation in terms of socialization, any recourse to the determinism of the social on the actor, and to yield a definition of the social which is not to be binding “24. Anyway, the interaction is seen as a place which permits the projection of an individual ethos, the manifestations of which are diverse.

At the very heart of a system or a social structure, the speaking subjects can reveal themselves and mark their subjectivity via their competencies. In effect, communicating is an act which entails, knowledge and a *savoir-faire*. These latter are comprehended at two levels, the former is of a discursive nature whereas the latter is of a strategic nature.

Concerning the communicative know-how, we would like to point out that during the verbal interactions in a general way, and during the political communications in particular, the argumentative competency fits in this kind of know-how. As a matter of fact, being capable of persuading, allots the speaking subject a positive identity image which allows procuring a real power on the others. In relation to the action strategies, we point out that we should cope with them by avoiding comprehending them as conscious projects of a voluntary individual would act by himself. This means that the strategy is far away from being intentional and conscious because of two reasons. The first is linked to the fact that this competence is related to the interaction itself, in other words, the ground. So, this interactive behaviour cannot be formerly reckoned. What is more, and no matter how are the strategic intentions of a speaking subject, they are confronted to a communicational context which imposes on the speaking subject strategies that they are to adopt in situ.

This is, on the one hand, on the other hand, the speaking subject manifests their subjectivity through his own mode of utterance; therefore, while speaking out he sees himself as the player of the situation, when he talks using the subject pronoun I. This subject pronoun allows the enunciator to impose himself in the discourse as an individual entity. His goal is to persuade the other from a set of positive images which reflect that ‘I’. Accordingly, the speaking subject subjectivity is equally marked by what Kerbrat-Orecchioni calls ‘the subjectivemes’²⁵. This is to say that the marks of subjectivity which any speaker leaves in his discourse.

Following the same idea, Patrick Charaudeau attempts to elaborate a splitting between the subject and the subject’s image. In point of fact, when he responds indirectly to Bourdieu in terms of the social status of language, he

24 RAMOGNINO N. (1991), ‘Interaction and social space time, Communication and/or socialization’ mimeographed, communication presented at the first international symposium *interactions analysis*; Aix-en-Provence September 12-14th 1991. P. 4

25 KERBTAT-ORECCHIONI, C.(1980). *The enunciation of subjectivity in the discourse*, Paris: Colin.

states that ‘what we say is that within this society are practiced power strategies which are the result of a play of being and seeming between the social status of the protagonists in the communication situation’²⁶.

Hence, the interaction establishes between a communicating ‘I’ and an interpretive ‘YOU’ a picture game between an enunciative ‘I’ and the addressee ‘YOU’. Which means that there are “*two communication circuits: the external circuit where the acting subjects operate and the internal circuit where the interlocutor’s images are engendered and negotiated*”²⁷. In this respect, the discursive ethos is a projection and a negotiation of the interlocutors prior images.

1. The collective ethos: persuasion and legitimization

In the light of what was developed in the previous point, the interaction remains an area where the individual ethos is projected and conveyed. The individual ethos then can be manifested only through a social structure of the ethos as it is the case in the interaction where the act of communication reflects the social order of the individuals. Indeed, “it is one of Mead’s fundamental institutions to observe that socialization process is achieved through a language mediated interactions”²⁸. The language is then considered as the pillar of the socialization of individuals, which is constructed, reconstructed and generated all along the verbal interactions. Hence, the verbal interactions permit spotlights the individual’s social image, firstly as a projection of a collective ethos which is used later as a means of discursive persuasion and legitimization.

(a) The Interaction: an area of the projection of a social image

Not only does language permits to generate and transmit meaning, but it is also an area where meanings are discussed by being constructed and defined. This is how we can regard that language is also a management of discursive forms because it is not the simple support, the simple transparent tool which allows the expression or the action of the daily lives. It constitutes the place of the patterning of this action and of these daily lives. In this regard, the combined management of the discursive forms enables the speaking subjects to engender meaning, social relationships and identity images which are being built like the essential functions of the verbal interaction.

26 CHARAUDEAU, P. (1983), *Language and discourse – Elements of semiolinguistics*, Hachette University – Coll. p.56

27 Vion, op. Cit. p.87

28 HABERMAS, J., (1987), *the logic of social sciences and other essays*. Paris : PUF, col. P. 442

The making of sense is being prepared during verbal meetings in the sense that, the interlocutors, in a communication process, are called to share, to discuss and to negotiate their ideas in an interactive and intersubjective process. The production of meaning is related, therefore, to the social order simply because it only reflects the cultural values inherited and reacquired by individuals. This leads to say that communication manifests, at the same time, substances, and social relations which complete each other and which sets connection between the interlocutors. Hence, the verbal interaction based upon some preset knowledge and a world vision confronts, negotiates and restructures these cultural values, therefore, it's the social order which is structured and restructured.

In addition to the construction of meaning, the verbal interaction is a place of the projection and of the construction of the social relation. In fact, communication meetings are hinged, above all, upon the roles that each speaking subject occupies. At the very beginning, the position relationships are previously determined and set up conflictual or consistent relations between individuals. Likewise, the position relation determines the relation between a dominating and a dominated depending on the roles assigned to each one. Except that, in an interactive process, this social relation can altogether tip over for the discursive fabric erects and negotiate new relations as long as it erects and structure new contents. This brings back the idea which states that "*Any communication presents two aspects: the content and the relation, such as the second encompass the first*"²⁹. The distinction between the content and the social relation and the speaking subjects grant another dimension to the verbal interaction which overtakes, this time, the construction of meaning so as to attain that of the social relation.

This construction of social relations, long verbal interactions, cannot be comprehended out of the identity images. Indeed, the third function which a verbal interaction accomplishes lies in the construction of identity images that circulate and get negotiated between the interlocutors. It is, thus, a construction and a projection of the individual as well as the collective image of the individuals. It is about the image of the self reflected from the discursive ethos. Through this discursive ethos, through this latter, the speaking subject negotiate preset images concerning his being seen as an enunciative subjectivity and as an individual endowed with a social identity. It is really the dominant concept in the Symbolic Interactionism especially in the micro sociology of Goffman.

29 WATZLAWIK, P. JACKSON, D. & BEAVIN BAVELAS, J. (1972), *A logic of communication*. Paris : Le Seuil, col. p. 52

(b) *Collective ethos: legitimating and identity claim*

Including a set of collective data, the social image is reflected from a set of enunciative procedures which deliberately or undeliberately, aim at legitimizing the self-image by a collective ethos. Within this framework, we assert that the speaking subject is not really an acted subject, but an actor who permeates the social via his subjectivity. The verbal interactions especially the publicized debates and political communications are social structures which require some social aspects. The notion of the status and the role ensures an essential function in the projection of the individual social image because it grants him both legitimization and power. In effect, over the course of the verbal interaction, chiefly the political communication, the speaker already bears a social position which he is to confirm through his interactional positioning and his discursive ethos.

The question here is what is called institutionalized positions which are anterior to the progress of the interaction. In short the notion of status subsumes a set of social positions occupied by a subject and which constitute social features and attributes. Accordingly, the social image is reflected through the notion of the role which is considered as the realization and the implementation of the notion of the status as a matter of fact, “*the role indicates the set of cultural models associated with a given status*”³⁰. Except that the role as a social indicator linked to a specific system turns into an individual role from the moment when this very notion can be activated only in an interactive context which includes and request an interlocutor. By taking on a status or a role, every interactant projects a precise social image which reflects the belonging to a given social community which has in common well-defined social representations.

At this level, the collective ethos crops up during the act of speaking in order to be able to legitimize the self-image or the individual ethos. In the political discourse, the speaking subject by taking the role of the communicator represents political structures whether at the level of the government or the political parties. In this sense, having to resort to the projection of a collective image or to a collective ethos is a kind of discursive strategy which legitimize the speaker’s discourse while granting him oratory credibility. In addition, adopting a collective ethos, during the verbal interactions and especially in the political communications, is viewed as a strategy for the claim of a statutory power and therefore of an interactional power.

These strategies can be noticed over the course of verbal interactions according to two levels: the form and the content. Actually at the formal level,

30 LINTON, R. (1977), *The cultural foundation of personality*. Paris : Dunod. pp. 71-72

the collective ethos can be manifested from the interactional management which confirms the social position of the speaking subject. In effect, by moving from a position to an interactional positioning, he has to manage the progress of the communication by directing it towards its proper goals. In this spirit, the monopoly of speaking and the interruption, even if they are offensive acts, form a key strength in the political discourse mainly if the interactant status compels him to play this role. Besides, the metadiscursive strategy which rallies all the value judgments for instance, the remarks, and the criticism on the progress of the interaction as well as the conversational norms, mirrors the image of a dominating collective ethos which grants the interactant power and a strong position.

In second place, the collective ethos appears in the speaking subject through a set of values and social norms, which they seek to defend and circulate through their discourse. Thus, and in a persuasive reasoning, these norms are enunciative strategies that aim at reinforcing the positive image of the speaker. Moreover, the norms requested by the speaker express his collective identity and his affiliation to a given social group, that's why he introduces them in his discourse by resorting to the collective subject pronoun 'we'. Having resorted to this pronoun is in itself one of the essential discursive strategies in the political discourse, in so far as the speaking subject can incorporate it in his discourse when he tends to reinforce his self-image by a collective image. Switching from an 'I' and a 'We' strengthen and legitimize the sayings of the interactant mainly when this collective pronoun represents instances that are related to the community values for instance the political, citizen and patriotic bodies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is very obvious that language not only reflects the linguistic aspect of the speaker, but projects also, accordingly, an extralinguistic aspect due to a precise communication situation. That is how the verbal ethos of every speaking subject encloses manifold enunciative voices. This enunciative diversity is linked to the diversity of social representations which permeate the speaking subject and consequently his world vision. In fact, during the verbal interactions the speaking subject is a subject of the saying that is the actual person who utters the statements. Besides, it is the acting and pragmatic subject who constructs and deconstructs a communication process. He projects, thus, his verbal ethos via a set of enunciative strategies which enable him to project a positive image especially in political communication where the political actor stands as a prominent link in the act of persuasion. This is reflected by communicative competencies that bring to the fore the speaker whether at the level of the form or the content. Similarly, the speaking subject in the sphere of political is a representative of

one or another instance, which accounts for the projection of a collective ethos. Be it political, religious or ideological political discourse is impregnated with a given frame of reference which is reflected in the collective ethos of the speaking subject. This ethos is equally a persuasion strategy, used by the political subject and remains changeable depending on the different communicational contexts.

References:

1. Ansart P. (1990), *Contemporary sociologies*, Paris, Le Seuil, col.
2. Bakhtine M. (1929), *Marxisme and philosophy of language*, Paris, Editions de Minuit.
3. Bernstein B. (1975), *Language and social classes*, Paris, Ed.de Minuit.
4. Bloomfield L. (1970), Language or ideas, *Language*. Hockett, Conference, La Haye, Paris, Mouton.
5. Bright W. (1996), *Sociolinguistics*, Proceedings of the UCLA Sociolinguistics.
6. Calvet L. J. (1993), *Sociolinguistics*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
7. Charaudeau, P. (1983), *Language and discourse – Elements of semiolinguistics*, Hachette University – Coll.
8. Chomsky N. (1968), *Language and thought*, Payot/Rivage, Coll.
9. De Mauro T. (1985), *Course in General Linguistics*, critical edition, Paris, Payot.
10. Habermas J. (1987), *Logic of social sciences and other essays*, Paris, PUF, col.
11. Kerbtat-Orecchioni C. (1980), *Enunciation of subjectivity in the discourse*, Paris, Colin.
12. Linton R. (1977), *The cultural foundation of personality*, Paris: Dunod.
13. Meillet A. (1965), 'A review of the *Course in General Linguistics of Ferdinand De Saussure*', Journal of the Paris linguistic society.
14. Meillet A., 'How words change meaning', published in the year of Sociology, 1905-1906; incorporated in Historical linguistics and general linguistics, Paris, Champion, chez C. Fuchs (2004), 'The Co-enounced section, *Carrefour of linguistic anticipation*', R. Sock and B. Vaxelaire, the anticipation at the horizon of the present, Mardaga, (Hashs-00067945).
15. Ramognino N. (1991), 'Interaction and social space time, communication and/or socialization' mimeographed, communication presented at the first international symposium interaction analysis; Aix-en-Provence September 12-14th.
16. Vion R. (1992), *verbal communication : interactions analysis*, Hachette.

17. Watzlawik P. Jackson D. & Beavin Bavelas J. (1972), *A logic of communication*, Paris, Le Seuil, col